

# Analysis of “Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot Concerto” for Guzheng Ensembles and Percussion Instruments

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**Abstract:** The concerto “Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot” for guzheng ensembles and percussion instruments, composed by the renowned composer Professor Chen Zhe in 2020, is based on the common patterns of Han folk songs from Sichuan. It highlights the fact that Sichuan-Chongqing hotpot and labor songs along the Sichuan River shared the local dock culture as their common origin. The concerto fully showcases the diverseness in polyphony of guzheng ensembles. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the background against which the music was composed, division of musical sections, and performance techniques, aiming to comprehensively and profoundly understand the essence of guzheng ensembles and tutti.

**Keywords:** Ensemble, Guzheng, Percussion Music, Performance Technique, Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot, Tutti.

## 1. Introduction

The concerto “Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot,” inspired by the traditional Nine-Grid Hotpot cuisine, was composed by the renowned composer Chen Zhe for the Tian Lai Zheng Orchestra in 2020, in celebration of the orchestra’s 20th anniversary. It premiered at the orchestra’s 21st-anniversary concert of in 2021.

Food constitutes the cornerstone of human existence, weaving through the tapestry of history and vividly portraying the progression of human civilization. As a culinary powerhouse, China has a comprehensive culinary culture characterized by color, aroma, taste, shape, significance, and nutrition. Different regions and ethnic groups, influenced by both natural and cultural environments, have created a diverse array of distinctive Chinese cuisines. Sichuan cuisine, originating from the Bashu region, is one of the most influential culinary styles, with Sichuan-Chongqing hotpot gaining nationwide and international acclaim for its bold and spicy flavor. Legend has it that this culinary tradition originated from the crude dining practices of laborers, such as boatmen and porters, with the Nine-Grid Hotpot representing its initial form[1].

The concerto “Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot” reminds people of the famous Sichuan-Chongqing hotpot, renowned for its spicy and flavorful broth. According to legend, the spicy nine-grid hotpot has four possible historical origins. During the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the Chaotianmen Dock was a hub for livestock slaughtering. Street vendors would cook cleaned beef tripe in a spicy broth, which proved to be exceptionally delicious, attracting people with its enticing aroma. Gradually, the single pot was divided into nine sections to accommodate different diners. This dining style typically involved strangers sitting around a table, each using a designated section of the pot. They would cook and eat their food without interfering with others, and the final bill was based on the amount consumed by each person. This is the so-called Dock Theory. A second theory is about cooking temperature. The hotpot was divided into three parts, with varying temperatures and beef tallow amounts in their soup

bases. The central sections had the highest heat, suitable for tender, ready-to-cook food like beef tripe, duck intestines, and beef liver. In the adjacent sections, the heat is slightly lower, but evener, suitable for cooking ingredients that require more time to cook, such as mushrooms, meatballs, lotus roots, sweet potatoes. The four corners are good for simmering food, such as quail eggs and duck blood. The third theory is that dividing a big pot into nine grids makes it easier to retrieve food from the pot, especially smooth and shapeless ingredients. The fourth theory is about exclusivity. The nine-grid configuration allows diners to cook their food in their chosen section, preventing others from inadvertently taking it.

## 2. Period Division and Analysis of Performance Techniques

### 2.1. Prelude

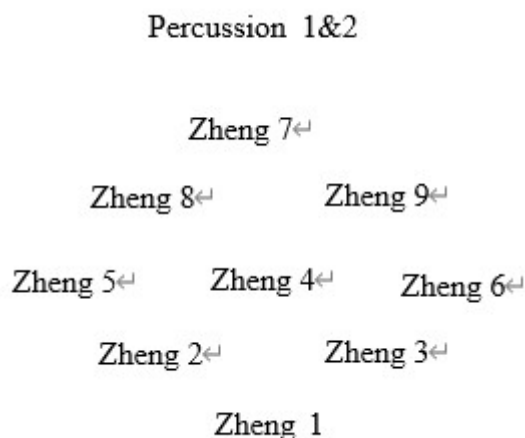


Figure 1. Players’ Seatings

This concerto breaks the traditional pattern of guzheng ensemble music or tutti, which typically involves various parts played together, such as the first part, second part, third part, fourth part, etc. The piece is divided into nine parts, with each part assigned to one player, forming a guzheng ensemble

of nine players. This departure from tradition symbolizes the arrangement of a spicy nine-grid hotpot. The positioning of the nine players is also carefully arranged, with parts 1, 4, and 7 in the middle from the front to the back, parts 2, 5, and 8 on the left side, and parts 3, 6, and 9 on the right side. See the diagram below.

The prelude with tempo at 40 is divided into five parts. The first, fourth, and seventh parts form a Part One. The second, fifth, and eighth parts constitute a Part Two. The third, sixth, and ninth parts form a Part Three and percussion instruments form the other two Parts. The prelude comprises powerful tremolo passages. At the end of each musical phrase following the short tremolos, there are forceful eighth and sixteenth notes, accompanied by crisp and decisive staccatos. After the 10th bar, the Part One, composed of the first, fourth, and seventh parts, continuously plays ascending and descending glissandi with rapid repeating notes. Subsequently, the prelude concludes with decrescendo tremolos. Here, both the staccatos following the short tremolos and the continuous glissandi vividly depict the scene of a spicy hotpot boiling vigorously, evoking a mouth-watering sensation. The percussion parts of the prelude employ four different percussion instruments with varied timbres and dynamics, including bass drum, suspended cymbal, tambourine, and triangle to enhance the imagery of the boiling spicy nine-grid hotpot[2].

## 2.2. Allegretto

After the prelude, in the 17th bar, the third, sixth, and ninth parts introduce sixteenth notes from soft to strong, compactly, followed by the addition of the second, fifth, and eighth parts. Finally, the first, fourth, and seventh parts enter at the strongest timbre and intensity, serving as a connecting phrase to lead into the theme section. The sixteenth notes create a tense atmosphere, with dynamics gradually increasing from soft to strong. Here, different parts gradually joining in enriches the texture of the music, accompanied by a significant increase in dynamics. At the 21st bar, the tempo suddenly slows down to less than half the previous speed, accompanied by the introduction of a large gong in the percussion part, producing a striking sound that symbolizes the official beginning of the theme section.

The theme section begins with a tempo of 60, with the first and fourth parts, along with the second and third parts, taking on the melody. The fifth and sixth parts maintain intermittent repeated glissandi, resembling the regular bubbling of hot oil in a nine-grid hotpot, accentuating the liveliness and exuberance of the melody. The seventh, eighth, and ninth parts, along with the bass drum in the percussion part, provide a continuous bass accompaniment, mimicking the vigorous flames under the hotpot. The bass part plays a crucial role in ensuring that the hotpot is cooked to perfection. After the melody group of parts completes a phrase, all parts join in a four-bar tutti, representing the bubbling of the hotpot intermittently reaching a boiling point. At the 49th bar, the music is once again divided into three groups of parts, with the second and third groups entering with glissandi, gradually increasing in intensity to the strongest point when the first part joins, and finally, all parts play together, pushing the music to its climax. During sustained tremolos, the percussion part adds tambourines with *fp* dynamics, increasing the urgency of the melody.

Starting from the 59th bar, every four measures constitute several groups of parallel phrases. The guzheng parts

continue with tremolos and glissandi predominantly, while the percussion part introduces the bass drum. Two bars later, the wooden fish appears in a regular alternation, highlighting the call-and-response effect of the phrases. Similarly, the phrases from bars 73 to 74 and 75 to 76 are symmetrically constructed, featuring sixteenth and eighth notes combined with short tremolos in the first half, followed by symmetrical phrases.

The subsequent phrases undergo a roller-coaster-like transformation. Divided into three groups of fluctuating phrases, the first group starts with regular triplets, gradually increasing in intensity, shifting to eighth-note tremolos, and ending with consecutive glissandi of quarter notes for two beats with strong dynamics. The second group, comprising bars 82-83 and 84-85, consists of symmetric phrases with ascending sixteenth and quarter-note glissandi. The second group serves as a smooth transition within the three groups of phrases. The third group begins softly in bar 86, followed by alternating sixteenth and eighth notes played *forte*, and then sustained on sixteenth notes. Gradually, the phrases diminish in intensity, played *mezzo-forte*, with less dense notes, primarily alternating between sixteenth and eighth notes. Finally, the phrases fade away completely, played *pianissimo*, transitioning from an initial pattern of eighth-sixteenth notes to one of sixteenth-eighth notes, until the notes disappear entirely. The percussion parts follow suit, gradually diminishing under the regular striking of the bass drum until silence prevails, completely concluding the *adagio* section. This sets the stage for the ensuing guzheng solo, creating a quiet atmosphere for the entire piece.

## 2.3. Rubato

At bar 93, the rest of the ensemble maintains a consistent tempo and relatively subdued dynamics, barely audible in the background, serving as a foundation for the melody, while the solo guzheng exhibits relatively free rhythmic and expressive nuances. The solo part begins with a forceful arpeggio and delicate and soft small pinches. Following the tremolo crescendo, the guzheng solo phrase is a display of virtuosity, featuring a sequence of triplets transitioning from slow to fast, with each group followed by glissandi and ended with a sustained tremolo, transitioning from strong to weak and back to strong. This pattern continues with the emergence of rapid finger sequences, interspersed with decrescendo tremolos, and concludes with loud playing.

Starting from bar 96, the melodic texture expands as the left hand introduces forceful quarter notes, accompanied by percussion instruments, further accentuating the rhythmic beats. At bar 98, the second and third guzheng parts, along with the fifth and sixth parts, provide harmonic support, while the first guzheng part introduces a series of triplets and sixteenth notes, creating an arpeggio effect. Subsequently, distinctive glissandi emerge from the arpeggios and lead to tremolos. What's worth noting here is the dynamics of the tremolos which becomes soft to strong and back to soft, before smoothly returning to the same note for tremolos and ending with two steady quarter notes. Following this, the fifth guzheng part takes over the solo part, executing tremolos from strong to weak and back to strong after a group of fretted notes. At bar 99, the second and eighth parts, along with the fourth and seventh parts, gradually intensify, overshadowing the solo performance of the fifth part. The first, third, sixth, and ninth parts remain silent as the second, eighth, fourth, and seventh parts crescendo, driving the remaining parts to a

climax with big pinches and sweeps. A parallel phrase echoing the previous bar 94 reappear and revisit the triplets from bars 98 and 106, foreshadowing the forthcoming climax of the allegro section.

#### 2.4. Allegro

The first section of the allegro part of the piece runs from bar 108 to bar 144. Following the age-old adage “fire and water have no mercy,” the initial musical phrase intensifies the fiery momentum of the spicy nine-grid hotpot by combining accented quarter notes with accented glissandi, marked *cresc.* for all parts. The flames grow even stronger. Bar 112 starts with small pinches serving as a lead-in, and evolves to ascending scales possibly as light glissandi, portraying the increasing intensity of flames before leading into tremolos with *crescendo* dynamics, demonstrating the gradual transition from scattered embers to a roaring blaze. Simultaneously, the second and third guzheng parts complement the glissandi and the transition of the percussion part from triplets to quintuplets of sixteenth notes, undoubtedly illustrating the fervor of the fire. The scorching flames boil the spicy pot with the oily broth bubbling up, depicted by alternating sixteenth notes with glissandi. The first, fourth and seventh parts play glissandi while the others play sixteenth notes, creating the rhythmic bubbling of the broth. At bar 128, the note density doubles, transitioning from a single set of sixteenth notes to two sets of sixteenth notes interspersed with tremolos on quarter notes to illustrate the rising temperature of the hotpot as the flames continue to blaze and thoroughly cook the food. Finally, the first section of the allegro tapers off with a series of *decrescendo* sixteenth notes in the bass section, gradually lowering the atmospheric intensity.

The subsequent strong vibratos on quarter notes vividly showcase the burning intensity of the blazes under the hotpot. Each swirling flame causes the broth to bubble up in the pot, hence the gradual increase in dynamics for each group of notes. At bar 153, the strong quarter notes transition into short tremolos, highlighting the more pronounced bubbling of the broth caused by the flames. Bar 161 maximizes the dynamics with *fff*, emphasizing the bubbling further. The first, fourth and seventh parts maintain the main melody as well as the second and third parts, while the fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth parts fill in the gaps left by the previous two parts during the sustained tremolos, adding more rhythm and groove to the melody. Bar 168 features two contrasting upward glissandi after two sets of accented strumming, allowing the melody to soar in the upper register. Meanwhile, percussion instruments such as the wooden fish and the tambourine add a touch of color, leading to the climax of the piece. Following this, the percussion section alternates between bass drum and wood fish every two bars, creating a stark contrast in dynamics and timbre. The regular pattern enhances the sense of urgency in the music. Bars 176–179 and 180–183 consist of parallel phrases, gradually increasing in dynamics from strong to weak and back to strong. Bars 185, 186, and 187, as well as

188, feature pairs of parallel phrases, with the first half played at *mf* and the second half at *ff*, leading to a climax and signaling the beginning of the concluding section of the piece.

The four-bar phrase progressing from soft to strong includes the first bar beginning with an eighth note followed by a triplet group at a *mezzo-piano* dynamic, followed by the addition of a similar rhythmic part in the second bar, expanding the musical texture[3]. The third and fourth bars feature eighth notes and short tremolos, culminating in upward sweeps on *fortissimo*. Subsequently, sixteenth notes alternate with upward sweeps, which changes into upward sweeps and glissandi. In the final phrase, after the increased dynamic of the sixteenth notes, strong dynamics changes into weak and then strong again. The piece ends with strong small pinches and a slap with the maximum force on the right side of the guzheng.

### 3. Conclusion

The concerto “Spicy Nine-Grid Hotpot” for guzheng ensembles and percussion instruments equals the nine parts with the nine grids of a hotpot. The piece vividly symbolizes the hotpot through the nine performers. Rooted in Sichuan Han folk songs, the piece highlights the regional and ethnic culture including labor songs along the Sichuan River, dock culture, and the hotpot culture of the Sichuan Basin. The piece including solos, ensembles, alternating playing among parts, and various collaboration between different parts not only innovates the performance format and artistic style, but also enriches musical expression and develops performance techniques. Moreover, it further demonstrates the diversity and possibilities of multiple guzheng parts.

Guzheng ensembles has increasingly become indispensable in concertos and the development of guzheng music, transcending traditional performance forms and diversifying composition, melody, mode, harmony, and ensemble forms, thereby enhancing the depth of guzheng ensembles and *tuttis*. Consequently, works featuring guzheng ensembles are advancing towards greater artistry. Through training in ensemble performance, musicians can broaden their artistic horizons, enhance their performance skills, foster teamwork, and elevate their artistic cultivation and aesthetic appreciation. In turn, they contribute to the development of contemporary and classical guzheng ensemble performances.

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