

Beyond the Notes, Bridging Cultures

Interpretation Tips for Conductors Navigating Chinese-Inspired Wind Band Repertoire

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Introduction

Music is more than just notes on a page, it carries history, culture, and the composer's storytelling. Conductors play a crucial role in bringing a composer's story to life, but interpreting Chinese-inspired wind band and orchestral music requires a deeper understanding of its unique cultural and musical elements.

In this engaging session, conductor Dr. Meijun Chen and acclaimed composer and pipa virtuoso Gao Hong explore the intersection of Chinese and Western musical traditions, discuss essential interpretation strategies, and offer practical insights into phrasing, articulation, tone color, and cultural context when performing Chinese-influenced wind band repertoire.

This interactive session will also touch on the evolving role of women in composition and conducting, the challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural collaboration, and strategies for expanding wind band repertoire with diverse voices. Additionally, it will emphasize the importance of empowering female conductors and composers in the wind band field, fostering an inclusive space for artistic leadership, and advocating for greater representation in programming and commissioning. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of Chinese-influenced wind band music, practical takeaways for interpreting and programming diverse repertoire, and inspiration to bridge cultural gaps through thoughtful and informed performance practices.

Why This Topic Matters

- Music carries culture, history, and storytelling beyond the printed page.
- Chinese-inspired wind band repertoire presents unique interpretive challenges in phrasing, rhythm, texture, and timbre.
- Conductors play a crucial role in translating these musical languages for students.

- Understanding cultural context leads to more authentic, expressive performances.
 - This repertoire expands programming possibilities beyond traditional Western-centered literature.
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Target Audience

- Wind band conductors & music educators looking to authentically interpret culturally diverse works
 - Conductors seeking practical insights on phrasing, articulation, and tone color in Chinese-inspired music
 - Composers interested in writing for wind bands and orchestras and working with conductors
 - University and high school band directors looking to expand their repertoire
 - Students, especially female composition and conducting students seeking mentorship and representation
 - Advocates for gender diversity in wind band leadership and programming
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How Chinese Musical Traditions Shape Wind Band Writing

Melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic characteristics unique to Chinese-influenced compositions

Core Musical Areas

- **Melody** – contour, gesture, speech-like phrasing
 - **Harmony / Texture** – heterophony and horizontal listening
 - **Rhythm** – flexibility, speech rhythm, percussive structure
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Melodic Characteristics

Melodic Characteristic:

- Influences of geography, culture, language, and regional personality
- Pentatonic scale
 - Most traditional Chinese melodies are based on a five-note (pentatonic) scale: gong 宫, shang 商, jue 角, zhi 徵, and yu 羽 (similar to do, re, mi, sol, la). This gives Chinese music its recognizable open and flowing sound.
- Free Rhythm and Flexibility
 - Many traditional pieces use flexible timing rather than strict meter, especially in solo instrumental and vocal music.
- Melodic Contour

- Melodies often follow a rising and falling shape, reflecting natural patterns of breathing and phrasing found in poetry and spoken Chinese.
 - Ornamentation and Grace Notes
 - Chinese melodies are richly ornamented with slides, bends, trills, and vibrato to express emotion and imitate speech inflection.
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Harmonic Characteristics

- Monophonic Texture
 - Chinese music usually features a single melodic line, without Western-style harmonic accompaniment or chord progressions
 - Heterophony
 - When multiple instruments play the same melody but with slight variations in ornamentation or rhythm, creating a rich, shimmering texture rather than harmonic chords.
 - Modal Harmony
 - Instead of major/minor tonality, Chinese music use modes such as *Gong*, *Shang*, *Jue*, *Zhi*, *Yu*, each producing different emotional colors and tonal centers:
 - Gong 宫: Western equivalent to Do (C)
 - Shang 商 Western equivalent to Re (D)
 - Jue 角 : Western equivalent to Mi (E)
 - Zhi 徵 : Western equivalent to Sol (G)
 - Yu 羽 : Western equivalent to La (A)
 - The Chinese pentatonic scale (in C) is C - D - E - G - A.
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Rhythmic Characteristics

- Flexible rhythm
 - Chinese music often emphasizes free rhythm rather than strict meter, especially in solo instrumental or vocal works. The performer may stretch or compress time to express emotion (rubato style).
- Speech rhythm influence
 - Because Chinese is a tonal language, musical rhythm often follows the natural cadence of words and phrases, giving the music a conversational, fluid quality.
- Percussive richness
 - In ensemble or opera music, drums, gongs, and clappers create strong rhythmic energy. Rhythmic patterns (called *ban* and *yan*) form the foundation of musical organization.
- Balanced structure

- Many traditional pieces use symmetrical rhythmic patterns (such as 2, 4, or 8-beat phrases), reflecting the Chinese aesthetic of balance and harmony.

Sound Models: Traditional Instruments as References

Dizi (Chinese Bamboo Flute)

- Visually similar to Western flute, but fundamentally different in sound production and expression

Gong

- Shapes **space, pacing, and energy**, not just accents
- Often structural and expressive rather than decorative

Pedagogical Reminder: Traditional instruments are **references, not models to imitate**. They help clarify sound ideals and expressive intent.

Case Study: *Celebration* by Gao Hong

Versions: - Full orchestra, wind band, chamber winds

Performance Contexts Discussed: - University of British Columbia Concert Winds (student ensemble) - “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band (professional ensemble)

Key Observation: Interpretive clarity comes from **process**, not ensemble level.

Tips for Interpreting *Celebration*

- Joyful and uplifting character—play from the heart
- Long, flowing phrases within the pentatonic framework
- Ornaments should feel natural and expressive
- Focus on **energy, celebration, and shared motion**

Don’t be intimidated by the “Chinese style.” Listening and intention matter more than terminology.

Teaching Chinese-Inspired Repertoire in the Band Room

- Introduce cultural context **early** as a listening framework
- Demonstrate ornamentation vocally or through analogy (speech, breath, sighs)
- Encourage **horizontal listening**, especially in heterophonic passages

- Use primary sources: recordings, language, traditional instruments
 - Incorporate composer program notes, recordings, and interviews
 - Avoid over-generalization or over-Westernization
 - Use respectful language—focus on function, sound, and expression rather than “exoticism”
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Fostering Composer–Conductor Collaboration

- Communicate early about tone color, phrasing, and imagery
- Ask composers about cultural intention and expressive priorities
- Share ensemble recordings and rehearsal clips
- Bring composers into rehearsals when possible
- Use consortiums to support new works and community building

Key Idea: Collaboration transforms interpretation into dialogue.

Representation, Inclusion, and Mentorship

- Programming shapes whose musical voices students learn to hear
- Supporting women composers and Asian voices expands interpretive perspectives
- Discuss how culture influences compositional choices through repertoire
- Encourage exploration of Chinese instruments, stories, and history
- Build mentorship pathways for young composers and conductors

As women working in conducting and composition, the presenters are committed to encouraging the next generation—especially female students—to see themselves in this field.

Final Takeaway for Conductors

- Culturally informed teaching is deeper musicianship
- Interpretation begins with **listening, curiosity, and intention**
- Conductors bridge cultures through rehearsal choices and sound awareness

When we listen with intention, interpretation becomes connection.

Thank you for attending.

We wish you safe travels and happy holidays.

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Bio - Dr. Meijun Chen

Dr. Meijun Chen currently serves as the Director of Concert Winds at the University of British Columbia School of Music. A sought-after conductor, Dr. Chen has worked with collegiate, school and military bands, as well as university and professional orchestras, operas, and community choirs. She has been named to CBC Music's Canadian Classical Musicians "30 Under 30" list for 2025 and was featured in an interview on CBC Edmonton AM radio. Dr. Chen is also a highly sought-after clinician in both conducting and clarinet, working with public schools across Canada and China. In addition, she serves as an adjudicator for music festivals throughout British Columbia and across Canada, including the Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival, the Con Brio Music Festival, Surrey Public Schools' Grade 9–12 Concert Band Music Revue, Abbotsford Secondary School and Middle School Honour Band Days, and MusicFest Canada. Dr. Chen has also served as the Emerging Artist – Assistant Conductor with Edmonton Opera and as the Edmonton Youth Orchestra Conducting Intern. Dr. Chen has been selected to present her session, titled "Beyond the Notes, Bridging Cultures: Interpretation Tips for Conductors Navigating Chinese-Inspired Repertoire," at The Midwest Clinic International Band and Orchestra Conference in December 2025, in Chicago.

Dr. Chen has received scholarships and grants supporting her conducting studies in Canada, Austria, and the United States. She is the recipient of the 2024 The Midwest Clinic Emerging Music Educator Scholarship and the 2024 CBDNA Mike Moss Conducting Study Grant, through which she studied under Dr. Travis Cross and Professor Jerry Junkin at the University of California, Los Angeles. She was also awarded the 2023 Johann Strauss Foundation Music Award, through which she studied with Professor Toby Purser in Vienna, Austria, and won the Absolute First Prize in Conducting (Professional Category) at the 2023 UK International Music Competition.

Dr. Chen has been selected as a Conducting Fellow for prestigious conducting masterclasses, including the 2024 Domaine Forget International Music Festival, where she studied with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Kensho Watanabe, collaborating with Orchestre Métropolitain and Orchestre symphonique de Québec; the 2024 International Conductors Guild Conference in New York, studying with David LaMarche; the 2023 United States "Pershing's Own" Army Band Conductors Workshop, studying with Dr. Emily Threinen and Colonel Bruce Pulver; and the 2023 University of Cincinnati College-CCM International Wind Festival, in conjunction with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band, where she studied with Dr. Kelvin Holzman and Colonel Jason Fetting.

Also an award-winning clarinetist, Dr. Chen has performed and competed in 13 countries across Europe, Asia, and North America. She frequently performs as a guest clarinetist with the Royal Canadian Artillery Band and won the Absolute First Prize in Clarinet Performance (Professional Category) at the Debussy International Music Competition in 2023.

Dr. Chen holds a Doctor of Music degree in Wind Band Conducting under the supervision of Dr. Angela Schroeder, dual Master of Music degrees in Wind Band Conducting and Clarinet Performance, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music with a minor in Economics (with Distinction) from the University of Alberta. She serves as the Scholarship Committee Chair of the Women Band Director International and is affiliated with the College Band Directors

National Association, International Clarinet Association, Alberta Band Association, International Conductors Guild, and British Columbia Music Educators Association.

Dr. Chen is deeply committed to immersing herself in the music performance and education community, not only to inspire younger generations, but also to bring the joy of music to others and foster community engagement through the power of music.

Bio - Gao Hong

Gao Hong graduated with honors from Beijing's prestigious Central Conservatory of Music, where she studied under the great pipa master Lin Shicheng. Since moving to the United States, she has performed at renowned venues and festivals, including the Lincoln Center Festival, Carnegie Hall, the San Francisco Jazz Festival, the Smithsonian, and festivals in Paris, Caen, Milan, Perth, Lisbon, Zaragoza, and Ronda, Spain, as well as numerous locations across China.

In 2024, she recorded four original pipa concertos at Abbey Road Studios with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and performed as a soloist with the South Netherlands Philharmonic. A video from those performances went viral, garnering over 6 million views on Instagram and an astounding 900 million views across Chinese platforms. That same year, she was honored with the International Cultural Role Model Award by the United Nations World Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Foundation and featured on postage stamps in four countries. Her bilingual children's book, *The Chirps in Gao Hong's Pipa*, inspired by her childhood, was also published in 2024.

Gao Hong has presented pipa concertos with distinguished ensembles, including the Minnesota Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Heidelberg Philharmonic, Buenos Aires Philharmonic, Louisville Orchestra, Women's Philharmonic (San Francisco), Hawaii Symphony, Portland Symphony, China National Traditional Orchestra, Guangdong National Traditional Orchestra, Beijing National Orchestra, and Orchestra Now (at Lincoln Center in NYC). In 2017, she became the first Chinese musician to play the National Anthem at an NBA game, performing on the pipa for the Minnesota Timberwolves in Minneapolis.

Gao has received numerous prestigious awards in China and the U.S. In 2005, she became the first traditional musician to receive a Bush Artist Fellowship, and in 2019, she became the only musician of any genre to win five McKnight Artist Fellowships for Performing Musicians. She was also honored with the Sally Award at the Ordway Center for her dedication to the arts. Additionally, she authored the first pipa method book in English, published and distributed globally by Hal Leonard.

Five of Gao Hong's consecutive recordings have earned gold medals from the Global Music Awards. These include collaborations with her late teacher Lin Shicheng, Syrian oudist Issam Rafea, Senegalese kora player Kadialy Kouyate, flamenco guitarist Ignacio Lusardi Monteverde, and guqin master Zhao Xiaoxia. Her duo video with Issam Rafea was selected out of over 3,000 entries by indie star Phoebe Bridgers to appear on NPR's Tiny Desk Top Shelf Contest #2 episode.

As a sought-after chamber musician, Gao Hong has performed at ChamberFest Cleveland, Yellow Barn Music Festival, Carolina Chamber Music Festival, Harbin Summer Music Festival, Ashkenaz Festival (Toronto), Pittsburgh Early Music Festival, Bridge Chamber Music Festival, and the Open Space New Music Festival. She has also collaborated with ensembles like the Bakken Ensemble, ProMusica Minnesota, and the Bach Society of Minnesota.

As a composer, Gao has received commissions from notable organizations, including the Minnesota Orchestra, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band, American Composers Forum, Minnesota Sinfonia, Walker Art Center, Zeitgeist, Ragamala Dance Theater, Theater Mu, and TPT-PBS, among others.

In 2022, Mayor Melvin Carter proclaimed April 3rd as “Gao Hong Day” in the City of St. Paul in honor of her milestone concert at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, celebrating her “50 Years of Making Music with Friends.” Several pieces from the concert were featured on Performance Today, hosted by Fred Child on American Public Media.

China’s foremost music publication, People’s Music, praised Gao Hong as “the best of all beautiful flowers... her performance has extremely strong artistic appeal and belongs in the category of ‘fine wine’... the more you listen, the more beautiful it gets.”

“For over 50 years, Gao Hong’s music has inspired and moved countless people around the globe. As one of the premier pipa players in the world, Gao Hong’s illustrious career is filled with accomplishments as a musician, composer, and educator.” – Amy Klobuchar, United States Senator.

Repertoire List of Gao Hong (For University / High School and Professional Orchestras, Bands, and Chamber Groups)

For Orchestra / Band

- **Celebration (歡慶)** – for *Chamber Orchestra / Full Orchestra / Wind Band / Chamber Wind Band*
- **Yue Xing (樂·行) [Musical Journey]** – for *Pipa and Orchestra / Wind Band*
- **Flying Dragon (飛龍琵琶協奏曲)** – for *Pipa and Orchestra / String Orchestra / Chamber Orchestra*
- **Reminiscences of My Hometown (故園情)** – *Double Concerto for Pipa, Bassoon, and Orchestra/Concerto for Pipa, Erhu, Piano and Orchestra*
- **Guangxi Impression (廣西印象)** – for *Pipa and Orchestra*
- **Green Willow Tree (楊柳青青)** – *Double Concerto for Pipa, Violin, and Orchestra*

Wind Ensemble / Chamber Band

- **China Breeze (中國風)** – for *Wind Dectet*
- **Celebration (歡慶)** – *Chamber version with vocal drums and drum set / Full Wind Band version available*

Chamber Works

- **The Ant and the Magpie** – for *Clarinet, Piano, Marimba, and Percussion*
- **Nostalgia (鄉愁)** – for *Clarinet, Pipa, Cello, and Piano/for Erhu, Pipa, and Piano*
- **Quiet Forest, Flowing Stream (靜林潺流)** – for *Piano Trio and Pipa*
- **Guangxi Impression (廣西印象)** – *version for Guitar Quartet and Pipa*
- **China Caprice (廣西隨想)** – for *Pipa and String Quartet*

Choral Works

- **Golden Season (金色的季節)** – for *S.A.T.B. Chorus and Optional Pipa/Guitar*
- **Coming of Spring (春天來了)** – for *S.A.T.B. Chorus and Optional Pipa*