

The Techniques on Pipa Solo and the Ambush from Ten Sides (Shi Mian Maifu)

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate world of solo pipa performance, focusing on the renowned piece "Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu). Through a comprehensive analysis of techniques employed in this classical Chinese composition, we explore the rich historical and cultural context surrounding the pipa, its significance in traditional Chinese music, and the nuanced playing styles that bring this piece to life. By examining the techniques required to master "Ambush from Ten Sides," this paper aims to provide insights into the artistry and skill demanded by solo pipa performance.

Keywords: Techniques on Pipa Solo; The Ambush from Ten Sides; Shi Mian Maifu

Introduction

The pipa, a traditional Chinese plucked string instrument with a history spanning over two millennia, holds a special place in the realm of Chinese music. Characterized by its pear-shaped body, four strings, and unique playing techniques, the pipa has been an integral part of Chinese musical traditions, both classical and contemporary. Among the many compositions that showcase the virtuosity required to master the pipa, "Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) stands out as a pinnacle of solo performance, challenging musicians with its technical complexity and emotional depth.

The Chinese Pipa, characterized by its pear-shaped body, a fretted neck, and usually four strings, is a traditional plucked string instrument. With a history that spans over two millennia, it holds deep significance within Chinese cultural and musical traditions. Renowned for its expressive qualities, broad dynamic range, and adaptability, the Pipa has garnered popularity across various music genres, including classical, folk, and contemporary styles (Zhou, 2023). Playing the Pipa involves employing intricate finger techniques such as plucking, strumming, and sliding to create a diverse array of sounds and tones (Wang, 2022).

Throughout history, the Pipa has held the esteemed title of the King of Folk Music within the realm of musical instruments due to its extensive range, distinctive timbre, intricate fingering techniques, and profound emotive capacity. "Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) stands out as one of the most widely recognized pieces in the repertoire of Pipa music. This composition, renowned for its passionate and high-pitched musical language, evokes a sense of excitement while vividly portraying the emotions of grief, anger, helplessness, and desperation experienced by King Xiang Yu of Chu during the pivotal battle at Gaixia. Drawing inspiration from this historical narrative, this article focuses on the score version compiled by Li Tingsong from the Wang School to delve into the musical structure, artistic characteristics,

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and performance techniques showcased in the Pipa piece "Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu), as elaborated by Zhuang and Dong (2023).

"The Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) is a renowned Pipa composition in Chinese history that narrates the conflict between Chu and Han. This piece vividly portrays the intense encounter between Liu Bang and Xiang Yu during their decisive battle at Gaixia through a rich tapestry of rhythms, captivating melodies, and intricate layers. The incorporation of sounds like clashing gold, drums, swords, crossbows, as well as the bustling movements of people and horses, creates a lifelike auditory experience, immersing the audience into the grandeur of the scene as if they were present themselves (Jie, 2018).

The melodies of the Pipa such as Chu Han, the Ambush from Ten Sides (Shi Mian Maifu), and The Overlord Dismantling Armor are all centered around the Battle of Gaixia theme, a crucial battle during the Chu Han War, developed in a storytelling manner. During the Ming Dynasty, Chu Han vividly illustrated the complete combat sequence, aiming to faithfully depict historical events by utilizing music and literature to depict the prelude and aftermath of the battle between the two factions (Zheng, 2014). The solo Pipa composition "The Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) is a revered piece in Chinese musical culture, highlighting Zhuge Liang's strategic acumen during the Three Kingdoms era under Shu Han rule. While commonly linked to Zhuge Liang's tactics against Eastern Wu forces, the exact origins of this piece remain enigmatic. Known for its detailed musical narrative, it vividly portrays Zhuge Liang's tactical brilliance through intricate storytelling (Lei, 2007).

"The Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) has evolved beyond its era to become a perpetual masterpiece in Chinese music. Celebrated and performed widely, it has undergone various reinterpretations and modifications, establishing itself as a cultural gem transmitted across generations. This enduring composition captivates audiences, maintaining its charm irrespective of time, solidifying its position as an iconic representation of Chinese musical legacy and historical narrative (Wang, 2023). The cultural and historical importance of Chinese music is undeniable. However, the new generation's involvement in preserving this heritage often lacks depth. Exploring the techniques employed in Pipa solo performances, with a specific focus on "The Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu), emerges as a captivating research challenge that bridges musicology, performance studies, and endeavors to safeguard cultural traditions (Yang, 2018). At the core of this research lies the exploration of how Pipa players navigate the complexities of the ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) to deliver a captivating and authentic musical rendition. This composition demands a high level of technical proficiency, virtuosic skill, and interpretive depth from the performer.

The cultural significance of the ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) adds another layer of complexity to the research problem. As a musical composition rooted in Chinese history and folklore, the piece carries deep symbolic meaning and narrative weight. Understanding how Pipa players interpret and embody these cultural elements in their performance is crucial for preserving the authenticity and integrity of traditional Chinese music. Another aspect to consider is the stylistic interpretation of the ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) across different performers and performance contexts. Each Pipa player brings their unique artistic sensibilities and musical influences to their rendition of the piece, leading to variations in technique, expression, and performance style. Exploring these stylistic differences can offer valuable insights into the creative processes and individuality of Pipa performers, enriching our appreciation of the diversity within the traditional Chinese music scene.

Historical Context of "Ambush from Ten Sides"

Dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), "Ambush from Ten Sides" is based on a famous battle scenario from ancient Chinese history. The piece depicts the strategic military maneuver known as "Ambush from Ten Sides," where troops lie in wait to surprise and overwhelm their enemy. Translated into music, this narrative is conveyed through a series of dynamic shifts, rapid passages, and dramatic flourishes that demand exceptional skill and precision from the performer.

"The Ambush from Ten Sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) stands out as a well-known solo composition for the Pipa, a traditional Chinese string instrument. Although conventionally associated with Zhuge Liang of the Shu Han dynasty during the Three Kingdoms period, its precise historical inception remains unclear. Illustrating Zhuge Liang's tactical genius against Eastern Wu, this piece holds a special place in Chinese musical heritage—frequently performed, reimagined, and treasured across generations. Despite its murky origins, "The Ambush from Ten Sides" persists as a cherished masterpiece that has transcended different historical epochs, captivating audiences through various adaptations and renditions (Wang, 2023).

"The Ambush from ten sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) is a celebrated Pipa composition of significant scale, renowned for its rich content and distinctive style that sets it apart from conventional classical music. Inspired by the pivotal 202 BC battle between the Chu and Han armies at Gaixia, where the Han forces strategically employed a ten-sided ambush tactic to secure a decisive victory over the Chu army, ultimately leading to Xiang Yu's demise at the Wujiang River. Presented in a format typical of traditional Chinese music suites, "The Ambush from ten sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) consists of thirteen concise segments, each bearing a descriptive title that alludes to formations, battles, strategic maneuvers, and the conclusive outcome of the conflict, vividly narrating the unfolding events of this historic confrontation. This composition not only showcases the artistry inherent in Chinese musical heritage but also exemplifies the narrative prowess embedded within historical accounts, capturing the essence of a crucial moment through its orchestrated melodies and thematic development (Li, 2021).

"The Ambush from ten sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) is an esteemed and expansive Pipa composition, standing out as one of the top ten ancient Chinese melodies and held in high regard as a classic in its genre. Its magnificence, unique style, and substantial content distinguish it within the realm of classical music. Originally featured in the Pipa Score by Hua Qiuping in 1818, this notable piece underwent a title change to "The Pacification of Chu in Huaiyin" in Li Fangyuan's compilation "New Scores for Thirteen Sets of Northern and Southern School Pipa Pieces" in 1895. In the aftermath of the Battle of Gaixia, subsequent generations crafted two renowned Pipa martial arts compositions inspired by this historical event: "The Ambush from ten sides" (Shi Mian Maifu) and "The Overlord Dismantling Armor," originating from the Ming Dynasty Pipa tune Chu Han. The Tang Pipa Biography, penned by Tang Yingzeng, details this musical piece through the account of Wang Youding, a Ming Dynasty Pipa player. The composition vividly portrays the intense showdown at Gaixia, where a symphony of sounds reminiscent of collapsing structures reverberated, blending gold, drums, swords, and the tumultuous clamor of people and horses altering paths. As the dust settles, the fate is sealed, segueing into a melancholic Chu melody echoing Xiang Yu's poignant farewell to his lover as he faces his tragic end. Subsequent movements within the piece depict frantic pursuits, the self-immolation of Xiang Yu at Wujiang, the valiant efforts of the Yu

cavalry in defense of Xiang Yu, and more, capturing the essence of this historic saga (Yao, 2019)

The division of Chu Han led to the creation of two distinct musical renditions: The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) and Overlord Removing Armor. Although both compositions stem from the same historical context, they convey divergent narratives. The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) focuses on Liu Bang and the Han army, depicting strategic ambushes and battles at Jiming Mountain and Jiuli Mountain, resonating with an exhilarating and grandiose ambiance. In contrast, Overlord Removing Armor centers on Xiang Yu's separation from his troops, highlighting emotional moments like Chu Ge and Farewell My Concubine. This piece carries a somber, mournful tone infused with melancholy, vividly capturing Xiang Yu's poignant goodbye to Yu Ji set against the backdrop of sorrowful Chu melodies. While the former celebrates triumph, the latter serves as a lamentation, weaving themes of loss and yearning into its musical tapestry (Li, 2019).

1. The music structure of Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu)

The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu) is structured as a conventional large-scale suite in Chinese music, consisting of thirteen concise sections, each delineated by descriptive titles. These titles allude to formations, battles, strategic tactics, and the conclusive resolution of the conflict, effectively illustrating the unfolding events of this significant encounter. This musical piece serves as a testament to the rich tradition of Chinese music and the narrative depth embedded in historical accounts, skillfully portraying a crucial juncture through its orchestrated harmonies and thematic development (Li, 2021).

"The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu)" exemplifies large-scale Pipa martial arts within traditional Chinese instrumental music. Chinese Pipa music typically features melodious tunes, gentle rhythms, and intricate techniques like left-hand actions such as pushing, pulling, chanting, and kneading. It excels in evoking natural beauty and delicate emotions. Contrastingly, Wuqu, characterized by intense emotions and varied rhythms, is dramatic and employs forceful right-hand techniques to convey powerful feelings and ambiance. The composition is renowned for its majestic and passionate qualities, crafting a vivid artistic representation. Within its high-pitched melodies lies not only the triumphant tones of victors but also the exceptional spirit of the defeated (Wang, 2017). Overall, the music content is magnificent and magnificent, with a magnificent and unique style. The entire piece is touching, with ups and downs. As the Pipa is played, the listener's mood changes with the sound of the music, from passionate and grand to tense and urgent, and then to tragic self-immolation. Finally, the end of the sorrow ends, and our heartbeat fluctuates accordingly. Only by listening to it can one appreciate its grandeur and feel that it is worthy of the title of one of the top ten ancient Chinese songs.

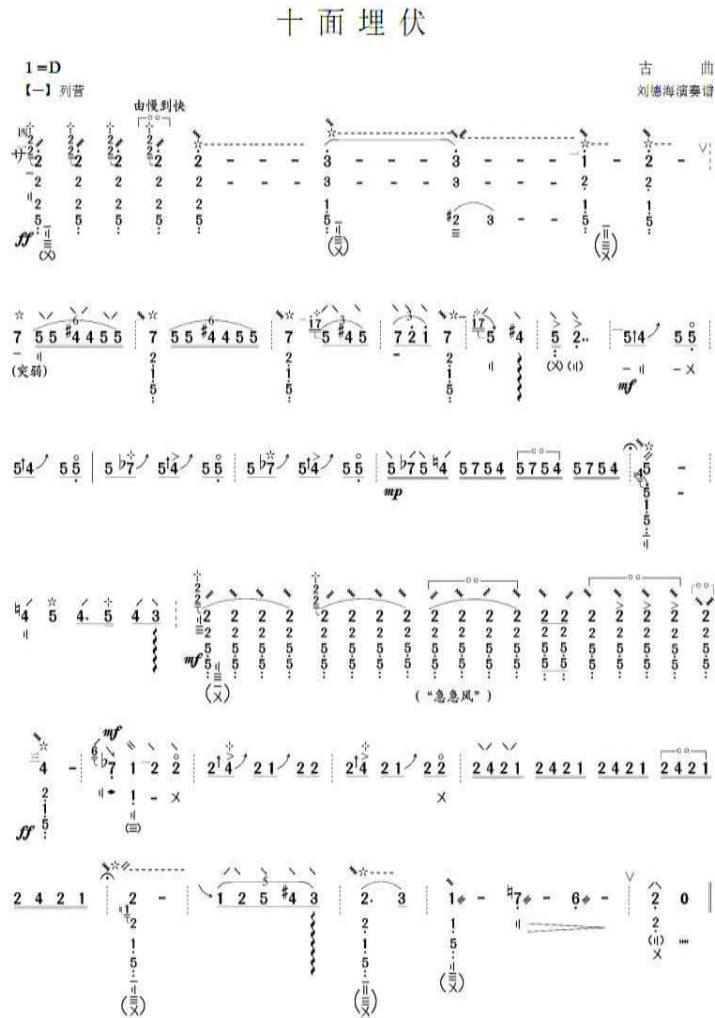


Figure 1: The structure of Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu)
Source: <https://sooopu.com/>, 2024

The structure of "The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu)" can be delineated into three key parts:

(1) The initial section portrays the Han army's preparations preceding the major conflict, emphasizing the formidable and grand lineup of the Han forces. This segment encompasses the first five paragraphs of the composition.

(2) The central part, comprising paragraphs six, seven, and eight, vividly illustrates the climactic and intense battle between the Chu and Han armies, capturing the pivotal moment of the conflict (Liu, 2018).

(3) The final segment consists of the remaining five paragraphs. The first two paragraphs depict Xiang Yu's despair and subsequent suicide by the Wujiang River. The melancholic melody of "Wujiang Suicide" contrasts with the earlier intensity, shaping a poignant artistic representation of Xiang Yu's passionate yet tragic story. The concluding three

paragraphs depict various victorious scenes of the Han army, typically abbreviated in modern performances to enhance emotional impact and avoid dilution of musical intensity (Liu, 2018).

Through its musical elements, the Pipa piece "The Ambush from ten sides (Shi Mian Maifu)" effectively captures the intense battle scenario of this ancient conflict, painting a vivid and emotionally evocative picture of the historical battlefield.

2. Techniques in Solo Pipa Performance

Mastering "Ambush from Ten Sides" requires a deep understanding of traditional pipa techniques and a high level of proficiency in executing them. Key techniques employed in this piece include:

Finger Picking: The intricate finger picking technique used in the pipa involves plucking the strings with the fingernails to produce crisp, resonant tones. Variations in finger placement and angle create a wide range of timbres and dynamics.

Sliding: Sliding the fingers along the strings produces smooth glissando effects that add fluidity and expressiveness to the music. Controlled sliding is essential for capturing the lyrical and melodic elements of "Ambush from Ten Sides."

Percussive Effects: The pipa allows for percussive effects such as tapping, knocking, and striking the body of the instrument to mimic drumming sounds or add rhythmic accents. These percussive techniques enhance the rhythmic drive and intensity of the piece.

Bending and Vibrato: Bending notes and using vibrato techniques on the pipa strings infuse the music with emotive qualities, offering opportunities for subtle expression and interpretation (Wang, 2022).

2.1 Performance Techniques and Emotional Expression in the Pipa Piece "The Ambush from Ten Sides"

In traditional categorizations of Pipa music, compositions are generally classified into "Wenqu" (civil pieces) and "Wuqu" (martial pieces). These two styles exhibit distinct musical characteristics and employ different performance techniques to convey a piece's melody. "Wenqu" typically features soothing melodies with techniques like string rubbing or pulling, while "Wuqu" is characterized by dramatic fluctuations and grandeur, often utilizing forceful techniques such as string sweeping or twisting during performance. "The Ambush from Ten Sides" belongs to the genre of "Wuqu," serving as a prime example within this category (Li, 2021).

To analyze the performance techniques of "The Ambush from Ten Sides," the composition can be divided into three major segments. The first part depicts the preparations for battle between the Han and Chu armies. The second part portrays the intense combat scenes between the opposing forces. The third segment delves into the tragic aftermath following the defeat of the Chu army. Through these three sections, we can gain insights into the performance intricacies of "The Ambush from Ten Sides."

The first part of "The Ambush from Ten Sides" utilizes specific playing techniques to depict the preparatory scene before the clash between the Han and Chu armies. This initial major segment is further divided into four smaller paragraphs. It begins with a technique called "sweeping strings," followed by incorporating a technique known as "rotating the wheel" to segue into the next passage, allowing listeners to sense the busyness and tension of soldiers preparing for battle through the performer's skillful execution. Subsequently, a technique known as "pulling strings" is introduced, followed by using harmonics to accentuate the tense atmosphere of preparation before the impending war. A technique called "swift sweeping" requires the performer to tighten the forearm while keeping the upper arm relaxed,

focusing the main power on the performer's wrist. Through this simple playing technique, the state of tension before the war is vividly portrayed with alternating tightness and relaxation.

In the latter part of this section, the performer employs a technique called "finger rotation" to transition the entire first part into a tranquil atmosphere. This segment aims to guide the audience towards a sense of inner calm and relaxation amidst the previously tense ambiance. Finally, the performer uses a technique called "long rotation" to maintain the elegance and aesthetic appeal of the entire piece. It is through these intricate playing techniques that "The Ambush from Ten Sides" emerges as an enduring masterpiece that captivates both the auditory and visual senses.

2.2 Performance Techniques and Emotional Analysis of the Second Part of the Pipa Piece "The Ambush from Ten Sides"

The second part of "The Ambush from Ten Sides" serves as the focal point of the entire Pipa piece, representing the climax of the historical events unfolding. This segment vividly portrays the confrontation between the two armies through a spirited melody. Initially, the performer can start with a technique called "separation," using precise finger movements to depict the well-organized formations of both armies with a sense of spatial depth. Subsequently, the performer can reintroduce the "harmonics" technique mentioned in the first part to convey the quietness of hidden troops lying in ambush.

Additionally, utilizing techniques such as "rolling strokes" can create a sense of quiet yet tense anticipation for the audience. This section also incorporates some elements of "Wenqu" playing techniques, like employing the "string rubbing" technique, which effectively brings out the melancholic scenes of Han soldiers singing Chu songs and Chu soldiers yearning for their homeland. Proper integration of the "twisting strings" technique is essential to captivate the audience further. The subsequent playing technique that follows undoubtedly involves the forceful "sweeping strings."

The use of such forceful techniques is essential to depict scenes of warriors falling, horses flipping, and fiercely battling, showcasing the unwavering resolve of soldiers from both sides to fight for their country. The powerful musical melodies can effectively convey that both sets of combatant's harbor firm beliefs in fighting for their nation. Given that the historical narrative behind "The Ambush from Ten Sides" reveals the Chu army's tragic defeat, this section of the performance strategically hints at the story's conclusion (Zhou & Dong, 2023).

By employing a technique known as "string rubbing," the performer gradually delves into the audience's psyche, symbolizing the transition from intensity to silence. This silence, amplified by the Chu army's devastating loss, exudes an especially poignant and desolate feeling. The fluctuations in this segment, achieved through a diverse range of intricate playing techniques, present a nuanced portrayal. It encapsulates not only the valor of soldiers soaked in blood but also the pain of the wounded Chu soldiers unable to defend their homeland, showcasing a contrast between strength and weakness, intensity and tranquility, all necessitating continuous transitions through various fingerings. Through these closely intertwined performance techniques, "The Ambush from Ten Sides" emerges as a resonant and impactful masterpiece (Li, 2021).

The third part of the pipa piece "The Ambush from Ten Sides" utilizes gentle melodies to express a light-hearted conclusion. By incorporating elements like "long strokes" and appropriate "sweeping strings," this section conveys the joy and relaxation following the decisive victory of the Han army, as well as the desolation after the catastrophic defeat of the Chu army and Xiang Yu's tragic suicide at the Wu River.

The performance concludes with the technique of "stopping the strings," bringing the entire piece to an abrupt halt. This not only completes the storytelling of a historical narrative but also leaves the audience feeling immersed and wanting more. While the final part may seem simpler compared to earlier sections in terms of techniques employed, it serves as a crucial finishing touch to the entire rendition of "The Ambush from Ten Sides."

Conclusion

Solo pipa performance, exemplified by pieces like "Ambush from Ten Sides," showcases the beauty and complexity of traditional Chinese music. Through a mastery of techniques such as finger picking, sliding, percussive effects, bending, and vibrato, pipa players can evoke a diverse range of emotions and narratives, captivating audiences with their artistry and skill. As we continue to explore the depths of this ancient instrument and its repertoire, we uncover new layers of musical expression and cultural heritage that enrich our understanding of the pipa's enduring legacy in the world of music.

In conclusion, the performance techniques employed in the pipa piece "The Ambush from Ten Sides" play a crucial role in conveying the emotional depth and narrative essence of the composition. Through a meticulous analysis of the piece's structure and execution, we observe a deliberate interplay of various techniques to evoke contrasting emotions and vivid imagery within the listener's mind. From the tension-filled preparations for battle to the turbulent combat sequences and the poignant aftermath of defeat, each segment is meticulously crafted using specific playing techniques that mirror the unfolding drama of the historical narrative. The intricate use of techniques such as "sweeping strings," "rotating the wheel," "pulling strings," "swift sweeping," "finger rotation," and "long rotation" serves to not only showcase the performer's technical prowess but also to deepen the audience's engagement with the evocative storytelling embedded within the music. By skillfully blending these techniques, the performer breathes life into the notes, allowing them to transcend mere sound and resonate on an emotional level. Ultimately, "The Ambush from Ten Sides" stands as a testament to the artistry and expressiveness achievable through the fusion of performance techniques and emotional interpretation in traditional pipa music.

The second part of the pipa piece "The Ambush from Ten Sides" showcases a masterful blend of performance techniques and emotional narrative to convey the climactic confrontation between the Han and Chu armies. Through a strategic interplay of techniques like "separation," "harmonics," "rolling strokes," "string rubbing," "twisting strings," and "sweeping strings," the performer effectively paints a vivid picture of the intense battle scenes and poignant moments of valor and tragedy.

By skillfully transitioning between forceful techniques symbolizing combat and gentler techniques hinting at melancholy and defeat, the performer navigates the audience through a spectrum of emotions, culminating in a nuanced portrayal of the historical events and their emotional impact. The careful integration of diverse playing techniques not only enhances the auditory experience but also deepens the listener's connection to the narrative, underscoring

the pipa's power as a storytelling medium. As the performance progresses from the fervor of battle to the somber aftermath of defeat, the judicious use of techniques like "string rubbing" and transitions between intensity and silence heighten the emotional resonance of the piece. These intricate nuances, coupled with thematic elements reflecting victory and loss, provide a compelling and immersive musical journey for the audience, culminating in a poignant and reflective conclusion that leaves a lasting impression.

Through the seamless integration of performance techniques and emotional expression, the second part of "The Ambush from Ten Sides" emerges as a captivating and emotionally resonant musical composition that transcends mere notes, inviting listeners to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of historical drama and human emotion woven by the skilled pipa performer.

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