Chinese science in piano pedagogy: evaluating the chronicles of piano playing technique with Taichi

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Abstract

This paper examines theories of t'ai chi ch'uan, and the application of this Eastern philosophical concept of movement in the aspect of piano playing technique. The theory of yin and yang, which is the philosophical backbone of all t'ai chi movements, is examined in depth and its theory is employed in studying the traditional and modern approaches of piano playing. Selected components of t'ai chi balance between yin and yang, and the t'ai chi diagram are found to give new insights in a piano pedagogical sense.

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1. Background

Among all Chinese martial arts, t'ai chi has a high reputation for providing health benefits and is the least likely to result in injury (Huang, 2005). There is also a growing literature on t'ai chi in health research such as: stress management (Sandlund and Norlander, 2000); delivering impact on decreasing tension-type headaches (Abbott \textit{et al}., 2007); study on osteopenic women (Wayne \textit{et al}., 2010); and its effect in lower urinary tract symptoms (Jung \textit{et al.} 2012). Most studies relate t'ai chi to its health benefits. However, looking deeper into its philosophical backbone, t'ai chi can be seen as a set of bodily movements. Thus, in this article, our core concern is to analyze the field of piano playing techniques by applying the philosophy of yin and yang through studying its movement.

The understanding of t'ai chi diagram is crucial in the study of t'ai chi movement (Jou, 1980). Two important principles were selected from the t'ai chi diagram to analyze piano playing (see Figure 1):

a) a curved line is used to represent movement (without stagnancy) in circular motion (Ni, 1999).

b) The attainment of balance is represented by the equal portion of the white (yang) and the black (yin). The two areas are reciprocally integrating and restraining to maintain a continuous balance. In addition, there is a smaller black circle in the white area and vice versa in the black area ("in yang there is yin, in yin there is yang" or yin zong you yang yang zong you yin). This avoids being in total yin or yang that represents extremity which is abnormal.

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