Pipa

The *pipa*, a form of lute with four strings, became an important solo and ensemble instrument in China over a period of two thousand years. It is used in a great variety of traditional genres as well as modern compositions.

The *pipa* is a four-stringed, pear-shaped, plucked lute that developed in China over a period of two thousand years. The instrument was originally based on Central and South Asian prototypes brought to China via the Silk Roads. The *pipa* spread to other East Asian nations such as Japan, where the characters are pronounced as “biwa.” The name for the instrument was originally a generic term applied to a variety of plucked lutes, but eventually came to be applied exclusively to the pear-shaped version.

The modern Chinese instrument has a hollow back basin made from a single piece of hardwood tapering into a carved tip that bears its tuning pegs; its front surface has a flat piece of porous wood. Slightly more than a meter in length (about 42 inches), it has four fret ledges (*xiang*) carved into the body as it approaches the tip, and an additional twenty-three bamboo frets (*pin*) glued to the porous soundboard. The Chinese characters (Hanzi) in the instrument’s name (*pi* and *pa*) are phonetic approximations of ancient terms indicating the alternate strumming up and down with a plectrum.

Min Xiao-Fen performing with her *pipa*. Besides being known for playing the *pipa*, Min Xiao-Fen has gained recognition as a vocalist and for her work in jazz, contemporary, classical, and traditional Chinese music. Photo by Helmut Lackinger.
The *pipa* 琵琶 is a four-stringed, pear-shaped, plucked lute that developed in China over a period of two thousand years. The instrument was modeled on Central and South Asian prototypes brought to China via the Silk Roads. PHOTO BY ANNA MYERS.

(pick); this was the original right-hand technique, preserved in Japan and in some regional Chinese ensemble genres. Modern right-hand technique is very complex and uses a variety of individually named strokes made by all five fingers, achieving contrasts in timbre and volume. Beginning during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and possibly earlier, players who used these right-hand techniques held the instrument vertically.

Initially, the instrument was associated with foreign travelers, including Buddhist evangelists who used it to accompany their songs, and virtuoso musicians who came to the Chinese court during the Tang dynasty (618–908 CE). Eventually, the instrument became popular in native Han musical genres, including regional ensemble music, narrative song accompaniment, and solo performances.

In the nineteenth century, printed collections of *pipa* scores were published using woodblock technology, and solo technique continued to expand. In the early twentieth century, new compositions were created by Liu Tianhua and other composers. After 1948, Lin Shicheng brought the virtuoso Shanghai traditions to Beijing, and several generations of professional soloists were trained in the nation’s conservatories, including Liu Dehai, who premiered the *pipa* concerto “Little Sisters of the Grassland” in 1973. Since the modern *pipa*, with more frets that were added in the 1950s, was now capable of playing chromatic melody and harmony, composers such as Tan Dun began to create more modern pieces for the instrument. Min Xiaofen, a *pipa*ist living in the United States, has begun to utilize the *pipa* in jazz improvisation. Min and other players continue to maintain the traditional repertoire parallel to more recent musical styles.

John E. Myers

Further Reading
