

A Research and Performance Guide of The Viola Concerto Xian Shi

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## Abstract

The viola concerto *Xian Shi* is an outstanding concerto composed by Chinese-American composer Chen Yi. Chen Yi enrolled as a student at the Central Conservatory of China where she began her composition studies. Graduation in 1983, Chen Yi composed this viola concerto as her first major work as well as her graduation composition. In the same year, Liu Lizhou premiered the concerto with the China Film Orchestra under the direction of Guan-rong Yao. . Though relatively unknown in the United States for many years, the Viola Concerto “*Xian Shi*” has recently become a focus in both America and on the worldwide stage. The new interest in “*Xian Shi*” has positioned the concerto to become part of the major repertoire for viola. The concerto uses elements of ethnic Chinese music in a Western music form; This DMA project begins with an exploration of the historical background of Chen Yi’s life and this influence on this viola concerto. The second section is provides an analysis of this concerto’s form, general harmonic elements, and the use of traditional Chinese music elements (e.g., the musical notation, instrumental techniques needed for performance, and musical expressions within the composition itself).

With explanations of specific Chinese elements used in this composition, insights from the interviews with the composer, and the first recorded performance of this work with piano and percussion, this document will provide violists outside of China with more resources to successfully study and perform this concerto.

## A Research and Performance Guide of The Viola Concerto Xian Shi

At the age of 5, I first heard traditional Chinese music performed on a Western musical instrument. As I sat on an old wooden chair beside by my mother, I listened as she was practicing “The Butterfly Lover” on the piano. Hearing ethnic Chinese music touches my soul deeply and the elements of traditional Chinese music are innate to me. In exploring potential projects in this area, my first research included violin music that could be transcribed for the viola. Upon discovering the performance of the Viola Concerto Xian Shi by composer Chen Yi, the musical style of this work struck my heart. This is Chen Yi’s first major work, and the inspiration for the composition comes from the Chao Zhou Xian Shi, a traditional Chinese ensemble from the Guang Dong province. The city of my birth, Chao Zhou, is in this province, so I heard this style of music as a child. It is an honor to study the music elements native to my hometown and to contribute to available knowledge for those interested in this viola concerto.

Born in the Guang Dong province, Chen Yi excelled at both violin and piano at an early age, with many years of study with the highly respected violin teacher Yaoji Lin. After performing as a violinist in the Guangzhou Peking Opera Troupe, Chen Yi enrolled as a student at the Central Conservatory of China where she began her composition studies. Completing her education in 1983, Chen Yi composed this viola concerto as her first major work as well as her graduation composition. The piece was originally written for violist John Graham who was a guest artist in residence. However in 1982 when the Chinese athlete Na Hu defected to the United States, the diplomatic rift between China and the United States resulted in an abrupt halt to the artistic exchange between the two countries. Professor Graham left China, unable to perform the premiere of the Viola Concerto. He sent the concerto to his student Lizhou Liu, and recommended fingerings, bowings and other

instrumental suggestions for performance. In 1983, Liu Lizhou premiered the concerto with the China Film Orchestra under the direction of Guan-rong Yao. Though relatively unknown in the United States for many years, the Viola Concerto “Xian Shi” has recently become a focus in both America and on the worldwide stage. The new interest in “Xian Shi” has positioned the concerto to become part of the major repertoire for viola. In my paper, Professor Chen will be referred to by Chinese tradition as Chen Yi. Chen is her family name and Yi is her first name.

There are three major recordings of the concerto: the 1983 premiere performance by Lizhou Liu and China Film Orchestra; the 2011 performance by Chicago violist Michael Hall at the Thailand International Composition Festival; and a 2013 concert by Lizhou Liu and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.

The concerto uses elements of ethnic Chinese music in a Western music form. One of these elements is the Chao Zhou Xian Shi, an instrumental ensemble originating from the Guang Dong province of China. The most prominent instrument in this ensemble is the Ye hu, which is unique to this region of, and possesses a sound described as sharp and hoarse. In her viola concerto, Chen Yi uses the timbre of the viola in its higher registers to match that of the Ye hu. In the heart of the concerto, Chen Yi uses pizzicato in the solo viola to imitate the Chinese instrument Pipa. To truly imitate this sound on viola is a challenge because the pizzicato we learn as part of Western performance technique on viola is quite different than the pizzicato technique on the Pipa.

This DMA project begins with an exploration of the historical background of Chen Yi’s life and this influence on this viola concerto. The second section will provide an analysis of this concerto’s form, general harmonic elements, and the use of traditional Chinese music elements (e.g., the musical notation, instrumental techniques needed for performance, and musical expressions within the composition itself).

On the published version of the piano reduction with percussion which I will be play and recording, Chen Yi explained that:

Xian Shi was composed in 1983 in Beijing. The composition material, especially in its melodic style and the timbres of traditional instruments, is drawn from the Xian Shi, a kind of folk ensemble music from Chao Zhou, a region in the Guangdong province in southern China, where I grew up. The traditional music sounds to me like my native language, from which I can feel some Chinese thoughts and spirit; I expressed this feeling in my viola concerto. (Chen, 2003)<sup>1</sup>

As the composer has identified this concerto “a tone poem for the viola,”<sup>1</sup> this aspect will be explored through comments by the composer along with her suggestions for performance.

The third section will include interviews with Chen Yi, which she graciously offered for this document. Questions explored in these interviews include:

- Why did Chen Yi, a violinist and composer, choose viola as the instrument for her first concerto?
- What are the traditional Chinese music elements used in Xian Shi, and why were these particular ones chosen by the composer?
- What are the specific characters the composer is looking for in performances of this concerto, particularly from Western performers?

The final portion of this project is the premiere recording of the concerto with the composer’s piano reduction with percussion. The publication of this performance version is

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<sup>1</sup> Yi Chen, Xian Shi Viola Concerto: Reduction for Viola, Piano, and Percussion (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 2003).



extremely significant as it increases the profile of the concerto and the likelihood that it will soon become a part of the major repertoire. Of interest are musical insights of the composer included in this publication.

With explanations of specific Chinese elements used in this composition, insights from the interviews with the composer, and the first recorded performance of this work with piano and percussion, this document will provide violists outside of China with more resources to successfully study and perform this concerto.

## 1. The History of Chao Zhou Xian Shi and Its Influence on the Viola Concerto “Xian Shi”

Composer Chen Yi (family name is Chen, first name is Yi) reveals that the thematic material she chose for the Viola Concerto “Xian Shi” or in English “A String Poem,” is from Chao Zhou Xian Shi’s popular folk piece “Lions Playing the Ball.” This type of ensemble has a 400-year-old history with the oldest repertoire traced to the Ming dynasty, which lasted from January 23, 1368 to April 25, 1644. In addition to “Lions Playing the Ball,” other traditional works include “Zhao Jun Yuan,” “Xiao Tao Hong,” and “Han Ya Xi Shui.”

The tonal system of this ensemble is very unique in Chinese traditional music. The harmonic system in traditional Chinese music is the pentatonic scale. (see example 1) Generally, there are five keys in the pentatonic scale: Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu. Each key has five notes in one octave which is why we call the pentatonic scale the “five-note scale(五声调式 / Wu Sheng Diao Shi)” in Chinese. The basic pentatonic scales have only five notes, if we add one more notes, such as Qing jue(F) to the five notes pentatonic scale, then the scale become a six-notes scale and allow the piece base on this scale for more tone color. Also, there are three upgrade pentatonic scales that have seven notes: Qing Yue, Ya Yue and Yan Yue.

Though most Chinese music is composed based on the pentatonic scale, Chao Zhou Xian Shi has its own key system. There are four kinds of scales in this ensemble: light three six, heavy three six, Huo five, and light heavy three six. Light three six is the base scale of Chao Zhou Xian Shi, the five notes(C,D,E,G,A)is mean notes in this scale and the B and F is the grace notes in this scale. The “heavy” in the Heavy three six scale is means when play on the A and E notes of a piece with Heavy three six scales, the player push the string and make the notes to flat to indicate the sound of Heavy three six. This is a linguistic inflection for who play on the ensemble. The choice among these four scales depends upon the player and

piece they are playing. For example, in “Lions Playing the Ball,” when the players show their thumb that means the piece is played on heavy three six.

The basic pentatonic scale is made up of five notes, transcribed in Western notation as C, D, E, G, A. In his article “Generalized Diatonic and Pentatonic Scales: A Group-Theoretic Approach,” Zweifel outlines that “the pentatonic scale is defined to be five connected elements in the circle of fifths.”

The interval between notes is fixed, but the notes in the scales are varied. Example 1 is based on the C Gong scale where C designates the tonic of the scale and Gong is the interval and arrangement of the scale. Gong can start on other notes and become G Gong or D Gong. The Ya Yue, Yan Yue, and Qin Yue scales are seven-note scales based on the five-note pentatonic scale. Example 1 shows that the differences between those three scales are the F note and the B note. For instance, in the Ya Yue scale, the arrangement is C, D, E, F#, G, A, and B and in Yan Yue, the notes switch to C, D, E, F, G, A, and Bb. The different arrangement of the scales allows composer to write various types of music; the Ya Yue scale is for music played at royal celebration ceremonies and the Yan Yue scale is generally used by nomads from the north of China. I can say the different scales create the style (different level of sophistication, different ethnic traditions and different arrangement of melody) of music.

Example 1 Scale based on the C Gong scale, with C as the tonic

Chinese name	Gong	Shang	Jue		Zhi	Yu	
Pitch name	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Somization syllable	Do	Re	Mi		SO	La	
Ya Yue	C	D	E	F#	G	A	B
Yan Yue	C	D	E	F	G	A	Bb
Qing Yue	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Heavy three six	C	D	E	F	G	A	Bb

If we look at the last line of example one, there is a scale of heavy three six. This scale is for “Lions Playing the Ball” with F and Bb. The third and six notes are bendable. The interval of heavy three six is the same as Yan Yue but is different when played by the Chao Zhou Xian Shi ensemble. As Dr. Chen said: “the special dialect of Chao Zhou makes their unique music.”<sup>2</sup> For instance, think about when the Chinese Zither to play the heavy three six on the “Lions Playing the Ball,” originally, there are no note F and Bb on the string, so if you want to play those two notes, one way, is to move the bridge of Chinese zither, or, you have to push the string of left side harder to make the note E become F or the note A become Bb. Those arrangements of heavy three six create a tritone (see example 2) in “Lions Playing the Ball” and make the tune close to the dialect and accent of the Chao Zhou area. The tritone is important in the Xian Shi Viola Concerto because Chen Yi chose two thematic materials from “Lions Playing the Ball”; the first is the tritone and the second one is the intervals of a perfect fourth and major second (see example 2). Even though the composer indicates that she is using pan tonal<sup>3</sup> for the harmonic structure of the viola concerto, understanding the music system of Chao Zhou Xian Shi will help the player understand the musical language of the concerto and have insight into the folk song on which it is based.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Chen on Kansas city, September 23th, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Seen as an extension of tonality to all keys (rather than no key), Wikipedia.

Musical score for "Lions Playing the Ball". The first staff is marked "Moderato" and contains two thematic motifs: the "first theme" (boxed) and the "Second theme" (circled). The subsequent four staves show rhythmic accompaniment with dynamic markings *p* and *f*.

### Example 2 Thematic materials from "Lions Playing the Ball"

These two motives are the basis of the thematic materials that appears in the viola concerto Xian Shi. The tritone is shown in examples 3-5, and the fourth interval in examples 6 and 7.

### Example 3 tritone

Musical score for Example 3 highlighting a tritone interval. A red box highlights the interval between F# and C. Labels "F# to C Tritone" and "R.C." are present. The score includes a piano part with a forte *f* dynamic.

## Example 4 First theme (tritone)

33

S.P.

G# to D tritone

H.H.  
*ppp*

8va

8vb

Example 5 First theme (tritone)

S.P.

A# to E tritone

Example 6 Second theme (perfect fourth and major second)

♩ = 120 *vivo, spirito*

Viola

Percussion

Timpani *mf*

R.C.

perfect 4th and major 2nd

♩ = 120 *vivo, spirito*

Piano

*mf*

Example 7 Second theme (perfect fourth and major second)

perfect 4th and major 2nd

In addition to this thematic material, a rhythmic pattern from “Lions Playing the Ball” is adopted by Dr. Chen into the Viola concerto Xian Shi. This pattern is called Kao Pai, and is played on Quarter-notes but starts on upbeats (see examples 8 and 9).



Example 8

Musical score for Example 8, titled "Kao Pai Temple Blocks". The score is written for a single melodic line and a bass line. The melodic line begins with a series of eighth notes, followed by a rest, and then a series of eighth notes with a fermata. The bass line consists of a series of eighth notes. The score includes dynamic markings: *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). There are also markings for *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano) in the bass line. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing triplets and a fermata.

Example 9

Musical score for Example 9, titled "Kao Pai". The score is written for a single melodic line and a bass line. The melodic line consists of a series of eighth notes with a fermata. The bass line consists of a series of eighth notes. The score includes dynamic markings: *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano). There are also markings for *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano) in the bass line. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing triplets and a fermata.

## Shi Fan Luo Gu

Shi Fan Luo Gu is an instrument ensemble in the JiangSu province of China (see example 10), is another resource Dr. Chen adopted into the Viola concerto Xian Shi. Usually, the Shi Fan Luo Gu is play for a wedding celebration or temple religious worship. There are two kinds of ensemble in Shi Fan Luo Gu. The first one is called Si Zhu Luo Gu, which is an ensemble that includes many percussion instruments such as cymbals, drums, temple blocks; woodwind instruments like the Gudi (Chinese flute), Sheng (a mouth organ), and Xiao (a vertical bamboo flute); and string instruments like the Pi pa, Yang qin, and Er hu. The second ensemble, which is made up of just percussion instruments, is called Qing Luo Gu. “The Sum Is Always Eight” and “The Golden Olives” are both Qu pai (an ancient Chinese tune) in the Shi Fan Luo Gu. When the Shi Fan Luo Gu play, the players will play the Qu pai one by one. As a reader, you can think of this ensemble as always playing one piece with different rhythmic patterns, each of which has its own name and specialty.



Example 10 A Shi Fan Luo Gu ensemble

Dr. Chen adopted the rhythmic pattern of “The Golden Olives” and “The Sum Is Always Eight” into the Viola concerto Xian Shi. During my interview with the composer, Dr. Chen

mentions that she incorporated the rhythmic patterns from Shi Fan Luo Gu in the viola concerto to give the piece an authentic taste of traditional Chinese music elements.

The “The Golden Olives” is a rhythmic pattern in Shi Fan Luo Gu; when the ensemble plays, each instrumentalist plays the patterns in a particular order. In example 11, I list the order in which they play. Qi represents the sound of the drum; N represents the sound of Bo (a small cymbal); T represents the sound of the gong; W represents the sound of the big drum; Y represents the sound of the soft-striking bangu (a kind of drum); and Z represents the stand gong. The underline on the N, T, and W represents the eight notes. The players play from top to bottom with the order below. So the drum play one Quarter-note, then, Bo play two Eight-notes and one Quarter notes and so on. The shape of the score is like that of an olive, hence the name “The Golden Olives.”

Example 11 The rhythmic pattern in “The Golden Olives”

Qi  
NN N  
TT YT T  
WW YW YW W  
TT YT T  
NN N  
 Qi

In the Xian Shi Viola Concerto, you can find the “The Golden Olives” rhythmic pattern in measures 30-33 of the percussion part (see example 12); measures 331-335 of the viola part (see example 13); and measures 358-361 in the viola and piano parts (see example 14).

Golden olives

30

1 3 5

33

S.P.

7

H.H.  
ppp

Example 12 “The Golden Olives” rhythmic pattern in measures 30-33 of the percussion part

0

7 5 4 3

Adagio accel.

331

Xyl.

Adagio accel.

Example 13 “The Golden Olives” rhythmic pattern in measures 331-335 of the viola part

The image shows a musical score for Example 13, "The Golden Olives" rhythmic pattern in measures 331-335 of the viola part. The score is written for a viola and piano. The viola part is in the upper staff, and the piano part is in the lower grand staff. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows measures 32, 356, and 331-335. The second system shows measures 360 and 160. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic patterns in the viola part, with labels "4+4+2" and "2+4" below them. The piano part has a red box around a triplet chord with a "3" below it. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 160$ . The score includes a treble clef staff for the viola and a grand staff for the piano. The viola part is in the upper staff, and the piano part is in the lower grand staff. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows measures 32, 356, and 331-335. The second system shows measures 360 and 160. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic patterns in the viola part, with labels "4+4+2" and "2+4" below them. The piano part has a red box around a triplet chord with a "3" below it. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 160$ .

Example 14 “The Golden Olives” rhythmic pattern in measures 358-361 of the viola and piano parts

The viola concerto also makes use of rhythmic patterns found in “The Sum Is Always Eight.” The instruments of this Qu pai are the same as those of “The Golden Olives,” but the order in which they play is different (see example 15).

Example 15 The rhythmic pattern of “The Sum Is Always Eight”



QQ YQ YQ|Q

NN YN|N            ZZ||

WW|W    ZZ YQ||

|W ZZ YZ YZ||

In the Viola concerto Xian Shi, we can find “The Sum Is Always Eight” in examples 16 and 17.

Example 16 An example of “The Sum Is Always Eight” rhythmic pattern in the Viola concerto Xian Shi.

Example 17 Another example of “The Sum Is Always Eight” rhythmic pattern in the Viola concerto Xian Shi.

During the interview, Chen mentioned she is not use the precisely pattern of “the Golden Olive” and “The Sum is Always eight” for the viola concerto Xian Shi, just for the inspiration.

## 2. The Influence of Traditional Chinese Instruments

The main instruments used in the Chao Zhou Xian Shi ensemble are the Er Xian, Ye Hu, Pipa, and Yang qin (see example 18).

Example 18 Chao Zhou Xian Shi ensemble



The viola in the Viola concerto Xian Shi imitates these traditional instruments. For example, the Ye hu (see example 19, the instruments from left to right are: Chinese zither, Pipa, San xian, Yang qin, Ye hu, Er xian, Er xian.) is a traditional Chinese instrument from the Chao Zhou area. It has two strings and is played with one bow; the bottom part of Ye hu is made out of a coconut shell. The Ye hu produces a low, nasal sound. In a Chao Zhou Xian Shi ensemble, the Ye hu is the instrument that supports the other sections, much like the viola in a string quartet. In an interview with Chen Yi, she explains that her treatment of the viola timbre in the high register is meant to imitate the Ye hu's sound, so when this piece is performed, the violist should try to imagine the Ye hu. To provide this Ye hu sound, it is



necessary to position the bow close to the bridge and slow bow with the weight of the right arm for the notes to more closely represent the Ye hu's sound.

Example 19 A Ye hu



The viola must also imitate the Pipa (see example 20), Chinese cymbal (see example 21), and Dizi (see example 22).

The Pipa, a traditional Chinese plucked string instrument, is also known as the Chinese lute. It is made out of wood and shaped like a pear with four strings. In the viola concerto Xian Shi, as Chen specified, the viola's pizzicato part at the beginning of the cadenza is meant to emulate the Pipa's sound.

#### Example 20 A Pipa



In his dissertation from the Ohio State University, Chi Chuan Teng talks about the performance technique for this part. He mentions that, “in the beginning of the Xianshi cadenza, two original fingerings of the Pipa are used.” To play the first chords of the cadenza,

the violist should use the thumb of their right hand and pluck from the upper string to the lower string(example 21). This technique will make the lower string's sound last longer. Although I agree with the plucking direction and the sound theory from Teng's research, there is a authentic way to pluck the string; the performer should use the four fingers of their right hand and pluck the strings one by one from the A string to the C string. Dr. Chen added this idea to the piano reduction version and agrees with this performing technique in our interview. She told me this plucking technique for the Pipa is called Ban lun .To intimate a sound of Pipa, we need to find the most authentic technique and then try to imagine the timbre there. Juyi Bai's poem, *Pipa Xing*, can help us to imagine the sound.

嘈嘈切切錯雜彈，  
大珠小珠落玉盤。  
間關鶯語花底滑，  
幽咽泉流水下灘。  
水泉冷澀絃凝□，  
凝□不通聲暫歇。  
別有幽愁暗恨生，  
此時無聲勝有聲  
(Bai, 816)

Rumbling and rustling interleaved at a fast rate,  
Like large and small pearls falling on a jade plate.  
A warbling canary glided underneath a blossom.  
An underground brook purred out of a rock bottom.  
The brook became frozen, as the strings diminished.  
Decrescendo continued until all sounds perished.  
Yet a dark and gloomy meditation had grown.  
At this moment silence was better than any tone.  
(translated by Sun 2008)

The image displays two musical staves. The top staff is for the Viola, starting at measure 325 with the instruction 'Cadenza pizz. ad lib.' and 'Pipa'. The music features a series of chords and melodic lines with various articulations like accents and slurs. The bottom staff is for the Timp. (Tympani), starting at measure 326 with the instruction 'arco' and 'Adagio espr.'. The Timp. part includes a box containing the notes for measures 326-328, with a 'pp' dynamic marking. The overall tempo is marked 'Adagio'.

Example 21

The Chinese cymbal is the second instrument whose sound inspired parts of the Viola concerto Xian Shi. Even though its sound (as imitated by the viola) does not appear for some measure in the concerto, it is very important to emulate its character when it does appear. In measures 13-15 and 16-18, the viola plays double stops on two open strings with an accent. Dr. Chen suggests the player focus on the accent of the notes and play it with a clear and decisive sound. To create this sound, we play on the lower part of bow, and mimic the action of playing the Chinese cymbal, the bow should touch the string rapidly and allow the string to vibrate.

### Example 22 Chinese cymbals



The Dizi is a Chinese instrument with a brilliant and clear sound that can produce various tone colors. It's made by bamboo. The Dizi is held the same way one holds a Western flute. But the Dizi's sound is intense and sharp if compare with Western flute. You can

imagine the flutter tonguing sound created on a Dizi. The sound of the Dizi is imitated by the viola in measures 206-213.



Example 23 A Dizi



### 3. Form

In 1983, Guan rong Yao conducted the premiere of the Viola Concerto Xian. His article in the “The New Blossom of Orchestral Music Xian Shi,” *People’s Music* (1985,) was the first published article to analyze the viola concerto. In this article, Yao praises the way Dr. Chen combined the Western instrument with traditional Chinese music elements. He also considers the form of this piece as a modified sonata form because the exposition is divided into two parts and the development has two parts. The recapitulation and coda remain at the end. In 2001, sixteen years after Yao’s article, scholar Chi Chuan Teng declared the form “a hybrid sectional form with elements of sonata form” because although “the first and second themes indeed direct one to a hypothesis of a sonata form...[he] found that only part of the first theme comes back at the end.” Teng indicate the form should be: “first exposition (mm.1-91), development (mm.92-137), second exposition (mm. 138-192), development (mm.193-324), cadenza (m.325-), and coda (mm.326~361)”. His analyze is base on the orchestra version. While I agree with his conclusion—as only one theme appears at the end in measure 335—the form could also be considered a theme and variation. During my interview with Dr. Chen, I asked her which form she had in mind as she composed the concerto. Her answer was that when she composed the piece, there was actually no form in her mind.

There is no precise form for this music. As you said, you can analyze it as sonata form, because this piece is modeled on that classical form. Just like Yao’s article said, the exposition and development of this piece can both be divided into two parts, while the recapitulation is included as a cadenza. (Chen, 2016)

She agrees with the idea of a modified sonata form and a hybrid sectional form with elements of sonata form, but also considers the analysis as a of theme and variation as a better way to

understand and memorize the piece:

When I composed this piece in 1982, I considered two thematic materials from the Chao Zhou Xian Shi and used them to make a series variation. One is the beginning intervals (perfect 4th and major second), the other is the tritone (according to the mode in the folk tune). So I think if you analyze it as theme and variation form, it will be easier to understand and memorize the piece. (Chen, 2016)

Chen Yi recommends the following to violists performing the Concerto:

1. At measure 5, the G-sharp played by the fourth finger should stretch enough because the interval between D and G# is an augmented fourth (tritone). This interval occurs many places throughout the piece, so it is important that the player is attentive to this so that the triton can be heard.
2. All the sixteenth notes need to be played with long enough durations so as to create the taste of the Chinese music element.
3. The tempo in measures 93-105 should not slow down; the *espressivo* should be played at the same tempo as before with a more intensive sound. Finding a good position of the right arm will help get this intensive sound.
4. The group of sixteenth notes in measure 362 should be played *presto* but without rushing; a bowing change can apply here for avoid the rushing (see example 24).

Example 24 Sixteenth notes at measure 362





## Chen Yi's Interview

This interview with Dr. Chen took place on September 23, 2016 at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (the university she works now). The original interview is in Chinese and has been translated by the author. It combines the email question-and-answer exchange between Dr. Chen Yi and the author, and the in-person discussion in the composer's studio.

Question 1: *What form did you use to arrange the viola concerto Xian Shi?*

Chen: There is no precise form for this music. As you said, you can analyze it as sonata form, because this piece is modeled on that classical form. Just like Yao's article said, the exposition and development of this piece can both be divided into two parts, while the recapitulation is included as a cadenza. But when I composed this piece in 1982, I considered two thematic materials from the Chao Zhou Xian Shi and used them to make a series variation. One is the beginning intervals (perfect 4th and major second), the other is the tritone (according to the mode in the folk tune).

So I think if you analyze it as theme and variation form, it will be easier to understand and memorize the piece.

Question 2: *This concerto was written at the beginning of your composition career.*

*Would you write differently now for the viola? Any advice for western violists to better interpret your work?*

Chen: I think that this is a successful exploration of a challenge in the beginning of my composition career. The experience has brought me to a deeper stage of my

creative experience. Although I still love the piece and treasure the creative spirit in the early days of my career, I might write another piece differently if I got new inspiration. To play Xian Shi well, we need to taste the nasal timbre of Yehu (a Chinese fiddle with the soundboard body made from a coconut), which I imitated in the high register of the viola; we need to listen to Chinese percussion ensemble music and Chinese fiddle bowing to get the sense of the focus points (played with the viola's accents and intensive on-string bowing); and we also need to know the fingerings for some Chinese plucking instruments, since I also imitated the Pipa fingerings in the cadenza.

Question 3: *What do you most hope audiences will respond to during a performance of this concerto? The brilliant energy of the work?*

Chen: YES.

Question 4: *Have there been any reactions to the Chinese elements from your home province?*

Chen: YES. It's okay if they didn't know what they were reacting to; they could feel it.

Question 5: *Did it touch their hearts?*

Chen: CERTAINLY, the cadenza part is gripping and spiritual, while other parts are energetic or playful.

Question 6: *Of all of these, is one response more important than the others?*

Chen: The touching and the virtuosic.

Question 7: *When performing the piano reduction with percussion, should the musicians aim to present the concerto as close to the original scoring as possible?*

Chen: The chamber version was first composed as the reduction version of the concerto; some orchestra textures had been planned but couldn't be presented by the piano, that's why I used a set of percussion instruments to imitate the orchestral textures, although it still couldn't be completely matched, in terms of color and effect. The solo part is the same.

Question 8: *How broad is the range of emotion for the performer?*

Chen: It's not a programmatic work; it's just a virtuosic concert piece which needs energy in the technical parts and a deep tone that speaks out very well. The piece is pretty straightforward.

Question 9: *Did you compose the percussion or viola solo first? Did you have a concept of the entire work as you started? Did you hear the Chinese instruments as the basis of the work and then add the solo viola? Any insights into your composing process would be appreciated. As performers, we need to hear through the composer's ear, and any windows into your imagination are welcome.*

Chen: I wrote the entire piece bit by bit in my weekly composition lesson. The first completed section was the Cadenza which has a lot of passion and energy. It didn't sound like a beginning of a concerto, so I started to construct thematic materials and wrote the opening section—which has other variations to follow—with some influence from the principle of a sonata form in mind (but not strictly because I wanted to avoid a clear fixed form borrowed from the past).

Question 10: *At the part of “The Golden Olive,” I found you did not add the texture of the orchestral version to the piano reduction. Why?*

Chen: Because I wrote the chamber version first (in the fall semester of 1982), then orchestrated it (in the spring semester of 1983) after I recorded the trio version during the winter vacation. It was premiered by the Beijing Film Symphony at the end of the spring semester of 1983. There needed to be revisions when I did the orchestration, in order to make the section more sufficient and satisfied in terms of logical use of material and the appropriate length for transition.

Question 11: *The Viola Concerto “Xian Shi” is the first viola concerto composed in China. Why is this music composed for the viola?*

Chen: This piece was composed for guest professor John Graham who was visiting my school (the Central Conservatory of Music) during 1982. The piano reduction version was finished in 1982 and recorded by my sister, pianist Ming Chen and myself.

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<sup>4</sup> This recording is not available;

Professor Graham couldn't play the music because of a diplomatic rift between China and the U.S. which forced the art exchange between China and the U.S. to stop for a while. After Professor Graham left China, his student Lizhou Liu played the piece with the China Film Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Guan Rong Yao who wrote an article about this piece which was published in *The People's Music* magazine.

Question 12: *I really appreciate the elements of Chao Zhou Xian Shi in this piece. Why did you incorporate these materials into this piece?*

Chen: Chao Zhou is my mother's hometown, so the mother tongue and traditional music from this area gave voice to my personal composition style naturally. I used to go to the Chao Zhou area for field trips and analyzed "Lions Playing the Ball" in my folk music analysis class.

Questions 13: *In studying the Viola Concerto Xian Shi, what is most the important technique or tone color that needs to be expressed?*

Chen: Temperament is most important because I was a violinist before studying composition. This concerto combines virtuoso violin and viola performance technique.

-Every accent marked should receive full attention, using right hand control, and in particular the little finger of the right hand.

-There SHOULD NOT be a tempo change in measure 93, you have to keep the tempo going. The theme is lyrical, but the tempo is the same. I was trying to imitate the Ye hu's nasal quality on viola here.

-The pizzicato at the cadenza needs to be plucked by all the fingers of the right hand.

### Conclusion

From conversations with Composer Chen Yi and research on the compositional basis of the Viola Concerto “Xian Shi,” I more deeply understand and appreciate the imitation of traditional Chinese instruments and the exploration of viola’s sound. We can hear the warm viola sound at the low register of the cadenza section, and the imitation of the Ye hu at the high register of viola. Understanding her use of specific sounds of Chinese instruments such as the Dizi and Chinese Cymbals aids in creating evoking moods in the concerto. The composer’s suggestions for the pizzicato in the style of the Pipa add a vivid and authentic sound. The virtuoso section is demanding for the violist’s left- and right-hand techniques, and shows the composer’s thorough understanding of viola performance technique. Chen Yi’s explanation of the form of the work as both the modified sonata form but also as a variation form is helpful particularly for the performer. The motivic intervals that come from the “Lions Playing the Ball” aid in the understanding of the phrasing.

The Viola Concerto “Xian Shi” is the first viola concerto in China to use traditional Chinese music elements for a Western instrument. This Concerto is a wonderful vehicle for introducing Western performers and audiences to Chinese music.

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## Appendices

在里面发现了两个主题，在第一页头上有一个（狮子戏球），然后在第二页有一个。

Fanqin: I found two thematic materials in the viola concerto Xian Shi. One is in the first page, the other is in the second page.

Chen:我本来是不用调性来琢磨这些曲调的，但是我真的来分析，会变成我把原有的调式扩张了。为了营造重六调式的音响效果。因为我在大学的时候唱过很多民歌，然后又研究过很多民间音乐，就全部分析过这些。比如轻三六、重三六和苦音。比如说苦音或哭腔，是陕北地区独有的民间音调，其特色就是，唱。。。就是农民唱的。一个降7，本来他可以唱还原7，但是降7是一个特别的音程，像微分音那样的。

Chen: When I composed this music, I did not think about tonality. I extended the key to create the linguistic stress with the influence from the principle of a special mode, which is popular in southern China, called the light/heavy three six tune, in which a diatonic scale has a bendable third and sixth pitch. I sang and researched a lot of folk music when I studied in the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Take, for example, the light/heavy three six tune, and Ku Yin or Ku Qiang (bitter pitch or crying tune); Ku Yin is a unique pitch used in a tune in the Shanbei region of China, originally sung by the farmers. You can hear 7<sup>th</sup> degree-flat throughout it. The farmers are able to sing a leading tone, but they sing a flat tone to create the unique favor of local dialect, just like in microtonal music.

我：为了表现他的“苦”？ To indicate the “bitter” taste?

Chen:是的，我们学古典音乐的听着就很像是感情的表现，但是这是他的（这个地区）的长期的民歌和生活结合起来形成的旋律走向。这个叫旋法，就是往这个方向走（音调），



说起潮州弦诗，因为我们是从一个地区来的，我们的母语里面的 dialect 是一样的，这个可能你的分析是最细的。因为这个和语言有关系，到了那个地方（潮州）的音调感觉和这个是有关系的，所以民间音乐和唱民歌很像，唱民歌有和你的旋律很像，旋律和语言是一样的，所以我在中央音乐学院学民歌的时候，（民歌）都是需要背的，每周背 4 首，每 4 首都是不同地域来的，需要唱当地的方言来唱词，所以要学方言来唱。

Chen: The sound should be sentimental for the listeners who study classical music, but Ku Yin is the Xuan fa (melody direction) of this region. The farmers have sung the tune for many years, and this is their way of singing a song. Thinking about the Chao Zhou Xian Shi, you and I have the same dialect because we are from the same town, so your analysis is the most appropriate and considerate. The dialect of one region is related to the folk music of the same region. The folk music is similar to the melody we sing today. So when I studied in the Central Conservatory of Music, I memorized four folk songs from different regions every week, and I had to learn the local dialect to sing the lyrics of each song.

Chen:这个很多时候是要根据民间音乐的范儿(style and spirit)来决定，用 pan-tonal 的方法在上下两个方向（属 dominant 和下属 sub-dominant）游移。就是不在一个固定的调上面，而是在一个泛调性的层面上。我：如果我用五声调式来解释，应该怎么做呢？

Chen:有一个办法，你只分析某个片段规范在一个调上就可以。你学过中世纪音乐吗？圭多六声音阶唱名法，每唱 4 个音就可用首调转到下一个调再接着唱下去，这样的音调旋律就不会被固定在一个不变的调性上。

Chen: The style and spirit of folk music is important. The characteristics of folk music can tell you how to analyze the music. You can say that I use the pan tonal, so the tonality is

moving back and forth or flowing between the dominant and subdominant, so it's not fixed on one tonality but on a pan-tonal principle.

Fanqin: So if I want to analyze Xian Shi's tonality and harmony based on the Chinese pentatonic system, what should I do?

Chen: There is a method in which you analyze each short fragment in a key sense then combine the fragments into a melodic phrase. Have you learned the Medieval music history? There is a Guido system, in which you use movable Do method to switch key when you sing the fourth note in a hexachord. You can use a similar way to find out different key sense in some of my short fragments, which could be combined to form a melody in pantonal style.

Chen: 清末民初从欧洲和日本传入的学堂乐歌就是用首调唱的, 因为很普及, 只写简谱。用简谱和首调就总要挪动 Do 的音高。在我这个曲子呢, 如果你把这些小的片段放在某一个调上面用首调唱, 这是很容易理解的。然后你把不同的片段挪到另外一个调上面去, 你就发现也唱得很顺口, 等于传承了以前的首调唱法, 同时又不固定在一个调性上面太久。我把这些片段一个接一个地用不同的调来唱, 并要求这些转换必须是很自然的。如果这个转换很生硬、有人为扭曲的感觉, 突然挪到另一个调上就可能会很膈耳朵, 甚至演奏者都来不及反应。因为我这个调性转换是游移的, 你已经习惯了没有停留在一个调上的音响, 没有很固定, 所以你就容易跟着它游走。这个曲子, 我放给潮州的农民听, 他们笑死了, 他们觉得这个音调很熟悉, 可是他们都唱不出来, 也不能跟着唱, 因为我没有在一个固定的调上面走。

我: 对的, 狮子戏球一直是一个旋律在循环。

Chen: 对的, 如果我直接和狮子戏球一样, 那么乐曲就很难发展了。所以从一开始我采

用了这两个音调材料后就已经决定要用泛调性手法了。我一开始就用了这首民间乐曲中的两个特性音调，一个是第一小节的纯四度跳进与二度级进回转，第二个是第五和六小节之间的三全音。后来在全曲中我对此用了各种变奏手法来发展。如果我用中提琴照抄整个民间音乐曲调，则会因为音区、音色的不同而失去了椰胡的味道。

Chen: In the early twenty century, the mass choral songs used movable Do to sing, which is easier to learn and distribute. The same method you could borrow to analyze the melodies in Xian Shi. If you start a short fragment with some pitches in a key, then you move on to next fragment while switching to another key. Both of them are easy to understand and to follow. When you connect these fragments into a phrase, the music becomes pantoanl. The switches should be comfortable for our ear, not artificial and sudden. Your ear will feel uncomfortable if the switch of a fragment is done artificially without preparation. The melody in my concerto keeps flowing, it never stops on one key.

When I played Xian Shi to the farmers in Chao Zhou, they laughed and thought the melody was familiar, but they couldn't follow to hum the melody fluently because my melody is not a copy of the folk tune; it's a re-composed tune in my own way.

Fanqin: Yes, "The Lions Playing the Ball" is a fixed tune to repeat in folk music.

Chen: Yes, if I use an entire fixed tune from folk music for the viola concerto Xian Shi, then it's hard to develop. So when I decided to use those two thematic materials (a perfect fourth plus a second in the beginning, and a triton in measures 5 to 6) from "The Lions Playing the Ball," I decided to avoid using the entire folk melody as the theme of my concerto. Pantality is what I want to do. If I copy the whole melody of "The Lions Playing the Ball,"

then the taste of the folk music would be changed due to the register and timbre of the viola.

Fanqin: Are there any stories you want to share about Ye hu?

Chen: 椰胡在胡琴类乐器里的一个特征是它的鼻音音色. 这个用椰子壳做共鸣筒的胡琴, 是潮州弦诗里面作为主要伴奏乐器的, 它有滋滋的鼻音, 这也是为什么我选用了这个民间素材。因为当时 John Graham 教授来中央音乐学院任客座教授, 这曲子是为他而作的。当年我采风去了潮州地区, 听了潮州音乐的演奏并做过一些研究。我们去岛上吃鱼丸子、到了海边听当地的音乐, 对椰胡的音色有特别的感觉, 因为我对潮州方言比较了解, 我妈妈就是潮州人 这个椰胡的鼻音特别像中提琴高音区的音色。

Chen: Ye hu's nasal sound is a characteristic. The sounding box of the instrument is made from a coconut shell. In the Chao Zhou Xian Shi ensemble, the Ye hu is the primary accompaniment instrument. The nasal sound is my inspiration.

That's why I chose this material. I composed the viola concerto Xian Shi for Professor John Graham, who was a guest professor in the Central Conservatory of Music. While composing this concerto, I went to the Chao zhou region on a field trip. I picked the Ye hu's sound as my inspiration during this field trip. I have been to a far island to pursue the sound I want. I listened to many instruments there, close to the beach, and I heard the Ye hu's sound and I knew this sound was what I was looking for. This nasal sound is similar to the viola's timbre in its high register.

Chen: 因为小提琴的音色是明亮而有力量的, 但是就是没有这种鼻音音色.然而中提琴最大的特点就是高音里面憋住的鼻音, 中提深沉的音域又是小提琴达不到的。所以我的华彩段就全是这个。深沉的, 挖掘了中提琴的特性。其实在这个地方我就是想着怎么发

掘中提琴的不同的音区的特性，因为小提琴没有这么深沉.所以这么多个低音以及加了装饰音的低音是为了越深沉越好。中提琴也可以把低音表现得很透彻，就好像煮饭，不能让米夹生，熟透了以后是透明的。所以那些音就需要很透明且有穿透力。

Chen: On one hand, the violin has a bright and powerful sound; the viola, on the other hand, has nasal sound in the high register and a deeper sound than the violin. My cadenza highlights the unique viola sound. At this place I want to present the deep and solid on viola, by adding the grace notes on the low register. Viola can play very clear on low register. To create this unique viola sound, imagine the quality of cooked rice. Every bow and note must totally vibrate.

Chen:这个曲子里我还很巧妙地借用了民间音乐的变奏手法，因为你学过民间音乐你就知道，很多笛子独奏、琵琶独奏都是变奏曲，要么是一个主题的变奏或者是两个主题的变奏。每一个变奏都用一样的主题，但是在演奏法、节奏组成、音乐形象、音调或调式上面会不一样。

我：对的，比如说拷拍。

Chen:那是另一种织体和节奏型。

我：那么就比如说是催变奏对吗？

Chen：对，你都研究了潮州音乐，真棒。

我：我就是怕我说的不对，请您纠正我。

Chen: 拷拍是潮州弦诗的一个很重要的变奏手法，它是比较轻快的。

Chen: The form of theme and variations in this concerto is taken from Chinese folk music.

You know that many Chinese instrumental works are in the form of theme and variations. They play one simple theme, and then play some variations based on the theme, with different moods, rhythmic pattern, speeds, and so on.

Fanqin: Yes, like Kao pai in the viola concerto Xian shi?

Chen: Different texture.

Fanqin: So, Cui Bian Zou?

Chen: Bingo, I'm glad that you have researched Chao zhou music.

Fanqin: I hope what I researched is right.

Chen: Kao pai is an important variation method in Chao zhou music. Very lively tempo.

我：我懂了，其实一直都是主题和变奏曲式。Chen:对的，我就是这个意思。其实类似奏鸣曲式这些都是可以用来分析，但是最具有中国特色的分析是你说的，变奏曲。其实我就是这样想的。

Fanqin: I understand it now. Theme and variations.

Chen: Yes, that's what I meant, you can also analyze the form as sonata form. but you idea, the form of theme and variations has read my mind.

Fanqin: What mood or sound should be used in measure 206?

Chen: 这个地方，我的想象是弓贴弦，贴得紧一点。就象挤出来的声音，就更加有鼻音。

我：您的表情记号是 piano,然后后面重复是 mf.

Chen: 协奏曲演奏的时候需要 double 这个 dynamic, 因为乐队会 cover 你的 sound.这个

地方需要更加 intensive。把弓贴在弦上面，不能减少弓的长度，但是弓子也不能用太多，靠近马子，步步紧逼的声音。对了！弓子一定压住弦，这个地方还是模仿椰胡。在有 accent 的音都需要做出来才能分清楚 order，同时弓子不需要改变长短。用右手食指给一些压力弓子，在不加长弓子的情况下给予这一段椰胡特色。

Chen: I think the bow needs to be close to the string and create a buzzing nasal sound.

Fanqin: The dynamic mark here is piano, and the repeat (measure 276) is mezzo forte.

Chen: You need to double the dynamic here, because the orchestra will cover your sound if you play piano and mezzo forte. The sound needs to be more intense here. You can put the bow closer to the bridge without changing the length of the bow (use the same length and placement of the bow for every note here) for every note. The sound here is imitating the Ye hu. You need to put accents on the downbeat to distinguish the order, and maybe a little push with the forefinger of the right hand. The downbeat needs to be more firm and you can use more bow for the first note.

Chen: 拷拍要求：头一个音可以再坚定一些，多一点弓。后面那个音不能消失。

Chen: The down beat need more firm and you can use more bow for the first note. The second note also need to be hear.

Chen: 第一页的地方是撩。这个地方需要注意右手小指。用这个手指来 hold the balance of the bow. 音会很集中。

Chen: The viola is imitating the Chinese cymbal in measures 13 and 14. You can focus on the pinky finger of the right hand here; this finger will hold the balance of the bow, and the sound

will be very concentrated here.

Fanqin: 我们在排练过程中遇到两个问题，不知道怎么演奏合适。第一个地方是打击乐在 330 小节的箭头，打击乐不清楚是继续敲击箭头前面的音？还是自由敲？第二个是钢琴的 clusters. 钢琴不清楚是需要用手臂弹几次？或者弹一次就一直放在琴键上面？

Chen: 打击乐照着前面的音型往下敲，有些自由也没有关系，钢琴音块按住不放。

Fanqin: We have some questions for rehearsal. First one is the arrow at the beginning of measure 330, the percussionist not sure what notes should play, should him play the notes before the arrow? Or he can play freely? Second one is cluster on piano score; we are not sure how many times need to play by arm. Can we play it once and keep the arm on the keyboard?

Chen: the percussion is just to keep playing the notes from the previous measure. Can be freely. Piano play by arm once and not release until next material coming.



Errata Sheet of Chen Yi's Xian Shi for viola, piano and percussion (a trio version of the viola concerto with the same title)

- 1) m. 47, the top note on piano part is D but not C.
- 2) m. 281 and m. 282, the piano right hand should be the same as in m. 290.
- 3) Last measure, please change dynamic mark of viola part to “ff”, and dynamic marks of percussion and piano to “f”.



**CARL FISCHER**  
SINCE 1872

December 13, 2016

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Recording of The Viola Concerto Xian Shi

Location: Morphy Hall of University of Wisconsin-Madison Music School

Viola: Fanqin Meng

Piano: Zijin Yao

Percussion: Aaron Gochberg

Time: 10/16/2016

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