

# ARTS MIDWEST WORLD FEST

## Study Guide Chinese Musical Instruments

**Beauty & Melody** play a variety of interesting traditional instruments that may be unfamiliar to many people in the Midwest. Here are some images and descriptions for just a few of these many exciting instruments!

### Musical Instruments & Styles

**Pipa** (Chinese: 琵琶; pinyin: pípá), a four-stringed Chinese instrument. Sometimes called the Chinese lute, the pipa has a pear-shaped wooden body with a varying number of frets ranging from 12-26. It is one of the most popular Chinese instruments and has been played for two thousand years in China. The name "pípá" is made up of two Chinese syllables, "pí" (琵) and "pá" (琶). These are the two most common ways of playing this instrument. "Pí" is to push the fingers of the right hand from right to left, thus more than one finger can be used at a time striking multiple notes, and "pá" is to pull the thumb of the right hand from left to right, in the opposite direction.



Pipa (photo by Flickr user axio)



Members of Beauty & Melody play the Erhu.

**Erhu** (Chinese: 二胡; pinyin: èrhú), also called nanhu (南胡, "southern fiddle"), and sometimes known in the West as the "Chinese violin" or "Chinese two-string fiddle," is a two-stringed bowed musical instrument, used as a solo instrument as well as in small ensembles and large orchestras. The Erhu can be traced back to instruments introduced into China more than a thousand years ago. The first Chinese character of the name of the instrument (二, èr, two) is believed to come from the fact that it has two strings. The second character (胡, hú) indicates that it is a member of the huqin family. The name "huqin" literally means "barbarian instrument," showing that the instrument likely originated from regions to the north or west of China inhabited by non-Han peoples. Its two strings are generally tuned a fifth apart.

**Suona** (Chinese double reed trumpet) Owing to its large volume and strident, penetrating tone quality, the *suona* is commonly used in the accompaniment to local theaters or singing and dancing, and also for solos or ensembles on such occasions as weddings, funerals or other ceremonies and celebrations.



Suona (photo by Flickr user Zebra Pares)



Ruan (photo by Flickr user ouyangwulong)

**Ruan** (moon-shaped short-necked lute) The name is a shortened form of Ruan Xian, a musician and one of the "seven Sages of Bamboo Grove" of the 3rd century (the Six Dynasties). Pictorial evidence, excavated from a tomb of his time in Nanjing, depicting Ruan Xian's performance of this instrument, confirms that its construction, a four-string fretted instrument, was roughly the same as that of today. The ruan is now constructed as a family of soprano, alto, tenor and bass, a development intended to increase its range and effectiveness in the modern Chinese orchestra. Its four strings are mellow in tone quality and tuned in fifths like the mandolin. The alto and the tenor are most commonly used.

### Additional Resources

Visit <http://www.melodyofchina.com/06instruments/introduction.html> for a wonderful variety of photos and audio examples from Datung Int'l Stock LLC, a supplier of Chinese instruments.

Play an interactive pipa at Wu Man's flash site. <http://www.wumanpipa.org/flash.html>. (Click on "What is a Pipa?")

Learn more about the musicians and listen to their music online at <http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org>