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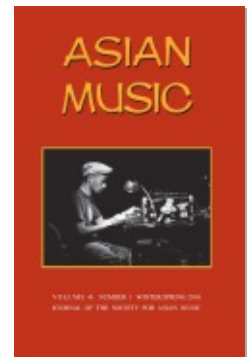
Expressiveness in the Premodern Performance Style of Chinese  
Music: "Equanimity" in Abing

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# Expressiveness in the Premodern Performance Style of Chinese Music: “Equanimity” in Abing<sup>1</sup>

*Yuhwen Wang*

That the performance of traditional Chinese music underwent tremendous stylistic change in the 20th century is often noted in studies of various genres, including Peking (Beijing) opera, instrumental music such as that for the *erhu* (a bowed string instrument) and the *qin* (or *guqin*, the seven-string zither), and in histories of modern Chinese music. For instance, comparing the *qin* performance styles of the older and younger generations, Huang Yi-Ping (1998) and John Latartara (2005) each note the “more dramatic tendencies,” the greater temporal contrast, and the more “virtuosic” effects in the performances of the younger generation.<sup>2</sup> A similar shift in performance style occurred in Peking opera (or *jingju*, Beijing opera). Nancy Guy (2005) investigates the difference between its performance in Taiwan and in China and finds that in Taiwan, because of a particular political agenda, many of the traditional, pre-1949 (pre-Communist) practices have been preserved, in sharp contrast to the situation in China. In addition to major differences in the use of either notation or traditional oral transmission, the current practice of Peking opera in China (which incorporates more innovation and change) exhibits more dramatic characteristics, such as an emphasis on virtuosic display and extended playing techniques, fluctuating tempi, the elimination of slower-tempo aria types, and so on.

The practice of *erhu* (a two-string bowed instrument) music demonstrates a similar shift. As will be detailed in the course of this essay, many contemporary musicians play the instrument with drastic tempo variations and forge a single climax. The styles of these musicians are so different from traditional practice that some consider them to be “unrelated to the original tradition of the Chinese instruments but to form a new tradition in its own right” (Schimmelpenninck and Kouwenhoven 1993, 82), even though these musicians “from the very beginning saw their work as a refinement and enrichment of existing musical traditions” (Stock 1996, 145).<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of possible explanations for such changes in performance styles. One is that they reflect the revolutions in the music milieu of 20th century China. Since the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Chinese musical culture

has undergone a revolution leading toward modernization (Wong 1991, 37–55; Han Kuo-Huang 1979, 1–43).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, changes in musical practices occur all of the time. Yet, the changes in 20th century China were overwhelming and profound in their impact. Not only were there severe criticisms of traditional music and musical practices, but also numerous requests and suggestions for reform. Although the latter created heated debate, they ultimately led to the establishment of such institutions as conservatories, to the design of “improved” traditional instruments, and to the Westernized musical education system that exists in both China and Taiwan today (Wong 1991, 37–55; Han Kuo-Huang 1979, 1–43). The Shanghai Conservatory of Music openly states on its web-site celebrating the 80th anniversary that the design of the Conservatory’s flag and emblem is meant to indicate its adaptation to “the system and model of [W]estern musical education” (Shanghai Conservatory of Music 2007). Reflecting this mode of thinking, the early 20th century *erhu* master Liu Tianhua (1895–1932), for instance, made changes to *erhu* and *pipa* (a Chinese lutelike instrument) and adopted Western violin and compositional techniques in his work (Fu 1933; Wong 1991, 42). The well-known Chinese scientist, linguist, and composer Chao Yuen Ren (1892–1982), to provide another example, criticized Chinese musical achievement for not “match[ing] the foreigners’,” and suggested that Western harmony be adopted (Chao 2004, 14). Performers today of traditional music are also subjected to this powerful tide, whether consciously or unconsciously. As Han Kuo-Huang has noted, the new generation of musicians who play traditional instruments thinks in Western musical terms. They hear and think music in terms of western intonation, harmony, tone color, range, and standardization of instruments (Han Kuo-Huang 1979, 13). Similarly, in the subsequent performances and arrangements of Abing’s music (as I shall explore), scholars have identified a general Western (European) influence (Zhao Xiaosheng 1994a, 1–5; Shen 2000, 24–30).

In addition, after the communist party started to rule China in 1949, communist ideology has had an overwhelming impact on the music milieu in 20th century China. Under this ideology, “progress” is urgently and aggressively demanded, and traditional musical practice is often considered (tacitly or explicitly) a “retrogression.”<sup>5</sup> All of the above factors help to explain the shift in performance styles of traditional music.

There remain questions to be answered. An important one is, How can we understand the traditional performance style and its less dramatic, less distinctively conveyed emotional expression? As Isabel Wong indicated, through the influence of graduates of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, a Western bias exists among “authorities [on] acceptable musical standards and behavior,” and Chinese traditional music has generally been regarded as “low culture” (Wong 1991, 43). In this way of thinking, the style and aesthetics associated with

traditional performance before it was Westernized and modernized are easily dismissed, as is revealed in contemporary *erhu* players' criticisms of Abing's performance style (see below). Yet, is traditional style necessarily "inferior"? If not, is there a way to understand and appreciate the traditional performance style other than taking it to be merely an example of musical practice "before modernization" which is now only "of historical value"? Is there a consistency and integral significance in the older performance style? More specifically, is there some kind of aesthetic notion that can help us better to appreciate that style?

With an interest in these questions, I take as my focus the surviving recordings of performances by Abing (pronounced as Ah-Bing), also named Hua Yan-jun (1893(?)–1950). In China he is often referred to as Blind Ah Bing, or Blindman Ah Bing. Although he left only six recorded pieces, Abing is considered to occupy a central place in Chinese music. His importance is sometimes compared to that of Beethoven (Huyan 2003), and his music is widely performed and recorded, as well as studied and analyzed. In addition to a film, a television series, and music festivals<sup>6</sup> devoted to him, academic conferences have been held in commemoration of his art (including one in 1983<sup>7</sup> and one in 1993<sup>8</sup>). There are numerous publications about him, including a book-length monograph (Stock 1996), a collection of essays (Abing Yishu Chengjiu Guoji Yantaohui Zuweihui, ed. 1995), and a commemoration CD set containing his original recordings, those of other soloists performing his music, and those of orchestras and groups playing rearrangements of his music, as well as a 285-page booklet (Tam, Cheng, and Xiao 1996).

My selection of Abing to exemplify a premodern musician may perhaps be questioned since all of his recordings were made in 1950, long after Chinese musical modernization had begun. There are several justifications for choosing him. First of all, Abing was a folk musician who never received modern, Westernized training.<sup>9</sup> He was a Taoist who grew up in a Taoist temple, played in Taoist rituals and, later in his life, performed on the streets. While many episodes of Abing's life are disputed, I have found no evidence that suggests the possibility that he ever attended a modern, Westernized music institution such as a conservatory. Scholars have debated, for example, how he became blind, the circumstances that led him to become a street musician, and whether or not he was expelled from the Taoist temple Lei Zun Dian. But none of the reports I have examined ever contradict the circumstance that he grew up in a Taoist temple, and was trained mainly by the Taoist Hua Qinghe (Hua Xuemei, said to be Abing's father) during his early years (Du 1981; Jiang and Sun 1979; Shen 1980; Stock 1996, 35 ff.; Yang Yinliu 1983b). Abing himself is reported to have said that, in addition to Hua Qinghe, he studied with many musicians even for just one or two pieces (Yang Yinliu 1983b).

It is true that the absence of a modern, Westernized training does not preclude the possibility of his encountering Western music in streets and courtyards, or from the radio or records. However, scholars generally agree that Abing's art is founded upon folk music tradition with little Western influence (Stock 1996, 90–1; Chen 1963, 1996; Zhao Xiaosheng 1994b; Fan 2005). His melodic structure has been analyzed and found to be constructed on the basis of folk music improvisational practices (Stock 1996). Fan Zuyin goes so far as to declare that Abing's musical processes—including melodic form, prolongation and variation, compositional structure, mode of development, and *erhu*- and *pipa*-playing techniques—are “solely established on the basis of Chinese musical tradition,” except for his imitation of certain foreign music (Fan 2005, 190). Even though Abing did not attend a modern, Westernized music institution, he had opportunities to listen to and adopt some Western musical styles that were present in Wuxi, the area in which he lived and performed. In fact, in his recording of *Ting Song* (Listening to the Pine) one can hear the imitation of a military band.

Nevertheless, the lack of a modern, formal, institutionalized training separates Abing from many musicians whose recordings are available nowadays, and most of whom are graduates of modern conservatories. Since Abing's performance style is enormously different from theirs, as we shall see, his artistic emphasis affords us a glimpse of the possible aesthetic tendencies in folk music practice before modernization.

In order to understand his style, it is helpful to explore it in comparison with alternatives, so that his peculiarities and hallmarks may be tangibly discerned. I shall therefore compare and contrast the recordings of present-day musicians with those of Abing's, with a focus on *Er Quan Ying Yue* (The Moon Reflected on the Second Springs), the most widely recorded, played, and listened to among the pieces he left behind. In addition, Abing's recordings of other pieces will also be considered and compared with the counterparts.

Although there have already been comparisons between his and later musicians' performances of *Er Quan* (e.g., Stock 1996; Liu 1988), my purpose here is not merely to indicate the changes introduced by later, conservatory-trained musicians—as has been the case in earlier studies—but also to better understand Abing's style and aesthetics. More specifically, I shall attempt to unveil the general artistic emphasis and distinctiveness—the underlying principle—behind both his emotional expression and the features that characterize his musical sounds.

### Criticisms of Abing's Music and Performance

Despite his fame in much of China, the reception of Abing remains an intriguing issue. On the one hand, most of the *erhu* players I have talked to do not appreciate his performance style. On the other hand, Chinese music scholars generally

rate him very highly in terms of his musical art. In addition to the aforementioned academic conferences held in commemoration of his birth and the numerous studies on his life and music, positive appraisals by renowned scholars can easily be found: that his music “displays a master’s splendor and a master’s demeanor,”<sup>10</sup> that it “opens up his own initiation and creativity,”<sup>11</sup> and that it is “the most vital, most spirited” representative of Chinese folk music such that “no one else in modern Chinese music history can be compared” with him:<sup>12</sup>

There is strict logic in the vocabulary, presentation and structure in Abing’s music. If we analyze it carefully, we find nothing that does not ensue with careful thinking. If we listen to it directly, we hear the ingenuity of flowing, animation, and spontaneity. . . . Only some masterpieces and master genius could reach such a state. Abing’s music not only displays a master’s splendor, but also a master’s demeanor. (Qiao 1996, 176–7; my translation)

[Abing’s] music, with its ingenious/clever design, vigorous vocabulary, terse form, and simple style, is taken [to have] greater and greater value, and is generally considered to be the most animated, most spirited part of our folk music. There is no one else in modern Chinese music history that can be compared with Hua Yan-Jun. (Qian 1996, 203; my translation)

Abing’s creation exceeds the confined following of his teachers and mechanical imitation of skill, but opens up his own initiation and creativity . . . (Yang Yinliu 1983b, 10–1; my translation)

However, many present-day *erhu* performers and listeners hold very different attitudes toward Abing’s style. Some of them praise it highly, but sharp criticisms can also be found. An *erhu* player who graduated from a university music department in Taiwan told me that she and her teacher both consider Abing’s performance to be “lousy.” An amateur player told me her *erhu* teacher said to her that Abing’s style is “no good,” and not a model for students. This judgment is prevalent among *erhu* players trained in various institutes. Their disparagement of Abing’s style is similar to what one finds on the Internet: Abing’s performance style is “insipid . . . very primitive”<sup>13</sup>; it is “not as rich and magnificent as modern [performances]”<sup>14</sup>; “if you listen to Min Huifen’s golden recording, you would surmise that [Abing’s recording of *Er Quan*] was played by an unqualified student.”<sup>15</sup>

The attitudes of present-day musicians toward his style are reflected in their own performances and recordings. They rarely play his music in the way that he did, but instead introduce many changes and dramatic expressions. This is particularly the case with the piece *Er Quan*. In addition to the use of so-called “reformed instruments” and the varieties of rearrangements and reorchestration, the modifications in the performances of later players range from different standards of tuning, diverse *erhu* techniques and ways of executing the notes to the deletion of certain passages, and the alteration of the overall structure.<sup>16</sup> Some musicians abhor Abing’s performance style, consider their own to be

better, and regard his recordings as “of historical interest only.”<sup>17</sup> If one listens to these performances, one finds in them a surprisingly enormous divergence from Abing.

However, there are also listeners and critics who highly commend Abing’s performances for their relative “reticence” and “absorbing and enduring interest,” and consider that the changes introduced by later performers represent degrading of the original.<sup>18</sup> The aforementioned positive evaluations given by scholars to Abing’s art do not merely concern the structure of his music, but also his performance style. Qiao’s comment that “if we listen to it directly, we hear the ingenuity of flowing, animation, and spontaneity” illustrates this point. Additional positive evaluations of his performance (rather than his musical art in general) are demonstrated by the following quotes from scholars and critics.

[Abing’s] *erhu* sounds intense, bounteous, and vigorous . . . (Yang Yinliu 1983a, 9; my translation)

. . . it is the unique tonal spectrums and artistic cogitative expressiveness in [Abing’s] performances that warrant our study of his music. (Shen 2000, 29)

Under his playing, the pieces with titles hinting at ordinary townspeople become void of vulgar interest and present a healthy and profound spirit that stems from people’s deep interior. (Yang Yinliu 1983b, 11; my translation)

Only performances [of *Er Quan*] like Abing’s own can be “true” ones. . . . Abing’s performance . . . bears inner tenacity and does not betray even a trace of pleasing intent, while many rearrangements of the piece soften this inner character, so that *Er Quan Ying Yue* is known as a mournful, plaintive, and melancholic piece. (Zhao Xiaosheng 1994a, 4; my translation)

Abing’s music in general is masterly vigorous, simple, and majestic. Its profound ingenuity bears a clumsy disguise, and its superb simplicity needs no adornment. In the meantime, it is dexterously varied with unconstrained versatil[ity], while forming an easy and graceful whole. He does not flaunt his music with superficial gilding, but fills it with composed and simple inner momentum. His performance is of splendid style, with upright, unadulterated magnificence. . . . Nowadays, however, some people play his music (such as *Er Quan Ying Yue*) in very slow tempos and low-spirited tones. . . . They totally distort Abing’s firm, upright and equanimous temperament. (Zhao Yan Chen 1994, 6; my translation)

The diverse reactions to Abing’s performance of course reflect the individual preferences of the commentators, but there is more than this for us to ponder. One might deny the artistic value of Abing’s recordings based on the information that he was not in a good state of musical proficiency when making the recordings (it is reported that he had not played for two years, and then practiced for only three days right before the recordings took place), and that he himself was reported to not have been very satisfied with his performances in the recordings (Cao [1983] 1996, 140). However, the high appraisals demonstrate scholars’ and

critics' affirmation of the artistic value of his recordings. Another possible reason to deny his artistry is the circumstance that such appraisals may stem from the fact that his vulgar identity serves the Communists' need to promote the lower classes. Abing was far from an ideal prototype, though. For example, his Taoist background did not suit the Communists' atheist ideology. In addition, tentative facets of his life history such as prostitution and drugs (Stock 1996, 42 ff.; Du 1981, 78) hardly made him a paragon of Communist ethics. These facets are still a matter of dispute among scholars. Yet if Abing's artistry were merely the result of political construction, one would expect that a "better" figure—a musician without any taint of such suspicion—be selected as a Communist model of artistry.

These considerations lead one to remain open to the possibility that, despite his own dissatisfaction and the lack of appreciation by many contemporary *erhu* players, Abing's recordings manifest artistic integrity at least from a certain point of view. Yet, if there is such integrity, where is it to be found? The following sections of this essay examine his performances in search of an answer. In order to do this, I shall identify Abing's stylistic peculiarities, distinctive musical features, and expressive quality through spectral, structural, and tempo analyses and through comparison of his and later performers' recordings of *Er Quan* (transcription of Abing's performance is given in Figure 1). To discern accurately Abing's unique characteristics, three contemporary musicians' recordings of *Er Quan* are chosen as the primary material for comparison, although performances by other musicians are also referred to when appropriate. These three recordings are all solo performances with no accompaniment. Therefore, the features observed in the waveforms and spectral analyses can be attributed to each individual *erhu* player rather than to an accompanist(s) or conductor. The performances are by Min Huifen (1992), Jiang Xun-feng (1996), and Song Guo-sheng (1998), respectively. Min (b. 1945) and Song (b. 1938) both obtained their musical training in conservatories—products of 20th century Chinese modernization. Min graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (SCM) in 1973, and Song from the Tianjin Conservatory of Music in 1961. Jiang (b. 1935) was not conservatory trained, but learned the *erhu* from his father, Jiang Feng-zhi (1908–1986), a famous player and music educator, who studied in 1927 at Shanghai Guoli Yinzhuang (Shanghai National College of Music), the precursor of SCM, and graduated from the Music Department of the School of Arts at Beijing University (Beiping Daxue Yishu Xueyuan Yinyuexi), where he learned *erhu* with Liu Tianhua. Thus, we have musicians with a variety of backgrounds with more or less modernized training to compare with Abing. These recordings, together with those played by other musicians, which also serve as material for comparison when appropriate, are all listed in the discography at the end of this essay.





Figure 1a. *Er Quan Ying Yue* performed by Abing,  
transcribed by Yu Chiao-Yin and Wang Yuhwen.

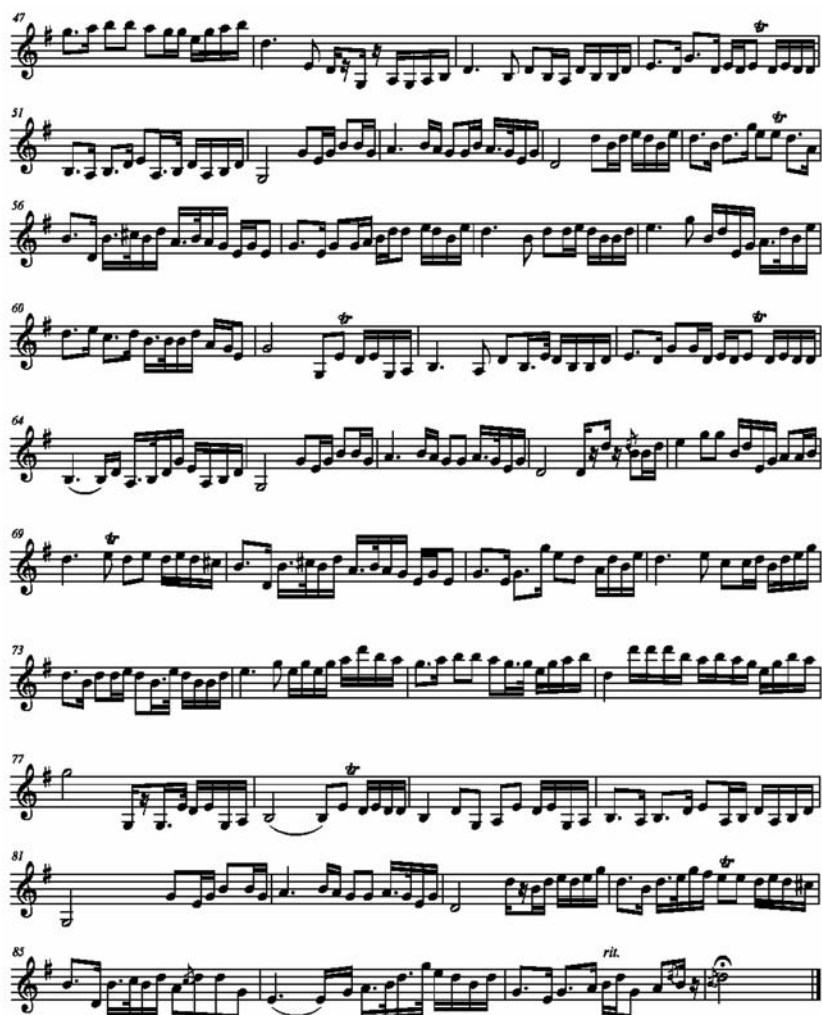


Figure 1b. *Er Quan Ying Yue* performed by Abing,  
transcribed by Yu Chiao-Yin and Wang Yuhwen.

## Performance Analysis of *Er Quan Ying Yue*

I am most blenched by violin [music]. It flows like water, taking away with it all that one cherishes dearly in life. Things are much better with *huqin* [music]. Though it also sounds forlorn, it always comes back to the human world after winding far, far away, like the northerners' idiom "to come back to the point." (Chang [1944] 1992 313; my translation)

This comment of *huqin* (a family of Chinese bowed string instruments, which includes the *erhu*) was written by the famous Chinese writer Eileen Chang (1920–1995) in the first half of the 20th century. She grew up during the years when Chinese musical culture began to undergo processes of modernization. Being exposed to both traditional Chinese music and Western classical music, she took piano lessons but preferred *huqin* music, and she made interesting remarks about various traditional musical genres, including Beijing opera, *shenqu* (a precursor of Shanghai opera), and *bengbengxi*<sup>19</sup> (Chang [1944] 1992; [1943] 2003). Her comment certainly reveals personal preferences and prejudices, but in the meantime more or less reflects how traditional *erhu* music attracted adherents through its "coming back" quality, its recurrent process.

The quality of recurrence—that is, priority given to "the same" and the constant over "the different"—is crucial in the analysis below. After listening to Abing's recordings numerous times, I found myself enchanted more and more by the constancy and steadiness in his sound. Through analysis it is discovered that his stable and constant quality is not a surface phenomenon, but has much depth. It is consistently and coherently achieved. Whether on a general or a detailed level, the parameters and aspects prioritized in Abing are very different from those in later musicians. In a nutshell, he gives more weight to those that remain the same, those that are stable and constant, such as the regular beat and melodic recurrence, than to those that are ever-changing, such as rhythm and pitch. Meanwhile, his performance is nonetheless expressive, so that stability and constancy are achieved without ever sacrificing moment-to-moment expressive differentiation. Subtle expressions are abundant even though the stability and constancy is well maintained and projected.

If we consider music to consist of both recurring and ever-changing elements,<sup>20</sup> then, in *Er Quan*, the recurring elements would include, among others, the return of the same melodic passages (primarily the "a" and "b" subsections, see below) and of regular beats and metric accents, the maintenance of the tempo, and the continuous use of the same instrument (which is certainly not unique in a solo piece). The ever-changing elements, on the other hand, would include the melodic variations (primarily the "c" subsections discussed below), registral shifts, and rhythmic changes.

Viewing from this perspective, this analysis proposes that, when compared with later musicians, Abing's recording displays a principle that emphasizes the same over the different, the constant over the changing, while they place more emphasis on the ever-changing elements, on "the different." In the following part, I will explicate this difference on both a general and a more detailed scale. On a general, overall scale, Abing's emphasis on the same is found in less frequent and less degree of tempo changes, and in the absence of climactic orientation. On a more detailed scale, this emphasis is illustrated in his maintenance of relatively constant beat duration as well as beat projection. All these features of Abing will be demonstrated through the comparison of his and later musicians' recorded performances.

### Tempo Variations

A parameter that obviously separates Abing from many contemporary musicians is the tempo. Whereas Abing shows relatively stable tempo and less tempo changes, they present more of such changes. When a tempo change does occur in both Abing and the other musicians, the latter tend to demonstrate more immense variations than does the former. For instance, *Er Quan* opens with *ritardando* up to m. 1.2, where the main section starts. This is evident in all of the recordings I have examined—including those by Abing ([1950] 1996a), Zhang Yuming (1995), Yu Hongmei (n.d.), Ding Lufeng (2004), Zhao Yan Chen (2000), Kan Pai-Lin (1994), Zhang Fangming (1994), Wang Guotong (2004), Song Guo-sheng (1998), Min Huifen (1992), and Jiang Xun-feng (1996). What distinguishes Abing from the others, apart from his faster tempo as a whole, is his slight shift from  $\text{♩} = 54$  to only  $\text{♩} = 50$  at the turn from the introduction to the main section (m. 1.2). The later players, on the other hand, change the tempo in a more radical way.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Song Guo-sheng plays the opening notes at  $\text{♩} = 40$ , immediately slows down to  $\text{♩} = 26$ , and then reaches a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 35$  for the main section. Even more dramatic are Min and Kan: from  $\text{♩} = 36$  to approximately half,  $\text{♩} = 16.5$  for Min, and from  $\text{♩} = 38$  to  $\text{♩} = 13.5$  for Kan. Zhang slows down in a similar proportion, from  $\text{♩} = 38$  to  $\text{♩} = 15$ , but adds a quarter-note rest at the end of the introduction, thus halting the music even more. Jiang's performance is unique in that he starts with a faster tempo on the initial two notes ( $\text{♩} = 48$ ) and immediately follows with a *ritardando* up to m. 1.2, so that when the main section starts it is in the same tempo as the end of the introduction ( $\text{♩} = 33$ ).

In addition to the degree of tempo changes, Abing also differs from today's players in terms of the frequency of tempo changes. His performance demonstrates less number of such changes, and in this sense exhibits more consistency—

more sameness. The frequently varied tempi in later musicians throughout the piece contribute to their idiosyncratic process. For instance, after Jiang starts the first main section in  $\text{♩} = 33$ , his tempo soon goes up to  $\text{♩} = 40$  at mm. 9–11, and then it varies from time to time in accordance with his emotional expression. In addition, certain moments are slightly prolonged. These include the last beat of m. 1, the first half of m. 13, the third beat of m. 15, and so on. Min (1992), for another example, drops her tempo from  $\text{♩} = 48$  to  $\text{♩} = 44$  after the second beat of m. 76. Later on, at m. 80.3, another *ritardando* takes place until m. 81.3, when the tempo becomes  $\text{♩} = 30$ . These changes do not occur in Abing's recording; he slows down only at the very last 2 measures.

### The Presence or Absence of a Climactic Orientation

In terms of the overall expression, a more important difference between the performances of *Er Quan* by Abing and by later musicians lies in the presence or absence of a distinctive climactic process.<sup>22</sup> Whereas these later musicians often forge a single climactic moment (at m. 76.2<sup>23</sup> of Figure 1), making it the outstanding, centrally important event in the entire piece, Abing's recorded performance does not feature such a climactic orientation.

This difference has already been pointed out by several authors (Stock 1996, 158; Shen 2000). What needs to be stressed here is that, without a climactic process, Abing is able to maintain a relatively constant, steady expression, rendering more emphasis to the same than later musicians do. This feature may not sound marvelous when stated in words. However, it turns out to be artistically significant in actual listening when all the features of his performance are perceived together at once.

Before discussing this difference between Abing and contemporary musicians, it helps to clarify the precise manner in which musicians forge a single climax in *Er Quan*. My analysis found that the climax is often achieved through articulatory emphasis, melodic alteration, tempo shifts, as well as orchestral arrangements and the addition of certain accompanimental figures. In forging a climax, they quicken the tempo beforehand and slow down afterwards, and, at the climactic moment itself, instantaneously shorten the duration of beats, and/or change the accompaniment (such as condensing accompanimental figures, increasing the range, doubling notes, altering articulation, and thickening the texture). Examples of this are readily found in recordings with accompaniment, including those by Song Fei (1997), Jiang Jianhua (1991), Zhu Changyao (1998), Zhang Fangming (1994), and Wong On-yuen (1989).

In solo recordings, such a climactic narrative is also present, although it is less obvious. Song Guo-sheng (1998) and Min Huifen (1992) each articulate a

process of pushing toward m. 76.2 and then relaxing in their recordings. Starting with E5, the initial note of m. 74, Song quickens the beat and momentarily increases the tempo. Right before the “climax,” he accelerates the beat again and shortens the note D5 (m. 76.1) so that the climactic D6 occurs slightly ahead of time. A *ritardando* then starts immediately after the D6 and continues up to the last note of the same phrase, G5 (m. 77). Song thus not only creates a sense of push prior to the climactic note, but also one of release afterwards, thereby highlighting the uniqueness of the moment at m. 76.2.

Min (1992) similarly demonstrates a sense of pushing and then relaxing around this same “climactic point.” Before m. 74, she maintains a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 42$  for the most part, but then increases it to  $\text{♩} = 48$  at m. 76. After the “climax,” she slows to  $\text{♩} = 44$ . Even within mm. 75–76 alone, Min plays with a slight tempo increase and decrease before and after m. 76.2, which can be detected through the minute changes in beat duration in her recording. Table 1 shows the timespans for the beats and half beats of segments of mm. 75 and 76 as delineated through the waveform of her recording. “①” indicates the first half of the beat and “②” the second. As shown in Table 1, the duration of each half beat around the climax betrays a slight, consistent decrease (tempo quickening) prior to the first half of m. 76.2 (from approximately 0.76 to 0.71 and from 0.67 to 0.58 seconds, respectively), and then a slight increase (slowing down) to 0.64 seconds right at the second half. Although these changes are very subtle, they nonetheless convey a tinge of climactic push and relaxation.

By contrast, Abing ([1950] 1996a) maintains a largely constant tempo and beat duration. (See Table 2.) At precisely the moment when contemporary musicians forge as the “climax,” his tempo is not altered in a noticeable way. The

Table 1. Beat durations in Min Huifen’s recording (1992).

Measure and beat number	Subdivision of the beat	Starting/ending time points of the beat subdivision	Half beat duration (in seconds)	Whole beat Duration (in seconds)
75.2	①	4'14.260" - 4'15.021"	0.759"	1.466"
75.2	②	4'15.021" - 4'15.727"	0.707"	
75.3	①	4'14.727"– 4'16.428"	0.701"	1.370"
75.3	②	4'16.428"– 4'17.097"	0.669"	
76.1	No subdivision	4'18.431" - 4'19.761"	0.665"	1.330"
76.2	①	4'19.765" - 4'20.342"	0.577"	1.221"
76.2	②	4'20.342" - 4'20.986"	0.644"	

Table 2. Beat durations in Abing's recording ([1950] 1996a).

Measure and beat number	Subdivision of the beat	Starting/ending time points of the beat subdivision	Half beat duration (in seconds)	Whole beat Duration (in seconds)
75.2	①	5'44.166" – 5'44.700"*	0.534"	1.079"
75.2	②	5'44.700"* – 5'45.245"	0.545"	
75.3	①	5'45.245" – 5'45.716"	0.488"	0.981"
75.3	②	5'45.716" – 5'46.226"	0.510"	
76.1	No subdivision	5'47.312" – 5'48.395"	not applicable	1.073"
76.2	Subdivision unclear	5'48.395" – 5'49.405"	unclear	1.010"
76.2				

\* The number is estimated because of indistinct subdivision.

durations of mm. 75.2, 75.3, 76.1, and 76.2 in his recording deviate from each other less than 0.1 seconds, compared to Min's 0.245 seconds between m. 75.2 and 76.2. More significantly, these durations do not consistently increase or decrease, as is the case with Min and Song, but are basically stable with only an unnoticeable oscillation. (See Table 3.) In this way the D6 of m. 76.2 occurs in Abing not so climactically as in Min or Song.

One may still hear this moment noticeably in Abing, but this is so primarily because of the D6's extreme register, the preceding octave leap, and the intensified rhythm. All of these features are also present in the other musicians' recorded performances. What distinguishes Abing from them is, among other features, the alteration or lack thereof of the beat durations in a climax-oriented process.

Table 3. Comparison of selected beat durations in Abing ([1950] 1996a) and Min (1992).

Measure and beat number	Whole beat Duration in Abing	Increase (+) or decrease (-) in Abing	Whole beat Duration In Min	Increase (+) or decrease (-) in Min
75.2	1.079"	—	1.466"	—
75.3	0.981"		1.370"	
76.1	1.073"	+	1.330"	—
76.2	1.010"	—	1.221"	—

### *Melodic Structure*

In relation to climax forging, a striking phenomenon is the later performers' alteration of the original melody. Major passages are deleted, so that the overall structure, length, and contour become sharply different from Abing's original version. This is astonishing considering the fact that these musicians do not otherwise add even one note.<sup>24</sup>

Again, their alteration generally renders the melody toward a more climax-oriented process than the original, whereas Abing's melody is organized in a circuitous, ever-revolving manner. Their structure highlights the different and changing process, as will be explained. Abing's circuitous process, by contrast, celebrates the same and the constant.

Abing's melody may be regarded as consisting of a brief introduction plus six sections in varied repetition, each comprising three subsections (a, b, and c). The variations in each section occur primarily within the c subsections (Table 4).<sup>25</sup> It is also in this c material that D6—the highest pitch of the entire piece—occurs. In Abing's original melody, the pitch is heard three times altogether—first at c3 (the c subsection of section 3, m. 46) and later at (c5 mm. 74 and 76).

In most of the recordings by later players that I have examined, only four sections are presented.<sup>26</sup> That is, in most of them a, b, and c each occur four times. Although different players take different segments from the deleted sections to replace the corresponding measures in the remaining subsections, they largely skip c3 and c4. In Min's (1992) and Song's (1998) recordings, for instance, both mm. 32.3–52.2 and mm. 54.3–67.2 are not played, so that the variation material of c3 and c4 is omitted, together with most of b3, a4, a5, and b5. In these

Table 4. Melodic structure of *Er Quan* following the introduction (mm. 0–1.2).

section	subsection		
	a	b	c
<b>1</b>	1-5	5-7	7-11
<b>2</b>	11-13	13-15	15-26
<b>3</b>	26-32	32-34	34-48
<b>4</b>	48-52	52-54	54-61
<b>5</b>	61-65	65-67	67-77
<b>6</b>	77-81	81-83	83-88

(Numbers refer to the starting and ending measure numbers.)




performances, a3 is succeeded by b4 (skipping b3, c3, and a4), followed directly by c5 (omitting c4, a5, and b5). Similar alterations can also be found in arrangements of *Er Quan* for various ensembles, including those by Wu Zuqiang and Ding Shande (as analyzed in Stock 1996, 157–8).


A closer look at his melodic structure may further substantiate Abing's prioritization of the same over the different. Some analysts have mentioned "the climax" in the melody of *Er Quan* (e.g., Zhang Zhenji 1994, 9, 11; Cheng Gongliang 1981, 38–40). If there is an event in *Er Quan* that can be called "the climax," it is quite different from the climax we find in Western music since the common practice. In Western music, as Susan McClary indicates, an entire piece or movement is often oriented toward one single goal—the resolution of tension. Prior to that is a process of tension accumulation culminating in the climax, so that this climactic moment constitutes the single most prominent, and sometimes violent, event in the entire piece or movement (McClary 1991). As in a sonata-allegro movement in Beethoven, all the previous events can be characterized as progressing toward the climax of tension and the goal of resolution, and all that follows can be understood as approaching, preparing for, or being part of, the closure. This procedure is also reflected in Schenker's analyses of tonal progression and in Edward T. Cone's metaphor of ball throwing (Cone 1968, 26; Wang 1998, 36 ff.).

This is quite different from the process we find in Abing's *Er Quan*, which is reflected in the way the melodic peak—often assumed to be the "climax" of the entire piece—D6 appears. This pitch is presented three times altogether, so that by m. 76, it is no longer unique (see Figure 2). True, as mentioned, the occurrence of D6 at m.76 does come in Abing through a conspicuous combination of an

The "climactic" moment (from c5):



From c3:



From c4:




Figure 2. The "climactic" moment at c5 and comparable passages at c3 and c4.

octave jump, intensified rhythms, and immediate reiteration, which results in the highlighted presentation of this moment. However, as it is the pitch's third occurrence in the performance, and the previous occurred just 2 bars before, this intensification makes the third more of a varied presentation than a unique, special, and matchless event.

It is suggestive that D6 in its first two occurrences appears in a mild, insignificant manner with no highlighting gesture in the original melody. When D6 is first reached at m. 46 in subsection c3, it occurs only briefly in a sixteenth note, placed neither on the downbeat nor on a beat point. In subsection c4, the high register disappears totally (the tune remains below G5), and so does D6. At m. 74 (subsection c5), the melody ascends and reaches D6 once again. However, the pitch comes with hardly any salience, neither a metric nor a rhythmic accent. It is not presented as a unique melodic peak, but rather as an event that is unnoticeably reached and immediately dropped. This process indicates that, melody-wise, the peak is not necessarily of prominence enough to be accompanied by ear-catching gestures.

In addition to its logic being opposed to a single-climax orientation, the original melody embodies a winding, circuitous, and roundabout motion. The variations in Abing's Introduction-plus-six-section structure are in fact presented within repetition, within a general emphasis on sameness. As the primary difference among the sections occurs only in the c subsections, each section is a recurrence (of the a and b materials) plus a variation (of the c material), with no moment or section particularly outstanding as a goal or climax (Table 4). All of the sections appear as important as one another in their contribution to a structure in which the sound is always revolving, coming back, self-perpetuating, and manifesting what Shen Sin-yan calls "ever-regenerating life cycles" (Shen 2000, 27).<sup>27</sup>

This revolving, circuitous quality in the original melody, with priority given to the same over the different, is enhanced in Abing's own performance style: he plays without making any of the sections or subsections particularly obtrusive, and he articulates none of the three D6s in as differentiated or unique a way as the later performers do at m. 76.2. Together with his constant beat projection and maintenance of a stable tempo, his overall sound shows a powerful integrity in consistently emphasizing the same.

In contrast, the alteration of the melody by later musicians has transformed the piece from its original circuitous, cyclical, ever-revolving process toward a linear, ever-changing process. Structurally, their elimination of the first occurrence of D6, together with their omission of much of the c3 and c4 materials, has enlarged and highlighted the difference between the "climactic" c5 subsection and the rest of the music, and thus it has wiped out much of the original weight

on sameness. Hence, in terms of the *c* material, once it has appeared for the first time, there is only one recurrence (*c*2) before it turns to *c*5. In other words, once the *a*-*b*-*c* pattern is established through varied recurrence (*a*1-*b*1-*c*1-*a*2-*b*2-*c*2), it enters into a climactic variation, and then reaches the closing section directly. The original winding, ever-regenerating character of Abing's melody is now turned into a motion that is directed toward the highlighted climax, with the peak D6 (m. 76.2) reached more directly and outstandingly.<sup>28</sup> Such alteration presents the various moments of *Er Quan* in a more differentiated, idiosyncratic manner than those in Abing's performance. They thus have turned the piece into a single irreversible direction—once the “climax” has passed, it is passed forever; there is no second climax. The original cyclic time in Abing's ever-regenerating melodic pattern is now replaced by linear time, with the emphasis on difference, on the idiosyncratic.<sup>29</sup>

### Articulation of the Beat

The principle of prioritizing the same in Abing is found not only on an overall dimension, but also on minute subtleties, that is, on a more detailed dimension such as beat articulation. In Abing's recorded performances, each beat is projected very distinctively through an extra stress on the “beat point”—the initial moment within the duration of a beat. That is, within the timespan of a beat, Abing would make the very beginning rather distinct while subduing the remaining part of the beat. The primary strategies in his emphasis on the beat point include a sudden dynamic increase and an immediate drop, momentary timbral changes (i.e., alterations of the relative weights of the various overtones of the pitch), pitch sliding, and/or the addition of ornamentation. An example is given in Figure 4. In the upper graph (the waveform), the thicker dark area at the initial part of the grayed area (aligned above the “①” of the lower graph, the spectrogram) indicates Abing's instant louder volume at the beat point.

To be sure, projecting the beat is a technique commonly heard in *erhu* music. Especially when there is no accompaniment, adding some accent at the very starting point of a beat—that is, at the beat point—helps to clarify the meter and, consequently, the rhythm, and makes the solo melody more accessible. In the case of *Er Quan*, later musicians sometimes stress not only the beat point, but also the initial moment of each half beat (♪), as they play in slow tempi. Song Guo-sheng's performance (1998) is a typical example. When playing a half note, he tends to divide its second beat into two halves and to stress on the initial moments of both, as is the case at mm. 5, 7, 11, 13, 15, 26, 28, 34, 54, 77, and 83.<sup>30</sup>

Before detecting the ways in which Abing and other *erhu* players project the beat, it should be noted that *erhu* players often emphasize not only the initial

moment (or time point—to be more specific) of each beat or half beat, but also that of the entrance of a note. The waveforms show that a note is often articulated more prominently at its starting time point than at the rest part, allowing its entrance to be clearly perceived. Thus, if a note starts right on a beat (as is often the case), the stress at its initial time point may not be attributed exclusively to beat projection.

To observe the beat projection and to avoid any confusion, we have to look for the articulation of a beat that is not simultaneously the beginning of a note, but, say, the second beat within the duration of a long note. The G at the start of m. 5 presents such a case, which continues for 2 beats. The gray areas in Figure 3 present the waveforms of this G in Abing ([1950] 1996a), Min Huifen (1992), Jiang Xun-feng (1996), and Song Guo-sheng's (1998) recordings, respectively. The horizontal axis indicates time (counted from the beginning of the piece), and the vertical axis indicates amplitude. In these graphs, one can see that on the second beat (Abing at approximately 00:00:25.65, Jiang at 00:00:32.35, Min at 00:00:36.70, and Song at 00:00:34.50) all four players project the beat by momentarily increasing slightly and then immediately decreasing the volume at the beat point.

Projection of the beat is not always achieved through dynamic increase. In Abing's performance, sometimes the start of a beat cannot be observed on the waveforms, but only in the spectrogram. On these occasions, he projects the beat not through dynamic changes, but rather through timbral alterations, which are manifested in the relative intensity of the various partials of the pitch at the beat point.

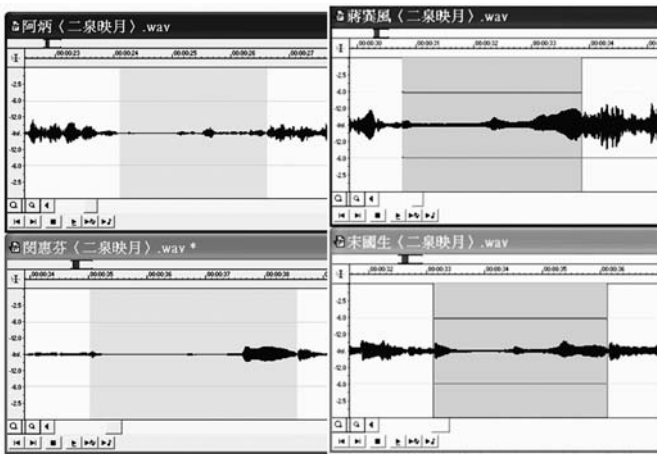


Figure 3. G on the downbeat of m. 5 in Abing (upper left), Jiang (upper right), Min (lower left), and Song (lower right).

The B at the beginning of m. 78 presents such a case, which encompasses two more beat points after it starts. Abing's emphasis at the second beat point can be observed on the spectrogram. Figure 4 aligns the waveform (upper graph) of the B note with its spectrogram (lower graph). Each horizontal line in the spectrogram represents a partial of the pitch. The darker it is, the greater its intensity. The projection of the second beat, with a slight timbral change at its beat point, is shown in the spectrogram around 05:56.883 on the horizontal axis (at the arrow marked "②"), as more higher-frequency overtones momentarily occur and immediately disappear. In addition to these dynamic and timbral changes, Abing sometimes projects the beat through appoggiaturas and slides as well, as is the case at m. 16.3 and 24.2 (shown in Figure 1).

Although it is a common *erhu* practice to project the beat, Abing does so in a rather unique way. To generalize, his beat points are articulated more distinctively and sharply than those of all of the other performers that I have examined. When his projection is accomplished through dynamics, for instance, he makes a sudden volume increase right on the beat point and then momentarily drops back—often to a degree barely audible—for the remainder of the beat duration. The result is a sharp distinction between the beat point and the remaining part of the beat. Other *erhu* players, in contrast, tend to make the decrease gradual and smooth, thus resulting in much more legato quality.

The initial B (marked areas in Figure 5) at the start of m. 4 serves as a point for comparison. The beginning part of each grayed area in Figure 5 shows how

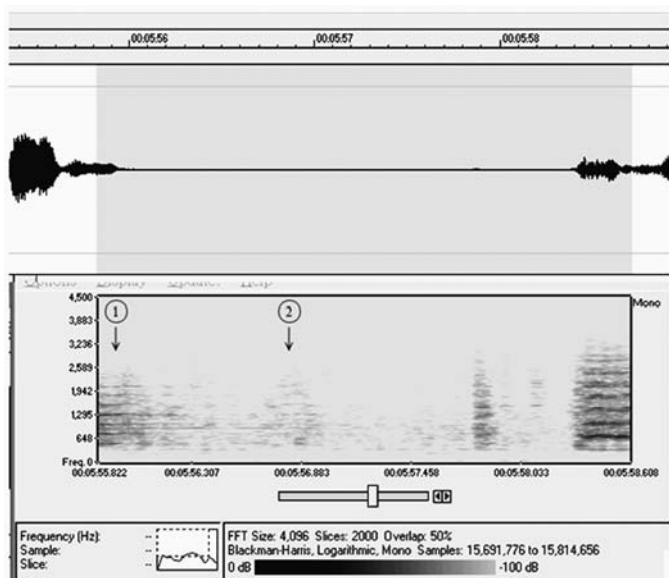


Figure 4. B on the downbeat of m. 78 in Abing.

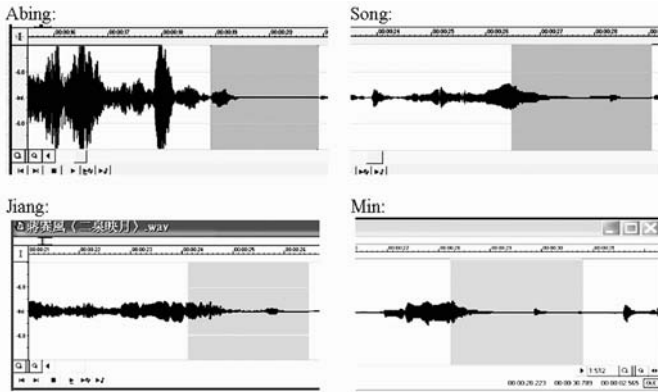


Figure 5. B at the start of m. 4 in Abing, Song, Min, and Jiang.

each musician emphasizes the beat point. From these waveforms it is found that whereas Abing immediately drops back after emphasizing the initial time point, thus keeping the remaining part of the beat at the lowest volume, the other three performers decrease the volume in a gradual manner after the beat point projection. In this way Abing makes the entrance of each beat rather distinct.<sup>31</sup> When listening to the performance, this sharp projection bestows a peculiar emphasis upon his constant and stable beats. The result is that his steadiness and constancy in tempo and beat duration are further highlighted.<sup>32</sup>


### Abing's Expressiveness

With Abing's priority given to the same established, the above analysis may perhaps lead to an important question: Namely, is this quality achieved at the expense of expressive differentiation? That is by no means the case. Rather, his performance displays a balance of both the constant and the ever-changing while more weight is given to the former. To illustrate this point, another comparison of expressive details is given below. It concerns a brief passage (m. 25, Figure 6) in which various types of musical accents clash. As each performer chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to show or to ignore certain accents, his or her weighing of various musical dynamisms is revealed, and individual expressive characteristics stand out.



Figure 6. m. 25.

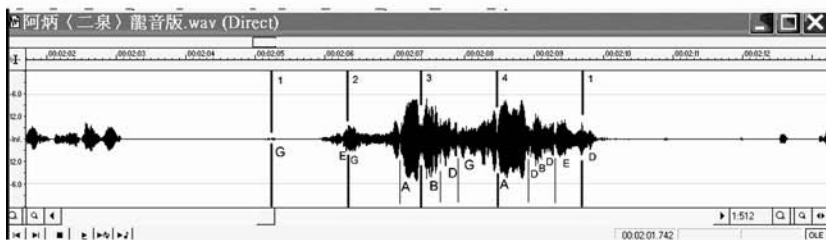
The main reason I have chosen to focus on m. 25 for further comparison is due to the competing relationships among melodic, rhythmic, and beat accents present in this measure. Major melodic changes gather around the third and fourth beats, especially the fourth. One may notice that the melody moves up and down around G and then back to G in the first 3 beats, whereas, on the fourth beat, not only does it move away from G, but also several leaps in the opposite direction occur within this brief moment. In this sense, the primary melodic activities of the bar occur at m. 25.4, with the E—the highest pitch in the measure—particularly stressed (see below). However, this goes against the beat accent, which falls on A, the opening note of the beat.

Meanwhile, the third beat also holds melodic importance. It is the first time in the measure that a beat does not start with G, although the pitch soon comes back. Thus the initial note (B) of beat 3 carries both a melodic stress and a regular beat accent. However, the syncopated rhythm () contradicts these accents, which gives weight to the last note of the beat. A similar conflict occurs on the fourth beat. Its last note bears both melodic and rhythmic accent, carrying both the highest pitch of the bar and a syncopated rhythm. Yet this is against the beat accent. In other words, regular beat accents (*banyan*) on the third and fourth beats are at odds with the irregular, changing accents of the melody and/or rhythm.

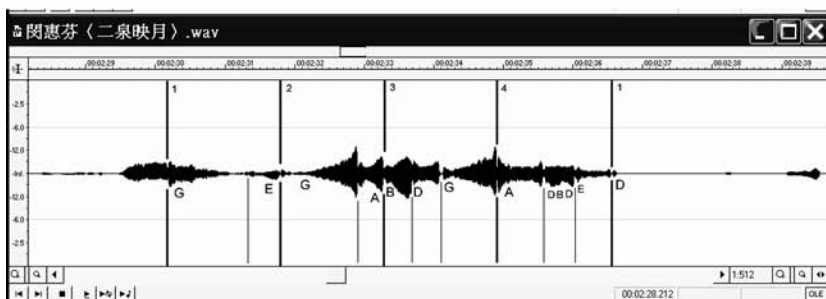
How do Abing and contemporary performers weigh and balance these various accents? The waveforms of Abing, Min Huifen (1992), Jiang Xun-feng (1996), and Song Guo-sheng (1998) at m. 25 are shown in Figure 7. The vertical dimension refers to the amplitude, and the horizontal, to time (in minutes and seconds). Waves are shown by the darkened area, and the vertical lines (marked with Arabic numbers) above the waves indicate beats within the measure. The lines below the waves indicate the timespan of the individual notes. When the beginning/ending time point of a note cannot be clearly detected, it is not marked in the waveform.

Abing maintains a constant projection of the beat even within this complicated measure. This may not be detectable at a first glance of the waveform. However, when listening, it becomes rather clear—each beat is saliently and stably conveyed. In Abing's waveform, the volume of the first beat seems barely noticeable. This does not mean that it is not projected. If we compare the waveform around m. 25.1 with what immediately precedes and follows it (see Figure 8), the beat point does stand out through its slightly higher amplitude. In addition, its projection is also achieved through timbral changes and pitch sliding. Figure 8 shows the waveform (in the blackened area) and the spectrogram (enlarged) around the beat point of m. 25.1 in Abing's recording. The spectrogram shows that the beat point of m. 25.1, in addition to its slightly higher amplitude, is further enhanced through both timbral changes and pitch sliding, with higher overtones

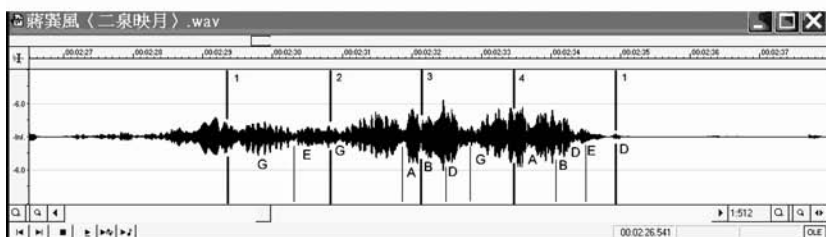
Abing:



Min:



Jiang:



Song:

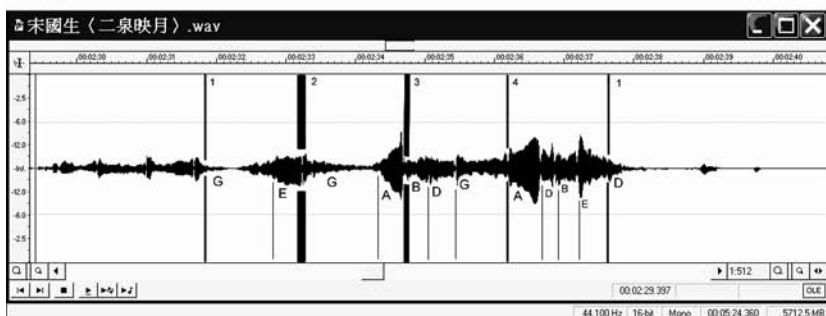


Figure 7. Waveforms of Abing, Min (1992), Jiang (1996), and Song Guo-sheng (1998) at m. 25.



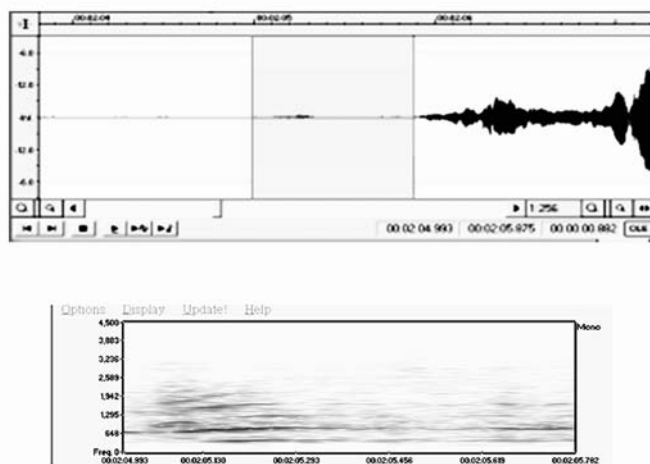


Figure 8. Abing's waveform and its spectrogram on the first beat point of m. 25.

(higher horizontal lines) appearing and disappearing between 02:04.993 and 02:05.293 and some of them gliding up slightly at 02:04.993–02:05.20.

One may question why Abing's amplitude at the beat points of m. 25.1 and 25.2 is softer than at the end of these 2 beats, so that he does not seem to emphasize these 2 time points (Figure 7). However, we should remember that the music proceeds in actual time from beginning to end, rather than moving back and forth. Thus, when the first beat of m. 25 is heard, the rest of the measure has not been heard yet. The emphasis on the beat point is aurally experienced through its relative intensity and difference from what *immediately* precedes and follows it. Compared with the preceding and succeeding half beats, this beat point is indeed prominent. Similarly, although the beat point of m. 25.2 shows lower amplitude than the end of the same beat, it nonetheless stands out by being louder than both the previous beat and the following half beat.

Despite the transitory drops in volume at the starting time points of beats 3 and 4 in Abing's waveform of m. 25, these 2 beat points are also projected (Figure 7). The drops are very brief, and hence barely noticeable when listening, and the amplitude instantly rises up high at the start of beats 3 and 4. Thus, the effect is still the enhancement of the beat point. In fact, the transitory stop or momentary drop in volume is a common device in *erhu* playing to mark the change of pitches, as is also presented in Song Guo-sheng (1998) and Min Huifen (1992) on note G of m. 25.3 (Figure 7). In terms of the actual listening experience this strategy helps the listener to identify the start of a new pitch.

In short, Abing manages to maintain the projection of each of the beats within m. 25. In contrast, the later performers do not always project beat points. Min Huifen (1992) and Jiang Xun-feng (1996), for instance, both present the second

beat point of m. 25 in a very soft amplitude, lower than what immediately precedes and follows it, and give it neither a timbral change nor any other projecting devices, so that their second beat point is almost hidden. On the third beat point, both Min and Song Guo-sheng (1998) play in a rather low volume in comparison with the surrounding moments, and thus this point is also submerged in their recordings.

This is not to say that their performances are inferior or flawed, but rather that they exhibit different emphases and weighing than does Abing when faced with the conflicting demands of rhythm, melody, and beats. Song, for instance, emphasizes note E at the end of the bar, which expresses the note's melodic significance, but undermines the beat accent and hence, sacrifices regularity in the execution of beats. Min's presentation of each pitch is carefully shaped. Most of her pitches at m. 25.2 and 25.3 (all except D), for instance, start with a soft volume and gradually increase until they enter the next pitch, thus resulting in trumpet-shaped waveforms. This fine, gradual increase in volume gives her music a highly refined and plaintive sound quality. To achieve this quality, her beat points have to be sometimes inhibited to make way for the volume increase. Thus, the highest intensity within m. 25.2 in her recording does not occur at the beat point, nor—as in Abing's—at the end, but rather at about 3/4 of the beat duration, right before G ends (Figure 7). This brief moment in fact comes with the highest volume of the entire measure. In terms of musical structure, however, it bears neither melodic stress nor metric or rhythmic accent.

In other words, in Min's performance, the consideration of individual note refinement seems to come prior to that of the constant projection of the beat point. Since the notes change in pitch and duration throughout the piece, her priority given to the note refinement reflects a primary emphasis on the different, the changing aspects of the music. Similarly, Song's stress on the last E of m. 25 betrays the priority he gives to the syncopated rhythm and pitch pinnacle (the melodic high point), which occur on an irregular and ever-changing, rather than regularly recurring, basis. In contrast, beat projection in Abing is rarely compromised. Each beat is clearly articulated and projected as explained. Together with his stable tempo, this constant insistence upon the projection of regularly recurring beats betrays his prioritization and valuing of the stably recurrent, the same, the regular.

The constant emphasis of sameness and regular recurrence in Abing may perhaps imply the absence of expressive differentiation. One would be wrong, however, to assume that Abing sacrifices expressive diversity in order to maintain regular pulsing. Since his major accents in m. 25 are placed around the third beat point and at the start of the fourth beat, melodic importance of these 2 beats is tactfully conveyed. In addition, with the A at the end of m. 25.2 bearing the primary accent, he expresses the structural importance of A-B-D on m. 25.2 and 25.3, which hints at the melodic motion A-B-D-E of beat 4. This emphasis,

because of its closeness in time with the third beat point, contributes to a sense of “pushing” toward the third beat and thus, intriguingly, renders the effect of enhancing the latter. In other words, Abing’s emphasis on A is so dexterously presented that, while stress is given to the end of a beat rather than to the starting point in order to convey the melodic motion, the result is not a contradiction of beat projection, but on the contrary, an enhancement of it. He ends up expressing both the constant beat accent and the ever-changing melodic accent.

All of these nuances demonstrate that his emphasis on the same and stable is not achieved at the sacrifice of expressive differentiations. It is achieved, rather, by carefully balancing the same and the different, the constant and the changing. The different and changing are acknowledged on a subtle level in his treatment, embraced within a general equanimous flow of constancy. Owing to this observation, I shall identify Abing’s expression as oriented toward “equanimity.”<sup>33</sup>

### Other Works of Abing

*Er Quan* is far from being an isolated case among Abing’s works that manifests such an equanimity-oriented style. In the other recordings that he left, signs showing priority given to the same, the recurrent, and the constant are also prevalent. His *erhu* recording of *Cold Spring Wind*, for instance, embodies many of the features found in *Er Quan*, including a stable tempo and constantly projected beat points, whether through dynamic, timbral, or other processes such as pitch sliding at the beat points, while giving an animated expression.

It should be stressed that these characteristics of Abing’s style are not of an absolute nature, but are only relative: that is, his emphasis on the same and the stable does not stand alone, but can be perceived and distinguished only in comparison with subsequent performances by other musicians. This is particularly true of his *pipa* (a plucked-string instrument) recordings, which bear much of the vitality of folk music. In these pieces Abing’s stability and reserved expression may not always be obvious, but they become clear when compared with more recent performances. In his *pipa* recording of *Dragon Boats*, for instance, Abing sounds exciting and vigorous, as the piece involves many metric and tempo changes in imitation of percussion music. However, when compared with, for example, the recording by Chen Ze-min (b. 1930) (Chen 1996), Abing’s performance sounds more steady and consistent in projecting the beat and maintaining tempo stability, and thus more emphasis is found with the same than in Chen’s performance. In another *pipa* piece, *Great Waves Washing the Sand*, although the tempo is quickened when the cadenzalike final section starts, Abing basically maintains the same pace for the whole section. In contrast, Liu De-hai (b. 1937), a famous Chinese *pipa* player, increases the tempo much more drastically and changes it several times within the section in his recording of the same piece (Liu 1996).<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The quality of equanimity deserves more attention than is usually taken nowadays in Chinese traditional music. As Eileen Chang's comment (cited previously) reveals, it may be a quality that attracted adherents in the earlier 20th century. Recall the expressive qualities of *Er Quan* perceived by the various listeners quoted earlier, some of whom criticized Abing's performance for its "insipidness," whereas others praised it for its reticence and absorbing and enduring interest. These divergent opinions seem incompatible. However, both insipidness (*pingdan*) and reticence (*hanxu*) imply a less ostentatious, less poignant or aggressive emotional expression in Abing.

Indeed, the perceived degree of mournfulness demonstrates once again his evenhanded, nonpoignant emotional expression. Later *erhu* players often present stronger and more poignant feelings of mourning and sorrowfulness than Abing.<sup>35</sup> As indicated by Zhao Yan Chen (cited earlier), many contemporary performers play *Er Quan* in a low-spirited manner. This is reflected in the basic tempi in their recordings. In contrast to Abing's ♩ = 50 ([1950] 1996a), Min Huifen (1992), Song Guo-sheng (1998), and Kan Pai-Lin (1994), for instance, each perform at roughly ♩ = 35, Zhang Fangming (1994) at ♩ = 36, and Jiang Xun-feng (1996) at roughly ♩ = 40. A recording closer to Abing's in the overall pace is that of Zhao Yan Chen (2000) (which is hardly surprising, given his high appraisal of Abing's performance). His tempo in general, however, is still slower: ♩ = 44. The much reduced pace in the recordings by Min, Song, Kan, and Zhang result in their more pervasively mournful emotional expression.

This expressive disparity between Abing and later players is further enhanced in the tempo change in the introduction (mm. 0–1.2) mentioned above. The substantial slowing down by all of these contemporary players engenders and heightens the sense of mournfulness. In Abing, contrastingly, with his moderate tempo and less pronounced *ritardando*, the introduction is presented in a much composed and controlled manner. Contrary to later musicians' "low-spirited" tone, his performance is described by some as "healthy" and "animated" (cited earlier).

With the foregoing analysis, it is now clear that Abing's less poignant, less mournful expression is not accidentally resulted. Rather, it is closely linked to his evenhanded expression, his underlying artistic principle of emphasizing the same, the stable, and the constant over the different, the changing, and the idiosyncratic. If emotional hues and degrees of tension vary from moment to moment (as I believe they do) in the music, then this principle by its very nature would de-emphasize those changes.

Yet what is intriguing in Abing is that his performance is far from lacking in expression. On the contrary, there *are* expressive hues as explained above. They

are presented on a subtler level—artistically conveyed within his steady sound flow, in balance with his prioritization of the stable and the constant.

In addition to *huqin*, Eileen Chang also noted in an appreciative tone the repetitiveness and reserved emotional expression in *shenqu* (a precursor to *huju*, Shanghai opera) (Chang [1944] 1992). Her observation brings us to a final note, namely, that the aesthetic significance given to recurrence and sameness is likely to be manifested not only in Abing or in traditional *erhu* performance, but it may also occur in many other kinds of traditional music. For example, *Nanguan* (*Nanyin* in China, a kind of traditional music prevalent in southeast China, especially in Fujian province and Taiwan and among the overseas Chinese communities in neighboring countries) exemplifies many of the features analyzed above. The beat points in experienced *Nanguan* singers such as Tsai Hsiao-yue are consistently emphasized (Tsai 1988). Emotion is generally expressed in a reserved manner, and when changes are introduced (such as tempo acceleration and the joining in of various instruments at the beginning of a piece), they enter in an extremely slow and gradual manner, so that each new change brings in as little contrast as possible. As discovered in my analysis, when the melodic peak occurs it enters in a circuitous manner—the tune first reaches its peak covertly, immediately leaves it, but lingers near it and reaches it again, and then it repeats the process. Thus, the uniqueness, the exceptionality of the peak is not in the least elaborated as the climactic event in the piece, but is rather “neutralized,” counterbalanced through the circuitous melodic motion and rhythmic process. Meanwhile the heterophonic combination of the instruments, which improvise on the basis of skeleton tones, makes the overall sound unpredictable and fascinating on a subtle level.<sup>36</sup>

We may recall the findings mentioned at the beginning of this essay—namely, performers who play in older styles of *qin* and Peking opera often show less-overt dramatic characteristics and less-frequent tempo changes than do those who play in a modern style. This concurs with what has been found in Abing’s performance. One wonders whether this is a general feature of the older, pre-modern performing styles in various genres of Chinese music, in which the same and the stable are emphasized over the different. In addition to performing styles, structures that prioritize the same over the different are prevalent in Chinese traditional music. The continuous repetition of the same melodic material with or without variation is a procedure often found in genres including Beijing opera, *Jiangnan sizhu* (silk and bamboo music in southern China), Taiwanese opera, and Taiwanese *Beiguan*.

While the same material recurs again and again, it does not necessarily signify the same expression. For the lovers of traditional Chinese music such as folk operas, this process is far from being the consequence of an enfeebled imagination,

but rather conveys a sense of equanimity (even if only temporary) over life adversities. Eileen Chang vividly delineates such expressions in *shenqu*:

When expressing “hurriedly running ahead” in *shenqu*, there is a special music which indeed sounds flurried, as if the feet touch no ground and the wind blows around the ears. What is intriguing is that a similar tune is used to convey death, but it brings a different impression. The text reads: “The soul gets distant, the soul gets distant; the spirit is drifting, the spirit is drifting. When the King of Hades requests you to die at the third *jing*, he does not allow you to stay till the fifth *jing*.”<sup>37</sup> The music comes across like dense rain, insipid, repeating and repeating, fluttering and noisy. It is as if one feels blank inside when catastrophe occurs, while people around get anxious for him. Such a way is poor men’s death!—it tastes of the flavor of human life . . . to the bitter end. (Chang [1944] 1992, 313; my translation)

The same melodic material—“insipid” and “repeating”—that has been associated with the expression of “hurriedly running ahead” is now imbued (or interpreted) with a contrasting undertone for a different dramatic purpose. To Chang, when it is associated with the protagonist’s dying moment, the tune no longer conveys the “flurried” motion or his flurried mood, but rather his “blank” inner feeling amidst the spectators’ anxiety. In other words, while similarly insipid and repetitive music is “equally” associated with contrasting dramatic occasions, for a listener familiar with traditional operas, it may nonetheless convey different expressions as are appropriate to the ongoing context.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the Chinese names and terms are mostly transliterated following the Hanyu pinyin, the official system of romanization in the People’s Republic of China, and also the dominant system used in Chinese studies. However, when there are established romanizations, I follow them. This is the case with most of the musicians mentioned in this study. Their romanized names can be found on their records.

<sup>3</sup> The styles of these musicians are often identified as “conservatory,” as they have been mostly trained in the modern Chinese conservatories (Stock 1996, 143 ff.). See also Schimmelpenninck and Kouwenhoven (1993).

<sup>4</sup> For accounts of the Westernization of Chinese musical culture in the early 20th century, see Jones (2001, chap. 1) and Wang Yuhe (1996, chaps. 2 and 3).

<sup>5</sup> For example, indicating repetition, variation, and association as the basic traditional formal principles, Yuan Jingfang immediately apologizes that, “due to the economic stasis in the recent one or two hundred years [in China], there has been no breakthrough

development in traditional music culture (except for the creative development in Beijing opera)” (Yuan 1999, 121; my translation). See also Chen Yingshi’s criticism of various revisions of traditional music (1963).

<sup>6</sup> The more recent festivals include one in 2005 at Wuxi, and one in 2007 at Xishan.

<sup>7</sup> “Jinian Minjian Yinyuejia Hua Yan-jun (Abing) Danchen Jiushi Zhounian Xueshu Taolunhui” (Academic Conference Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of Abing’s Birth), held in 1983 by the Cultural Department of China and the China Musicians’ Association.

<sup>8</sup> “Hua Yan-jun (Abing) Yishu Chengjiu Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui” (International Conference on the Achievements of Hua Yan-jun’s (Abing’s) Art), Hubin Hotel, Wuxi, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account and comparison of various biographies of Abing, see Stock (1996, chap. 2).

<sup>10</sup> “*Bujin yo dashide shoubi, yeyo dashide fengfan*” (Qiao 1996, 176–7; my translation).

<sup>11</sup> “*Kaiqile tazijide zhudongxing yu chuangzaoxing*” (Yang Yinliu 1983b, 10; my translation).

<sup>12</sup> “. . . zuiyo shengqi, zuiyo shengmingli . . .” “*Zongguan zhongguo xiandai yinyueshi, jihu meiyo yige minjian yinyuejia neng yu Hua Yan-jun xiangtibinglun*” (Qian 1996, 203; my translation).

<sup>13</sup> “. . . pingdan . . . shifen yuanshi . . .” See Zhao Zuotong (2001).

<sup>14</sup> “*Abing lade Er Quan meiyo xianzaide fengfuduocai*.” Google cache of November 4, 2004. [http://66.102.7.104/search?q=cache:9dcrxIAi4NEJ:www.hxwz.com/my/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php%3Ftopic\\_id=31146%26forum=2+阿炳,朱昌耀&hl=zh-TW&client=safari](http://66.102.7.104/search?q=cache:9dcrxIAi4NEJ:www.hxwz.com/my/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php%3Ftopic_id=31146%26forum=2+阿炳,朱昌耀&hl=zh-TW&client=safari) (accessed September 12, 2005). My translation.

<sup>15</sup> “*Ruguo tingle Min Huifen de jindieban luyin, ni shenzhihui juede [Abing’s Er Quan] shi nage bu ruliude xuetude yanzou*” (Huo 2005; my translation).

<sup>16</sup> More discussion of the alteration will follow.

<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon is also noted by Stock: “Several conservatory erhu performers . . . criticiz[ed] Abing’s intonation and tone quality. For them, the recording was of historical interest only” (Stock 1996, 150, 165, fn 31).

<sup>18</sup> “[Abing’s performance] . . . *gengjia hanxu juanyong, ye gengjia dongren* (shows more reticence and absorbing and enduring interest) [than later performances]” (Huo 2005; my translation). See also Chen (2002).

<sup>19</sup> “*Bengbengxi*” is an old name for *errenzhuan*, an operetta popular in northeast China, involving only one to three performers.

<sup>20</sup> That music involves both recurrent and ever-changing processes is proposed as a “double stream” by William Benzon (2001, 126).

<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon is also surveyed by Han, Zhao, and Liu (2000) in their analysis of recordings by Abing and Song Fei.

<sup>22</sup> A major difference between Abing’s performances and those of later *erhu* players, which is not treated here, concerns tuning and individual pitch frequencies. This difference has been widely noted and investigated by scholars, including Han, Zhao, and Liu (2000) and Ong (2002, 2005). I have not discussed it here because the explanation for

this difference is a complicated issue, and much of it may not be related to Abing's expressiveness. His distinctive tuning can be attributed to various possibilities, including the method of folk tuning in his time, the musical training he obtained, his personal preference, his condition at the time of recording (as indicated above), or a combination of all of these. These possibilities require a separate study. See also Cao ([1983] 1996, 140).

<sup>23</sup> "M. 76.2" refers to the second beat in m. 76. Pitches are referred to under the system in which the middle C is identified as C4; the D above it, D4; and the B below it, B3. Measure numbers throughout this essay are all based on Abing's ([1950] 1996a), as transcribed in Figure 1. There are two important sets of CDs available on the market that include Abing's recording of *Er Quan*—one produced by the ROI of Hong Kong ([1950] 1996a), and the other by the Wind Records in Taipei ([1950] (1996g). Analysis here is made with the ROI edition (Abing [1950] 1996a), because its length is exactly the same as noted by Yang Yinliu (the major scholar who visited Abing and made the recording in 1950) in his transcription, while the recording in the Wind edition is slightly longer in the total duration.

<sup>24</sup> Although Abing is reported to have said that *Er Quan* is a traditional Taoist piece (Yang Yinliu 1983a, 6), scholars have been unable to agree on identifying the original. Yang Yinliu (1983a) declares that it is Abing's own creation. Zhang Zhenji (1980, 1994) and Cheng Gongliang (1981) each argue that it is Abing's creation based on various folk material. Stock (1996, 99 ff.) contends that it is Abing's improvisation based on certain material shared among all three of his recorded *erhu* pieces.

<sup>25</sup> There are various ways to view the structure of *Er Quan*. Scholars, including Chen Yingshi (1963, 1994, 1996), Cheng Gongliang (1981), Zhang Zhenji (1980), Zhao Xiaosheng (1994b), and Jonathan Stock (1996), have shown their different understandings, which relate to their respective purposes. Stock, for example, delineates the sections into more subsections than what I propose here. The smaller subdivisions in his analysis helps to form melodic units in proper sizes so that they can be compared with each other among Abing's various recorded *erhu* pieces, which is what Stock attempts to do. The explanation provided by Zhao Xiaosheng (1994b) appears closest to my sectional analysis. His sectional delineation is almost identical to mine, except for different labeling for the subsections. Similarly, Zhang Zhenji (1980) and Cheng Gongliang (1981) each regard the piece as structured in uniquely varied repetitions, though their respective labeling of the subsections are different from mine. I hold that there need not be only one correct analysis for a given musical piece. In fact, contrasting analyses may complement each other. Acknowledgement and digestion of them help to form in the reader an "enlarged mentality" in Paul Ricoeur's sense (Kearney 2004). Joseph Lam (1993) has demonstrated how this is possible with his examination and comparison of various analyses of *qin* music.

<sup>26</sup> Terence M. Liu (1988, esp. 186–8) has offered a careful comparison of how various performers cut portions of their performances.

<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed structural and proportional analysis of *Er Quan*, see Zhao Xiaosheng (1994b). In his analysis, which concentrates solely on Abing's melodic structure, he arrives at a conclusion in agreement with my observation. *Er Quan* is found to be "a unified organic whole" that "keeps constant while changing."



<sup>28</sup> However, since their c5 subsection contains two occurrences of D6 (mm. 74–76), later musicians' climax-forging process is inherently counteracted.

<sup>29</sup> For discussions of "linear" and "cyclic" times in music, see Judith and Alton Becker (1981), Goldsworthy (2005, 309–12), and Kramer (1988, chap. 2).

<sup>30</sup> When a half note is tied to an eighth note, he plays the second beat of the former as one, and projects only its starting time point. This is the case with m. 29.2 and m. 78.2.

<sup>31</sup> It may be observed from the waveforms in Figure 5 that, whereas Min, Jiang, and Song project the second beat point (the "knobs" toward the last 1/3 of the grayed area), Abing did not seem to do so. However, this is in fact another case in which Abing projects the beat point through timbral change (not shown here) instead of through dynamic emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Abing's sharper articulation of beat points may perhaps be regarded as highlighting the different. However, this is an effect on a microscopic level, that is, within the duration of the beat. On a more noticeable and obvious level, this emphasis upon beat entrances in fact strengthens the sense of beats. And because the beat is constantly present and equanimously maintained in Abing, emphasis of its entrances results in highlighting the constant quality.

<sup>33</sup> Some performers present the melody of *Er Quan* completely without any deletion, but they comprise only a small number. Among all of the recordings I have examined, only Song Fei (1997) and Jiang Xun-feng (1996) retain the original melody in its entirety. However, neither of them maintains as much regularity and constancy as Abing does. Song Fei projects the melodic peak of m. 76 to the point of making it the climactic moment. Jiang does not forge a climax, and thus his performance may be closer to Abing's than the other players I have examined. However, his beat points are not constantly projected as are those in Abing, and he increases the tempo toward the "climactic" moment of m. 76.

<sup>34</sup> Sameness plays an important role not only within Abing's individual pieces, but also among them. Wang Zhenya (1996) indicates the use of same or similar melodic materials among the six works that Abing left, but does not explain how. In Stock's carefully laid-out analysis of Abing's use of the improvisatory process, he successfully argues against the general notion that Abing's three *erhu* pieces (*Listening to the Pines*, *Cold Spring Wind*, and *Er Quan*) are distinctive works (Stock 1996). According to him, they actually consist of improvisatory variations of the *same* basic materials, and that this reflects traditional forms of musical creativity within Wuxi, the area in which Abing was active. Stock's finding confirms that difference and originality/creativity are not as important aesthetic qualities in Abing as are often assumed to be, and that "sameness" plays a significant role in Abing, not simply on an inner-music scale, but also on an inter-music scale. To aesthetically appreciate his art, one needs to acknowledge the quality of "equanimity" more than that of creativity.

<sup>35</sup> Ironically, Abing may not have meant to depict the Second Springs or express a mournful mood in the piece, as it is understood by many later performers and listeners. For a detailed examination of how the title came about, what it was supposed to mean, and how the program was debated by scholars, see Stock (1996, chap 2).

<sup>36</sup> This analysis will be published in another article.

<sup>37</sup> The *jing* is a traditional Chinese unit for the indication of time. A night is divided into five *jings*. The third *jing* comes between 23:00 and 1:00, and the fifth *jing* between 3:00 and 5:00.

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