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The Organization of String Instruments

Overview: The family of string instruments transcends beyond the instruments that we are very familiar with, like violins, cellos, and guitars. There exists a wide range of string instrument families that exists within different regions and cultures, each with their own unique traits and significances. This case study aims to explore how these string instrument families are organized amongst three specific regions, Asia (specifically China), Western Europe, and Africa, and determine the implications of these different category sizes. Additionally, I will be exploring the similarities and differences between the instruments that make up these string families.

What is being Organized? String instruments, specifically those that are prevalent in the regions of Asia (specifically China), Western Europe, and Africa, are the resources being organized in this case study. String instruments differentiate from other instruments due to string instruments ability to produce sound from vibrating strings, which can be played in a variety of of manners. These different playing styles will also be organized. Additionally, there exist general categories that can describe families of string instruments based on their physical characteristics as well, like lutes, harps, and zithers, which will be defined more concretely below.

Why is it being Organized? There exists a very wide range of unique string instruments around the world, each with their own values and cultural significances. Different regions could value a certain type of instrument and a specific playing style more as well. It's clear that the world is filled with a great variety of these instruments. Despite this wide assortment of string instruments, however, there exists common characteristics amongst all these instruments that allows them be organized/categorized. Organizing these instruments would help determine what type of instruments and playing styles are more prevalent than others in certain regions.

Furthermore, the organization of these instruments could aid in determining the implications of such categories, such as cultural significances/values of each regions studied. For example, as shown in Figure 1, the plucked playing style is the only and most prevalent playing style in Africa, compared to those of China and Western Europe, where other playing styles are prevalent as well. This could reveal that regions in Africa all throughout history greatly favored plucked instruments and placed greater cultural emphasis on this specific type instead of other styles of instruments. Similarly, zithers are much more prevalent in China compared to other regions, which reveals the instrument's rich history and cultural value in this region.

How Much is it being Organized? Although there exists a plethora of string instruments that exist around the world, there will be greater emphasis on the organization of string instruments within the regions of China, Western Europe, and Africa in this study. As a result, the extent of the organization of string instruments will be limited to those three specific regions. Additionally, I focused on organizing string instruments that were most prevalent in these specific regions. As a result, rarer, more limited string instruments that may possibly exist in these regions may not be included in my organizing system.

The string instruments are first organized based on the region they are located in; in my case, they are organized by the regions of China, Western Europe, and Africa. The instruments are then organized by the playing style they have, with plucked (playing the instrument using a finger or thumb to pluck the string), bowed (playing the instrument using a bow), and struck (striking the strings to produce sound) playing styles being the most prevalent categories. String instruments can be further organized based on their physical characteristics through three main categories as well. They include lutes, harps, and zithers. Lutes are any plucked or bowed string instrument with a neck and a deep round back enclosing a hollow space, usually with a sound hole or opening in the body (includes guitars, violins/fiddles, etc.). Harps are instruments that contain the strings within a frame, and have individual strings running at an angle to its soundboard. Zithers are instruments consisting of many strings stretched across a thin, flat body. This hierarchical organization can be seen through Figure 1. String instruments are organized into these categorizations based on how well they match these specific definitions of playing styles and physical characteristics.

There does exist a special category specifically in my organization of Chinese string instruments, with the category of “Silk” as seen in Figure 1. This is due to Chinese string instruments’ strings traditionally being made out of twisted silk rather than the metal or nylon found in the strings of string instruments of other regions. As a result, I saw it best fit to include this specific category as well.

When is it being Organized? With this organization system in place, any further instruments that come from either of the three regions studied can be added to the collection of already existing string instruments and be organized immediately.

How or by Whom is it being Organized? All of these categories representing playing styles and physical characteristics of the instruments were organized by me and based on my own personal experiences and involvement with string instruments, as well as other outside research into this specific topic.

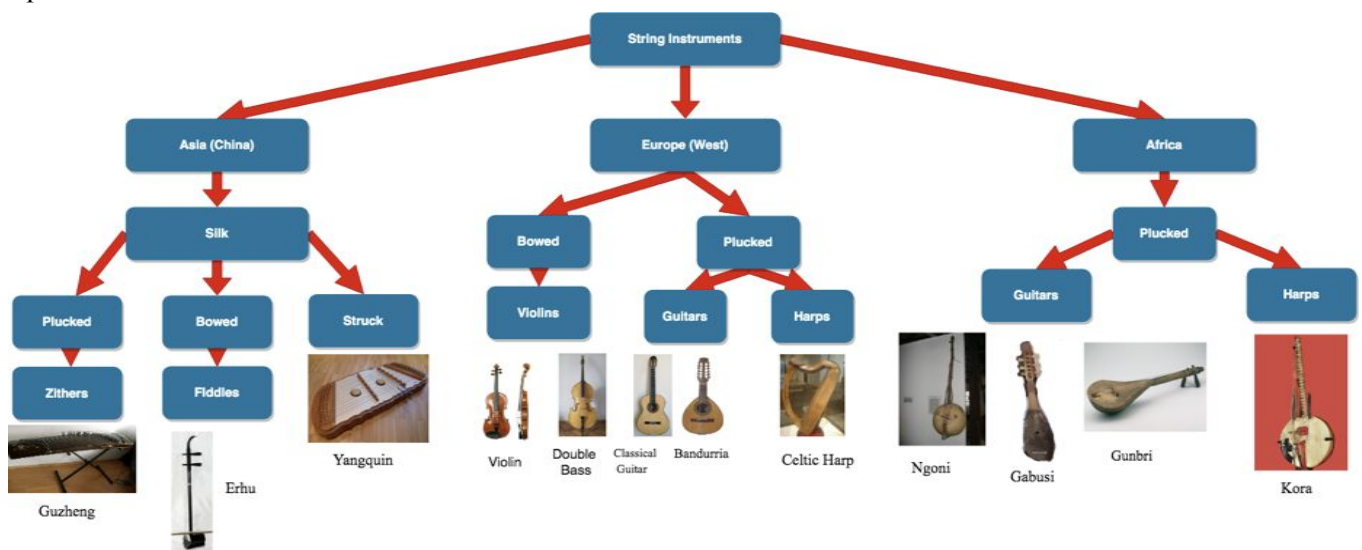


Figure 1 String Instrument Organization

Other Considerations? There are countless number of string instruments in the world and more specifically, in each of the regions studied in this case study. The organizing system described in this case study is a very broad representation of how this plethora of string instruments can be organized, and as a result, there may be string instruments that may not really fit into any of the categories defined previously. Additionally, the organizing system only accounts for string instruments that exist as of today. There could be a possibility that string instruments developed in the near future may not fit into any of these previously defined categories as well, which may require further revisions and additions to the organizing system.