

Analysis on the Influence of Breathing Perception on Performance Tension in Pipa Adagio Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the problem of "lack of playing tension" in pipa adagio teaching, and proposes that "breath perception" as an intervention variable has independent and core teaching value. The article emphasizes that breathing not only plays a role in maintaining the tension of the playing body, but also serves as an internal structure for organizing music rhythm and emotional progression, which has a critical impact on the quality of performance. In the practice of pipa teaching, technical training is often disconnected from the breathing rhythm, resulting in students experiencing rigid movements, imbalanced phrases, and weak timbre during slow tempo playing. Based on the theoretical perspective of rhythm action emotion linkage, this article constructs a five-dimensional respiratory teaching path of "cognition - perception - control - fusion - evaluation", and combines student cases to carry out process intervention and reflection, demonstrating the systematic effectiveness of respiratory training in the construction of performance tension, technical coordination, and expression performance. Research has shown that introducing systematic training in body perception and respiratory structure into pipa teaching not only enhances students' performance and emotional authenticity, but also provides the possibility of cross disciplinary reference for instrumental music teaching reform. The article advocates using breathing perception as a fundamental element of adagio teaching, transforming passive physiological responses into the core means of positive performance strategies.

Keywords: *Pipa teaching, Adagio performance, Breathing perception, Playing tension, Body rhythm.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Pipa, the head plucked instrument, is a plucked string instrument. It is made of wood or bamboo, the speaker is in a semi pear shape with four strings on top. The strings originally made of silk thread, they are now mostly made of steel wire, steel rope, or nylon. There are "phases" and "grades" on the neck and panel to determine phonemes. When playing, holding it upright, pressing the strings with the left hand, and playing with the five fingers of the right hand, it is an important ethnic instrument that can be used for solo, accompaniment, ensemble, and ensemble performances.

When playing a piece of music, the performer is already breathing. If the performer's physiological breathing can be used to assist the musical breathing during the performance, the performer's physiological breathing can be more perfectly integrated with the musical breathing during the

performance. Then, it will be beneficial to adjust the performer's psychological state during the performance, and it will also be beneficial for the performance of the music to be more vivid. Breathing not only reflects physiological rhythms, but also serves as a carrier for emotional fluctuations and body tension changes in music. Especially during the stage of slow tempo performance, if the performer cannot form a clear understanding of the rhythm of breathing, it often leads to loose and disorderly expression of musical phrases, unclear levels of timbre, and inability to naturally develop emotions. This article focuses on exploring the ways in which breathing perception participates in the process of tension construction in pipa slow tempo teaching. Through theoretical analysis, teaching observation, and case analysis, practical training paths are provided, hoping to provide a teaching paradigm that combines comprehensiveness, delicacy, and physical perception foundation for pipa teaching.

2. THE THEORETICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN BREATHING PERCEPTION AND MUSICAL TENSION

2.1 *Breathing Perception as an Intrinsic Bridge Between Bodily Rhythm and Musical Rhythm*

Breathing is by no means merely the fundamental rhythm sustaining life; it also serves as an intrinsic driving force in musical performance, guiding the flow of rhythm and emotional fluctuations [1]. During the pipa adagio performance, the stretching, pauses, and gradual progression of musical phrases often align with the rising and falling rhythm of the performer's breath. By establishing breath awareness, the performer develops a bodily rhythm synchronized with the musical rhythm, thereby preventing the emergence of stiff, disjointed, mechanical presentation. Just as breathing serves as the direct foundation of sound production in vocal and wind instrument performance, in non-wind instruments such as the pipa, breathing guides bodily movements to indirectly shape the rhythmic fluctuations and musical tension of the performance. A lack of awareness of the breathing rhythm often leads to flaws in slow-tempo performance, such as "sound without thread" or "technique without presence" [2].

2.2 *The Regulatory Mechanism of Breathing Control on Body Tension and Movement Coordination*

The development of playing tension does not rely solely on the distribution of force between the fingers and wrists; rather, it stems from the coordinated interaction of the body's overall state of tension and relaxation. Breathing serves as the core mechanism for regulating this state of tension and relaxation. Deep, steady, and stable breathing activates the core abdominal muscles, promotes relaxation of the upper body, and enhances the flexibility of finger movements [3]; Tension, holding one's breath, or unconscious shallow breathing often leads to stiffness in the shoulders and neck, as well as sluggish movements, indirectly compromising tone quality and the continuity of musical phrasing. In teaching on the pipa adagio, guiding students to coordinate their movements according to the sequence of "inhale - gather strength - exhale - release tension" is particularly effective in achieving the synchronized expression

of physical sensation and emotional expression, thereby enhancing the intrinsic resilience and expressive depth of the performance.

2.3 *The Role of Breathing Perception in Evoking Musical Emotions and Generating Expressiveness*

Musical performance is not merely a display of technical skill; it is also an outpouring and transmission of emotion. Breathing is closely linked to emotion: rapid breathing often accompanies feelings of tension, while deep, slow breathing reflects a sense of inner calm [4]. The complex emotions, such as lamentation, tenderness, and wandering thoughts, expressed in the pieces of pipa adagio, "The Conqueror Removes His Armor" and "Pure Spring Snow", often depend on the performer's ability to use breathing to construct an internal emotional narrative. The clearer and more tangible the awareness of breathing, the more smoothly emotions permeate the performance, and the musical tension flows more naturally. Breathing is by no means merely a technical support for performance; rather, it is the core emotional driving force through which the performer comprehends and orchestrates expression. Integrating breath awareness into the teaching of slow movements is, in essence, a profound awakening of the student's emotional drive mechanism [5].

2.4 *The Role of Breathing Perception in Driving Dynamic Changes and Emotional Layers*

Breathing not only maintains a stable tone and rhythm but also drives dynamic changes and the progression of emotional layers in performance. During slow movements, musical tension is not achieved solely through rhythmic control; rather, the progression and expression of emotion are even more critical. Performers use their awareness of breathing to regulate their playing, meticulously portraying the music's peaks and troughs and conveying emotional fluctuations. When expressing sorrow, joy, or melancholy, the depth and shallowness, slowness and speed of breathing, as well as the pauses and continuations of notes, are directly linked to emotional expression. If the performer can adjust the breathing rhythm according to emotional demands, the musical performance can be closely tied to emotional shifts, embodying the vital rhythm of the music. This is particularly true during the performance of slow movements on the pipa, where the performer uses

breath awareness to transcend technical limitations, truly allowing emotions to flow with vitality and be deeply expressed, enabling the audience to perceive the emotional power inherent in the music.

2.5 The Role of Breathing Rhythm in Physical and Psychological Self-Regulation

When performing pipa adagio, the performer must not only regulate the application of physical strength but also manage their mental state to ensure a smooth flow of emotional expression. Breathing plays a crucial role in facilitating this process. Deep breathing effectively regulates heart rate and blood pressure, helping the performer maintain mental stability in tense situations. When playing slow passages, performers are prone to developing anxiety due to excessive concentration; at such moments, breathing is of paramount importance. By using deep breathing and a slow tempo to adjust their state, performers can reduce anxiety, regulate their mental rhythm, and enter an optimal state. Breathing awareness training helps students achieve balance in their emotional expression, preventing emotions from becoming overly impulsive or negative. This ensures that performance details and emotions unfold in sync, achieving a harmonious unity of mind and body, and resulting in a performance that is more fluid and stable.

3. AN ANALYSIS OF BREATHING MISALIGNMENT IN PIPA ADAGIO PERFORMANCE

3.1 Ambiguous or Absent Breathing Placement

Characterized by strong rhythmic extension and broad phrasing spans, adagio performance requires the performer to consciously control the “breathing points” within the musical rhythm. However, most students have not undergone training in breathing structure and tend to adopt a continuous playing style during performance. This leads to the absence of natural phrasing breaks in the rhythmic progression, resulting in a situation where the sound flow is continuous yet internally disconnected in terms of breathing. This results in a lack of tension and emotional transition between phrases, giving the audience the impression that the music is “dragging” and lacking a focal point. More critically, this disconnect between rhythm and

breathing gradually solidifies into a flawed performance habit; even as technical proficiency improves, the emotional expression remains shallow [6].

3.2 Discrepancy Between Physical Posture and Breathing During Performance

The fingers, wrists, shoulders, back, and even the lower limbs should form a coordinated support system. However, some students exhibit inconsistencies between their breathing rhythm and physical movements. This issue is particularly pronounced in adagio; during passages with rapid finger runs, the body rises with the movement, yet breathing comes to a halt [7]; In passages requiring delicate vibrato and portamento, breathing fails to align with the tonal rhythm. This disconnect between breathing and movement directly diminishes the body’s ability to support the tension required for performance, resulting in a lack of dynamic power and suppressed dynamic range. Students risk falling into a state of “empty power”—where the physical movements appear complete on the surface, yet the structural tension is loose, and the sound lacks penetrating projection.

3.3 Overreliance on Localized Muscle Tension in Technical Control

Without the fundamental support of breathing, students often increase hand tension to compensate for a lack of overall tension when playing forte passages or on strong beats in adagio. This practice of “substituting force for momentum” may seem to enhance the density of the sound, but in reality, it merely masks systemic deficiencies in the performance. Localized tension not only causes fatigue but also undermines the suppleness of tone and the controllability of dynamics [8]. Proper playing tension should arise from a breath-guided, whole-body coordinated effort, not merely a simple accumulation of finger strength. The root cause of abnormal tension is often misaligned breathing. It is cause for concern that many students, unaware of this deviation, mistakenly view “playing forte with brute force” as the ideal of musical expression, leading to misguided aesthetic interpretations of performance [9].

3.4 Mismatch Between Emotional Control and Breathing Rhythm

In pipa adagio pieces, which are often lyrical or sentimental in nature, breathing rhythm plays a

crucial role in sustaining the steady progression of emotion. However, observation reveals that when many students perform emotional climaxes or concluding passages, their breathing unconsciously becomes rapid, or they may even hold their breath. This mismatch between emotion and breathing not only weakens the natural progression of emotion but also causes the performer to lose control over the music's peak tension [10]. Consequently, during critical passages where the emotion should "coalesce" or "expand", the performance's tension may exhibit a "leaky" or "collapsing" quality, affecting the overall structural tension of the music. A deeper issue is that the inconsistency between breathing rhythm and psychological rhythm also disrupts the performer's allocation of attention, making it difficult to maintain psychological stability and emotional self-control when navigating long phrases or sections with free rhythms [11].

3.5 Lack of Guidance on Breathing Perception in Teaching Strategies

Most pipa instruction still focuses primarily on finger technique training, with very little systematic guidance on breathing incorporated into the curriculum. When explaining how to handle adagio phrases, teachers often rely on vague instructions such as "play it slower", "play it heavier", or "hold the note a little longer", rather than guiding students through specific perceptual exercises such as "take a breath here" or "begin exhaling at the start of this phrase". Consequently, students lack an internal reference model for breathing and can only adjust their playing tension based on subjective intuition. Worse still, this approach, which neglects to address breathing, hinders students' development of a unified cognitive framework for controlling the "breath-emotion-movement" integration. This creates a disconnect between technical skill and musical expression. The absence of clear breathing guidance during practice also makes it difficult for teachers to establish effective feedback mechanisms, leaving students trapped in a technical rut where they "can play the notes but struggle with musical expression".

4. DESIGNING A TEACHING PATHWAY FOR BREATHING PERCEPTION TRAINING

4.1 Cognitive Construction: Introducing the Relationship Between Breathing and Tension

At the outset of instruction, the traditional notion that "pipa performance has nothing to do with breathing" should be discarded. Teachers can employ diverse teaching methods to help students deeply understand the central role of breathing in performance. In the classroom, by integrating the relationship between breathing and musical tension, teachers should guide students through theoretical explanations and practical demonstrations to recognize that control of breathing rhythm directly determines the rhythmic flow and emotional tension in performance [12]. For example, through demonstrations, students can experience the changes in tension between phrases when "breathing is present" versus "breathing is absent," and perceive how breathing affects the fluidity of performance and emotional expression. Simultaneously, by comparing video materials to observe differences in musical expression among performers based on the adequacy of their breath coordination, students can clearly recognize the connection between inadequate breath control and weak emotional expression. To further deepen students' understanding, a three-phase structure, "before performance, during performance, and after performance", can be employed to encourage students to reflect on whether their awareness of breathing was integrated into the performance process. Through this structured feedback, teaching becomes not merely the imparting of knowledge, but a process of reconstructing students' perspectives on performance. It guides students to recognize that breathing is not merely a physiological phenomenon, but a bodily rhythm that can be shaped and controlled; it is the latent source of power for musical expression and the architect of emotional flow [13].

4.2 Awakening Perception: Establishing Body-Breath Awareness Through Multimodal Approaches

The awakening of body awareness is the foundation for the development of breathing perception. At this stage, instruction should employ multimodal training methods to guide students in

deeply experiencing and perceiving the relationship between their breath pathways and bodily rhythms. Teachers can use methods such as mirror practice, video playback, and physical relaxation exercises to help students observe and perceive the dynamic changes in their breathing. At the same time, by combining a sense of rhythm with breathing perception, they can enhance students' overall perceptual abilities. Each class should include brief static breathing exercises, such as a five-minute diaphragmatic breathing practice or synchronized extended breathing exercises using a metronome, to cultivate students' ability to perceive their internal rhythm. Through these static exercises, students can enhance their awareness of their bodily responses, preparing them for the subsequent performance [14]. At the same time, supplementary physical guidance exercises—such as placing hands on the abdomen to observe breath fluctuations, or performing shoulder and back swaying exercises—help students achieve a relaxed physical state during performance, making the process more natural and fluid. Particularly before a performance begins, a “breathing calibration” exercise can be implemented—such as having students take three deep breaths or performing a full-body relaxation scan—to help them transition from a state of static awareness to an active performance state. This process deepens students' understanding of “inside-out” performance preparation, enabling them to naturally integrate internalized rhythm and emotion into their playing movements during performance, thereby laying a solid foundation of physical dynamics for musical expression.

4.3 Control Training: Precisely Synchronizing Breathing Rhythm with Playing Movements

Establishing a precise framework for the coordination of breathing and playing movements is key to transforming breathing exercises into expressive tension. In teaching, one can create training modules that link “movement and breath”, such as incorporating “breathing cues” into specific plucking and strumming combinations, for example, “inhalation - plucking - exhalation - finger retraction”, to guide students in experiencing the alignment between the initiation of movements and the rhythm of their breath during practice. Subtle techniques frequently encountered in pipa adagio performances, such as vibrato, glissando, and pause control, rely on adjustments to the rhythm and depth of exhalation to sustain the delicacy of tension and the trajectory of emotion. Such training

should not be limited to isolated technical fragments but should integrate the continuity of breathing rhythm with emotional progression across entire musical phrases. For instance, when performing long phrases, students should consider how to identify breathing points for “sustained breath” or “building tension” within the phrase to maintain musical tension without letting it fade [15]. After completing each set of technical exercises, guide students to summarize the “breathing control pattern for this section,” recording their observations both verbally and in writing. They should then compare these notes with the actual performance to construct a systematic cognitive framework for playing. In teaching, instructors can also guide students to use coordinated body movements to reinforce the execution of breathing rhythms, such as synchronizing body sway with breathing rhythms or raising and releasing the shoulders to coincide with the landing points of forte notes, gradually forming a comprehensive execution pathway that integrates “form, breath, and sound”.

4.4 Integration and Expansion: Incorporating Breathing Training Throughout the Entire Teaching Process

Breathing perception training is not an isolated component; rather, it should be integrated throughout the entire teaching process, serving as a key link that connects technical exercises, musical understanding, and emotional expression. When selecting pieces, one should assess whether the breath rhythms within the music exhibit a high degree of logical coherence and offer opportunities for integration, and then design practice arrangements and instructional points accordingly. When explaining phrasing, the focus should no longer be limited to simply saying “slower” or “deeper,” but rather guiding students to consider in detail: “How many beats should the inhalation last in this phrase? Should the final note be played with held breath or a gradual release?” In teaching practice, “breath-led” repertoire adaptation exercises can be implemented, simplifying complex passages in adagio into units combining breath and movement. Clearly mark breathing points, emotional transition points, and peaks of tension to help students establish practical breathing models for performance. In group and demonstration classes, incorporate a “multiple breathing interpretations” segment, guiding students to perform the same piece using different breathing

strategies for comparison. This cultivates their ability to control strategies and make expressive choices, thereby facilitating their transition from “breathing practitioners” to “breath expressers”.

4.5 Multidimensional Assessment: Establishing Process- and Performance-Oriented Feedback Mechanisms

During the assessment process, the effectiveness of breathing perception training should be observed, summarized, and reinforced. A dedicated “Breathing-Tension Performance Observation Form” may be created. During classroom performance sessions, teachers should observe specific indicators such as students’ rhythmic control, emotional progression, and tonal tension. In stage performance presentations, conduct a “breath control comparison demonstration” activity, requiring students to perform the same passage in both a “breath-integrated version” and a “breath-omitted version”. Through group evaluations and oral self-reflections, students should analyze the impact of breath control strategies on musical expression. Teachers can add a “Breath Control Key Points” section to students’ practice logs to record breath usage points, rhythmic experiences, and coordination of movement during each practice session, and encourage students to incorporate breath management into their autonomous control of performance. Evaluation methods should cover four dimensions: cognition, skills, performance, and reflection. Teachers should guide students to gradually transform breath awareness from an external cue into an internal driving force, enabling them to actively construct and dynamically control performance tension during actual performances.

5. CASE ANALYSIS

5.1 Case Background

Li, a third-year undergraduate majoring in pipa at the Conservatory of Music, possesses a solid and well-grounded technical foundation, with high precision in intonation and rhythm, and demonstrates skilled performance techniques. However, when performing the adagio “Yangchun Baixue”, he exhibited flaws such as disjointed musical lines, lackluster emotional expression, and a lack of tension; even though there were no obvious technical flaws, the overall performance lacked internal tension and emotional depth.

Through observation and discussion, it was noted that Li’s breathing rhythm was unstable, with frequent instances of breath-holding and rapid breathing, which triggered physical tension and undermined the music’s fluidity and expressive impact.

5.2 Implementation Progress

To improve Li’s performance, breathing perception training was incorporated into the lessons. The specific steps are as follows:

- **Cultivating Breathing Awareness:** Through meditation and diaphragmatic breathing exercises, Li was helped to develop awareness of his breathing and learn to take deep breaths before performing, thereby focusing his attention. In the initial phase of training, two five-minute sessions of static breathing exercises were scheduled daily. These were combined with mindfulness meditation to guide Li in focusing on the flow and direction of his breath, gradually enhancing his awareness of the expansion of his chest and abdomen. At the same time, meditation exercises helped Li regulate his mental state, creating a relaxed and focused atmosphere for subsequent performances.
- **Integrating Breathing with Musical Phrases:** When analyzing the phrasing structure of “Yangchun Baixue”, the instructor guided Li to inhale at the beginning of each phrase and exhale at the end, creating a breathing pattern that harmonizes with the musical rhythm. This enhances the music’s fluidity, continuity, and tension. The instructor particularly emphasized the “continuity” of the breath, maintaining a faint yet consistent breathing rhythm between long phrases to prevent the loss of tension caused by phrasing breaks.
- **Coordination of Movement and Breathing:** During performance practice, coordination between the fingers, wrists, and breathing was reinforced to prevent stiffness caused by poor breathing. Through imitative exercises designed to “let the breath follow the hands,” Li was helped to achieve a fluid integration of movement and breathing—such as inhaling before a glissando and exhaling slowly during a vibrato. This training not only reduced reliance on localized muscle tension but also allowed the breath to guide the coordinated movement of the entire body,

achieving a unity of physical power and artistic expression.

- **Emotional Expression Training:** Using breath control to regulate emotional fluctuations, I guided Li in expressing the piece's emotions by adjusting the depth and rhythm of his breathing to enhance the music's expressive tension and emotional impact. For instance, when a passage transitions into a sorrowful mood, I guided him to use slow, deep exhalations to reinforce the sense of tonal resonance; at critical points of emotional transition, I had him use short inhalations and light exhalations to maintain the performance's cohesion, highlighting the natural ebb and flow of emotional layers.

5.3 Case Reflection

After a period of breathing perception training, when Li began performing "Yangchun Baixue", the musical lines became increasingly fluid, and the emotional expression grew more natural and seamless. The enhanced musical tension during the performance was particularly striking. The incorporation of breathing not only optimized the technical execution but also elevated the overall artistic quality of the performance. This case highlights that, breathing perception plays a crucial role in the teaching of slow-tempo pipa pieces, as it can significantly improve the quality of students' performances and their artistic expression. In the process of deepening pipa instruction, it is essential to prioritize the cultivation of breathing perception and regard it as an effective means of enhancing the tension in performance.

6. CONCLUSION

Pipa adagio teaching is by no means merely a one-sided training of technical movements; rather, it should be viewed as a comprehensive process of shaping the performer's bodily awareness, rhythmic understanding, and ability to convey emotion. Serving as a bridge between inner rhythm and psychological drive, in slow-movement performances, breathing does not merely serve the basic function of sustaining rhythmic flow; it intervenes at a deeper level in the construction of musical tension, the control of movement coordination, and the cultivation of musical emotion. By integrating breathing perception and relying on stable technique, the performer can more sensitively capture the transitions within musical phrases, creating a dynamic rhythm that

synchronizes the body with the music during performance. This enhances overall coordination, strengthens the authenticity of emotional expression, and adds elasticity and depth to the tonal tension.

This study, through theoretical analysis, instructional planning, and practical case studies, highlights the critical importance of breathing training in enhancing the expressive tension of pipa adagio performances. During performance, breathing is no longer merely a passive physiological backdrop, but rather a core strategic approach for actively building expressive tension and channeling the path of expression. Future pipa instruction must make breathing perception training a routine and structured component, integrating it into the teaching process and providing systematic design and guidance at every stage—from repertoire analysis and performance preparation to live performance. Instructors must innovate their pedagogical perspective, shifting from technique-centered "superficial training" to a teaching model that integrates the "breath-body-emotion" system of expression. This transformation will significantly enhance students' overall performance capabilities while charting a more multidimensional, scientific, and human-centered developmental path for pipa pedagogy, propelling pipa education toward a higher-quality, deeper stage of development.

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