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My Musical Life

One of my bossy habits is forcing my family to listen to the music I’ve played. It works well when I am playing the bell, but when it comes to the timpani, I have to ask my family to listen to the same part five times to find the part. While my mom struggles to find the timpani sound, all I focus on listening to besides the main theme is the percussion part. It’s understandable that timbres like timpani or dulcimer are hard to recognize because of their high resonance. Interestingly, people’s reaction to different timbres is so different. And sometimes it’s hard to realize how much the experience or cultural heritage affects people’s view on music.

The instrument that affects my view on music most is the dulcimer. Even though the Chinese dulcimer is classified as a plucked string instrument, it’s more like a keyboard percussion instrument with a sound like the piano. Because it was believed that the timbre closer to the piano is better, I used to try to make the sound as clean as possible. Additionally, although the dulcimer is a world instrument that exists in many European and Asian countries, it seems like the modern piece seems more “international” compared to some traditional folk songs or ancient pieces.

As Christopher Small expressed, “This privileging of Western classical music above all other musics is a strange and contradictory phenomenon” (Small, p. 3)[[1]](#footnote-0). Sometimes people who play classical music do not look down on the other music, it’s the people who play the instrument who are not confident with their own music. It feels weird for me to introduce the dulcimer to other percussionists because I am afraid of their view on the music I played on the dulcimer. I know that people will be interested in the instrument, but I don’t know if they are interested because it’s exotic. In conclusion, all those problems come to a question: why would people want to hear about the dulcimer when the piano is already so popular?

I still don’t know how people will view the problem, but I am so sure that the dulcimer has a grainier timbre that is different from the piano now. My friend described dulcimer sounds more like space after listening to me play the instrument. Thinking about other percussion keyboard instruments like marimba or vibraphone, they are so widely used in different ensembles depending on what timbres the piece needs. The unique part of the Chinese dulcimer is that the hammer used to play is made of bamboo with rubber covers which allow players to switch between different timbres by using different techniques.

One of the traditional songs I started to play recently is called *Dragon Boat*. Besides the song itself being a pipa song, the music used the dulcimer to play the timbre of traditional cymbals. And instead of making the timbre sounds clean, I decided to use more fingers to make the part softer. No matter if it’s a Chinese orchestra or wind symphony, the different timbres are always mixed to produce a piece of music.

1. Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening [↑](#footnote-ref-0)