

# Follow me to Learn the Erhu

跟我学 **二胡**

Written by YaoWei

姚卫◎著



ARTIME  
时代出版

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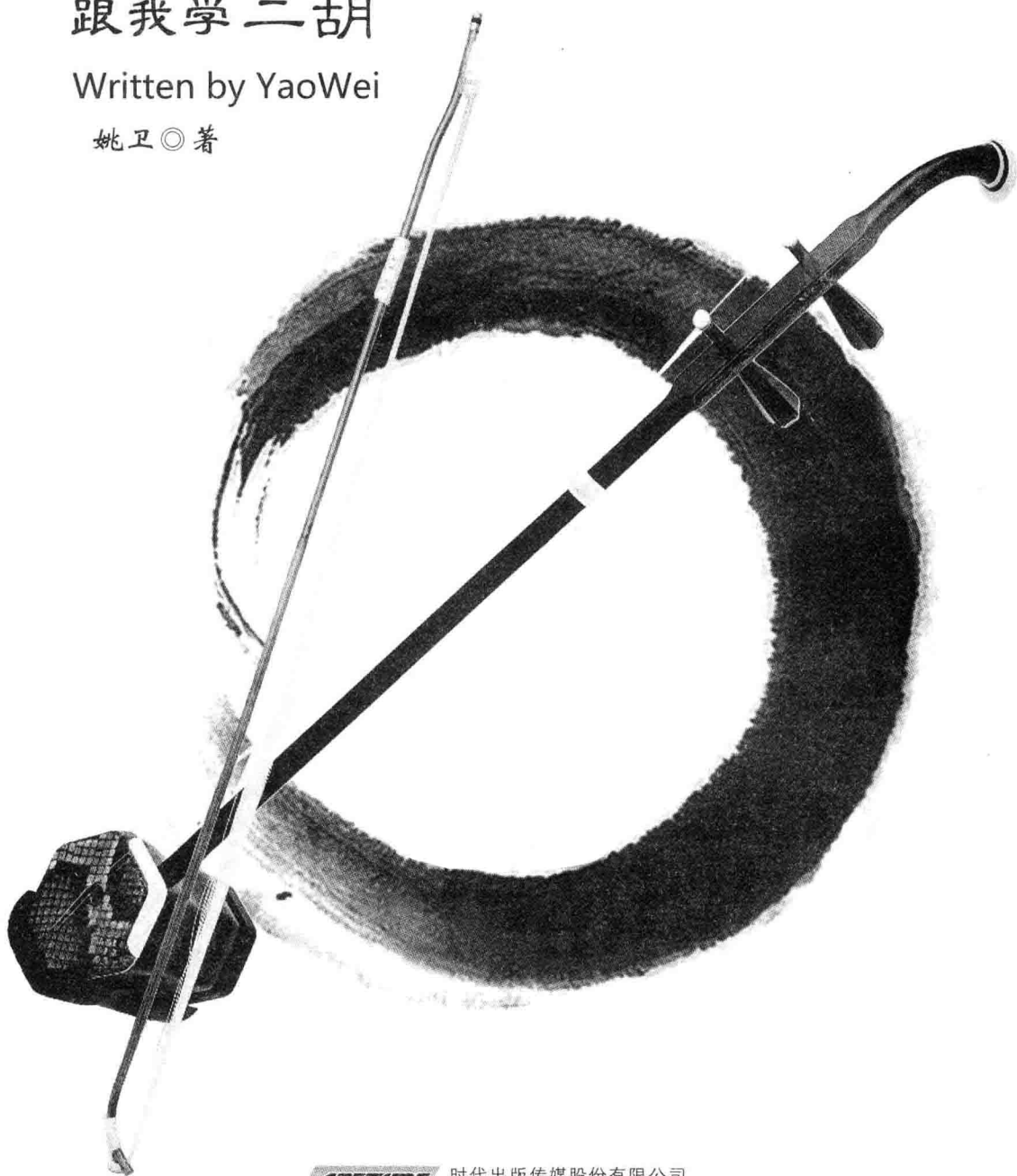


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# Foreword

The rich connotation of Chinese traditional culture and deep heritage is being known by more and more foreign friends. For the strong interest in Chinese culture, music lovers around the world are attracted further more by the glamour of the Chinese folk music. Many foreigners are also quite interested in learning a little Chinese folk music as a channel to understand Chinese culture. Many foreign tourists buy Chinese national musical instruments as the novel and unique souvenirs to take back to their own countries. The erhu is a musical instrument with a more melancholy, lyrical and melodious sound, its sound is easy to enter people's innermost feelings, touch people's emotion. Nowadays, the pressure is quite big in the modern society, this feature of the erhu can help people relieve stress. As the erhu has a beautiful sound, the simple structure and it is very easy to learn, therefore, it attracts many foreigners.

I have over 30 years experience in teaching the erhu, and also have taught several foreign friends. Most of them could not stay in China for a long time, but they wanted to fast grasp the basic skills of playing the erhu in a short term to reach the level of playing the general Chinese folk music. For the convenience of teaching, I compiled this booklet for those foreign friends to use. The effect is very good, in two to three months, most of them have mastered the main skills of playing the erhu and are able to perform several pieces of Chinese folk ditty, such as “Jasmine”, “Embroidering a Purse” and so on.

Now, I have rearranged it and accompanied it with some explanations of videos. I believe that foreign music lovers who learn to play the erhu in accordance with this booklet and the supporting DVD will certainly be able to perform out their delighted Chinese folk music in the shortest possible time. Let's begin!

Author: Yao Wei

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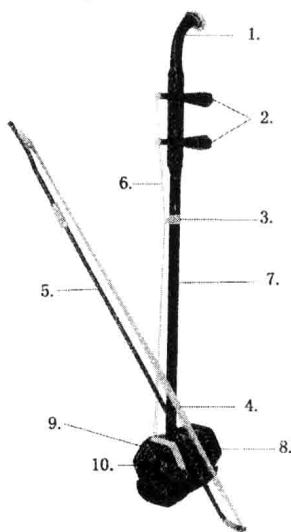
# Elementary Knowledge about the Erhu

## 1. The function and structure

The erhu is an age-old and popular stringed instrument of China. It has been more than one thousand years since its invention.

The tone colour of the erhu is very graceful and it has a wide range. The change between the strong and the weak is free; moreover, the sound it produces is quite like a man's voice. Thus, it is rich in capacity of expression. It can play a solo and adapt for an accompaniment or an ensemble as well. It is the most common instrument of the Chinese folk musical instruments.

The structure of the erhu is composed of the head, the neck, the tuning pegs, the sound barrel, the erhu skin, the nut, the bridge, the bow and the strings ( see picture 1 ).



1. The head
2. The tuning pegs
3. The nut
4. The bow hair
5. The bow stick
6. The strings
7. The neck
8. The sound barrel
9. The erhu skin
10. The bridge

( picture 1 )

## **2. The operation and the protection of the erhu**

In order to protect the erhu skin, when not in use, you must loose the strings or put a stick (which should be a little longer than the diameter of the barrel) above the bridge to support the strings so as to reduce the pressure to the erhu skin, then put it into a box.

Protecting the erhu is mainly to prevent it from being affected by dampness or by heat, just in case the sound barrel become unstuck and the erhu skin subside.

When the bow hair is dirty, you can clean it with soapsuds, dry it in the air, then rub some rosin on it.

The erhu is a vulnerable musical instrument to produce some noise in an arid climate. You can put a piece of sponge under the bridge in the space between the strings and the erhu skin to reduce the noise.

## **3. Tuning the erhu and naming the strings**

The tuning method of a fifth is commonly adopted for the erhu. That means, there is a relation of a perfect fifth between the inner string and the outer string.

In the tuning of the erhu, the inner string is usually tuned to  $d^1$  and the outer string tuned to  $a^1$ .

Why should the erhu be tuned in this way? First, the tension of the strings in such a pitch is moderate, and they can produce a loud and clear sound. Second, it is convenient for the erhu to join some instrumental ensembles and accompany other instruments.

Naming the strings means giving both strings the sol-fa syllables. For instance, the string name “do—sol”, means the inner string is named “do”, the outer string is named “sol”.

## ( See the following list )

Key signature		Open inner string	Open outer string
	———	do	sol
	———	sol	re
	———	la	mi
	———	re	la
	———	fa	do
	———	mi	si
	———	si	fa

What kind of strings of sol-fa syllables can you use to play a musical composition, a song or a local opera? You should select it in accordance with the style, the lowest tone, the characteristic of the open string, and the convenience of playing.

### 4. The explanation of the symbols

#### (1) The symbols for bowing.

- ▣ ——— The pull bowing——moving the bow from the left to the right.
- ▽ ——— The push bowing——moving the bow from the right to the left.



∪ — The connected bowing—the notes within the legato line should be played in a single bowstroke, and the notes outside the legato line should be played by the divided bowing. Namely, one bowstroke plays one note.

▼ — The bounce bowing.

▽ — The pause bowing.

∇∇ — The connected pause bowing—the pausing notes within the legato line should be played in a single bowstroke.

ㄥ — The shake bowing.

九 — The throw bowing.

ㄣ — The small shake bowing.

## (2) The symbols for fingering.





- — The index finger.




二 — The middle finger.



三 — The ring finger.

四 — The little finger.

*tr* — Trill, the trill of long duration can be written into *tr*.....

↗ — The upward slide—sliding from a lower tone to a higher tone, e.g. , namely, to slide from  or  to . The course of sliding should be weaker at the beginning and stronger at the end.

↘ — The downward slide—sliding from a higher tone to a lower tone, e.g. , namely, to slide from  to . Also, it should be weaker at the beginning and stronger at the end.


↪ — The slide of legato line; e.g.  or , the slide should be even from the beginning to the end.


↩ — The finger padding slide.


/{ — The big upward slide. The slide which is more than a third is

called the big Slide, e.g. , that means sliding from


 to  or .

\ — The big downward slide, e.g. , that means sliding

from  to

↘ — The downward turning slide, e.g. , that means

sliding from  to  or , then slide



to  immediately.



↗ — The upward turning slide—that means sliding from the original tone to a higher tone, then slide back.

○ — The natural overtone.

◇ — The artificial overtone.

ㄗ — The beating tone.

⚡ — The upper trill, e.g.  is equal to .

⚡ — The lower trill, e.g.  is equal to .

↗ — Open string.

内 — The inner string.

外 — The outer string.

+

ㄣ — Plucking the strings with the left hand.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1. Posture

The posture used for playing the erhu is generally divided into two kinds. One is called “ the crossed legs posture ”, the other is called “ the parallel legs posture ”.

For “ the crossed legs posture ”, after you sit down in a chair, cross your left leg over your right knee ( see picture 2 ), then lay the sound barrel of the erhu on the thigh of the left leg. The merit of this posture is that the body of the erhu is comparatively steady.

For “ the parallel legs posture ”, after sitting down in a chair, both of your legs are set levelly to each other ( see picture 3 ), then put the sound barrel of the erhu on the thigh of the left leg. This posture has three fulcrums to support your body, both your feet and your buttocks. So your body is more stable. It provides more convenient conditions for the movement of your body, and also, when joining in an accompaniment or an ensemble, the appearance of the orchestra looks orderly. So, this type of posture is adopted more often.



( Picture 2 )



( Picture 3 )

On playing posture, you should pay attention to posture as well as bearing. It is not perfect to lack either one of these two aspects.

With respect to sitting posture, regardless of whether the parallel legs or the crossed legs are adopted, the player should sit upright and naturally, and relax every part of the body properly (such as the waist, the chest, the back, the neck, the head, etc.). The head should be neither leaning nor hanging down. The eyes should look straight ahead, and so on.

Sitting upright and naturally is the base of playing, or else, playing will be affected directly. There are some common wrong postures such as the body bending forward excessively, the body lifting upward excessively, raising the shoulder, leaning sideways and bending back. All of these wrong postures will make the muscles of certain parts of the body tense. After a while, the muscles will become tired and normal breathing is also hampered. They will bring unhealthy tendencies to playing and a bad image on the stage.

Bearing really means a player's manner and expression on the stage. Playing the erhu can not be like an actor in a play emphasizing his posture and performance on the stage, but you should pay attention to your proper manner and expression on the stage.

As a player, you should develop your emotion according to the requirement of the musical compositions, and attentively throw yourself into the artistic display. Furthermore, you should express the content of the musical compositions by your look, making your heart consistent with your expression in harmony with your playing. You should pay attention to adjusting your breathing during playing. If your breath is not natural, you will feel your breathing stopped and closed, that is out of control. How do you adjust your breathing? After sitting down in a chair, calm yourself, contract your underbelly and raise a little breath, then breathe slowly with your nose. You should take even breaths instead of breathing rapidly. You

should feel your breath exchanging slowly between the pit of your stomach and your underbelly. Proper breathing will directly affect your playing. The experience of many players have proved that when you play a long bowstroke, if you breath properly, your bow will be drawn more steadily; when you shake the strings, proper breathing will bring a greater concentration of force to the muscles of your finger; when you play the high pitch section of each string, proper breathing will help you control the cooperation of both your hands easily, and make the sound clear and pure.

## **2. Holding the erhu and pressing the strings**

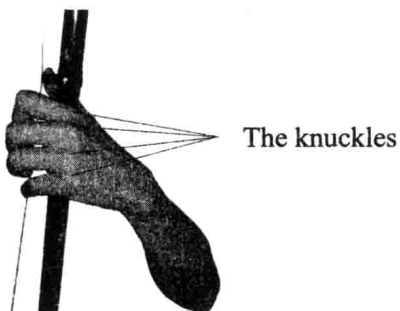
### **Method of holding the erhu:**

- (1) The body of the erhu should be stable. Lay the sound barrel of the erhu on your left thigh and close to your belly. In order to make the body of the erhu stable, the neck should be perpendicular to the plane of your left leg or tilted forward a little. In this way, your left hand will be free and naturally flexible, making it easier to play.

A common mistake made in holding the erhu is that the neck is tilted forward excessively, so that its center of gravity becomes unstable, which limits the playing.

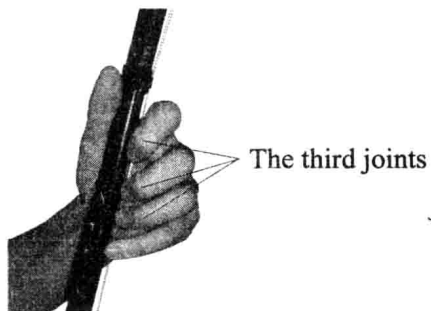
- (2) The shape of your left hand should be natural. The more natural the shape of your left hand, the more comfortable you will feel when playing. Therefore, when holding the erhu, your left wrist should naturally bend a little (see picture 4). Your thumb should naturally stretch flat, neither sticking up nor bending down ( see picture 5 ).

( The correct posture )



( Picture 4 )

( The correct posture )



( Picture 5 )

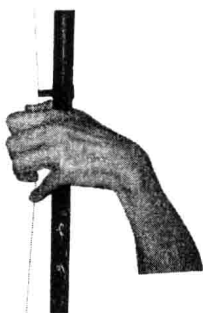
Lay the neck of the erhu between your thumb and index finger ( under the nut ). Holding the erhu should be naturally slack, otherwise, it will make your left hand tense, and affect the shifting and pressing the strings etc.

**The following are common mistakes made in holding the erhu:**

First: bending the wrist excessively when pressing the strings, which makes the fingers short of force and elasticity ( see picture 6 ).

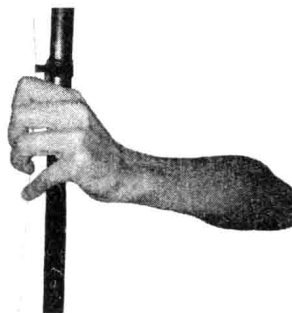
Second: bending the wrist backward excessively ( see picture 7 ). This makes the muscles of the forearm and the hand tense, and particularly affects raising the finger and vibrating the strings.

( The wrong posture )



( Picture 6 )

( The wrong posture )



( Picture 7 )

(3) Every part should be harmonious. When holding the erhu, you should

not only pay attention to the shape of the left hand, but also to the harmonious coordination of the upper arm, the forearm and the hand. When you play in the first position, your upper arm and the side of your ribs should make an angle of 45 degrees ( see picture 2 ). Meanwhile, your upper arm should also maintain the support to the other parts of your hand and arm, and hold the forearm and the hand steady. The excessive dropping down and raising up of the upper arm will hamper your playing ability. The angle between your upper arm and the side of your ribs should be increased or decreased depending upon the movement of the downward shift or the upward shift.

### **The demands on pressing the strings:**

- (1) You should use the tip of your fingers which has greater force to press the strings. Pay attention to the bending degree of each finger. The index finger bends the most, the middle finger bends less than the former, the ring finger bends less than its former, the little finger only bends slightly ( see picture 5 ). The whole shape of the left hand should be like a loose and half-made fist.
- (2) Pressing the strings demands that the action of your fingers be active, nimble and rich in elasticity. According to the need of artistic expression, pressing the strings should have some changes, such as the light press, the heavy press, the slow press, the fast press, the false press and the true press.

The stability of your left upper arm is helpful in making the activity of your fingers into full play. If your left upper arm behaves in a lax and undisciplined way, your fingers will be passive.

In order to be sure that your fingers are active, nimble and rich in elasticity, you should pay attention to the following when you practise:

- [1] The wrist should remain natural. When pressing the strings, the wrist basically keeps the natural state, neither bending nor stretching. It can

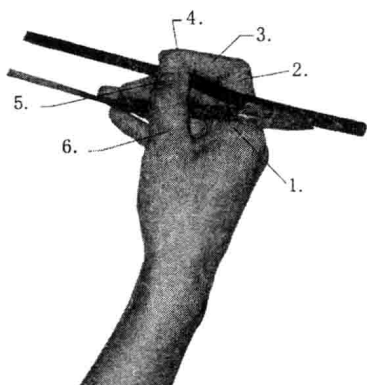
concentrate the force contracted by the muscles to the movement of your fingers. If the wrist bends excessively, the force of your fingers pressing the strings will be correspondingly reduced ( see picture 6 ). For example, when you make a fist, if your wrist is in a natural state, you can clench your fist. if the wrist bends excessively, the fingers will be short of force, and you won't be able to clench your fist. If the wrist stretches backwards excessively ( see picture 7 ), you will have difficulty in raising your fingers. If the wrist is natural, you will be able to raise your fingers comfortably. Therefore, the more natural your wrist is, the more active and forceful the movement of your fingers can be.

- [2] Emphasizing the movement of the knuckles. A knuckle is the finger joint at the root of a finger, which joins the palm ( see picture 4 ). When the fingers touch or leave the strings, the knuckles should move mainly and other finger joints move slightly. If other finger joints move excessively, it will make the fingers passive to touch or leave the strings.
- [3] It is incorrect for the fingers to be raised too high when they leave the strings, especially in playing quick rhythmic musical compositions. If the fingers are raised excessively high, the speed of the movement will be affected. Also, you should often pare the nails of your left hand to avoid affecting the correct posture for pressing the strings.

### **3. Gripping the bow**

The common method of gripping the bow is that you should suspend the wrist of your right hand levelly, use the second joint of the thumb and the first joint of the index finger (count from the finger root to the fingerend) to control the bow stick. Insert the middle finger and the ring finger between the bow stick and the bow hair to hold the bow (see picture 8).





( Picture 8 )

1. The root of the index finger.
2. The first joint of the index finger.
3. The second joint the index finger.
4. The third joint the index finger.
5. The second joint of the thumb.
6. The first joint of the thumb.

Holding and moving the bow actually reflects the effect of the lever principle, there are the fulcrum, the force point and the resistance point. In the effect of the lever principle, the more stable the fulcrum is, the more the force point will be able to exert its strength and have effect to the resistance point.

When gripping the bow, the thumb and the root of the index finger hold the bow stick, basically making up the fulcrum. The middle finger and the ring finger control the bow hair, basically making up the force point, and the point at which the bow hair rubs the string is the resistance point.

When moving the bow, the steadier the thumb and the index finger ( the fulcrum ) control the bow, the easier the middle finger and the ring finger ( the force point ) will be able to exert their strength ; thus, more forcefully the bow hair ( the resistance point ) will rub the strings.

When playing the outer string, the thumb and the index finger control the bow stick, use the force of the wrist to put pressure on the outer string by the middle finger and the ring finger, making the bow hair close to the outer string to rub it.

When gripping the bow, your fingers should be natural and flexible and also keep the necessary force of control, just like holding a pair of chopsticks. The thumb is the most important to the natural gripping of the bow, because if the thumb is natural and flexible, it implies the corresponding naturalness of the whole hand.