

# Guqin Tablature

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# What is Guqin?

- An ancient instrument: appears in writings 3000 years ago and tombs 2500 years ago
- Created as an important ritual instrument
- Symbolized social status and became fashionable among the intellectuals
- Guqin culture peaked during Tang dynasty



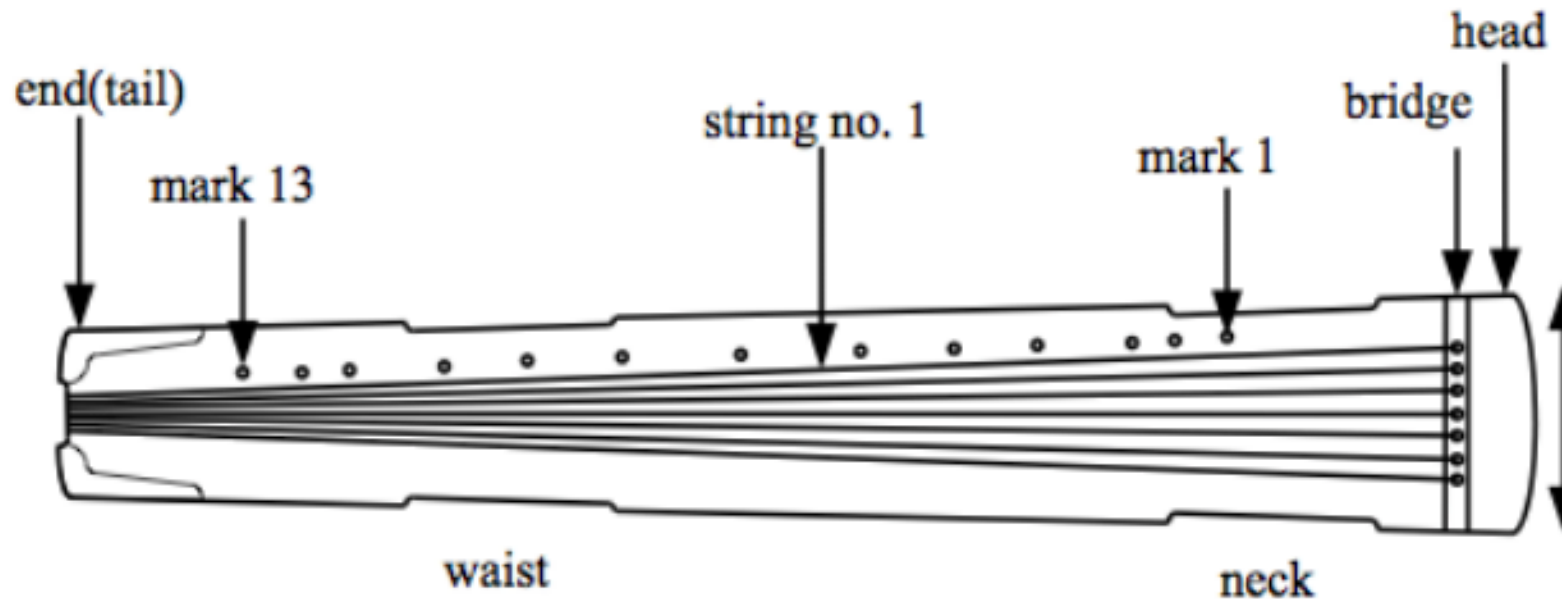
# Tang Dynasty: Golden Ages for Guqin

Tang: international political, economical and cultural center

Numerous conditions improved for Guqin's development:

- Popularization of Guqin – famous players emerged
- Guqin melodies circulated
- Guqin production techniques improved – some of the instruments are still playable today!
- **Improvement of notation system: longhand to shorthand tablature**

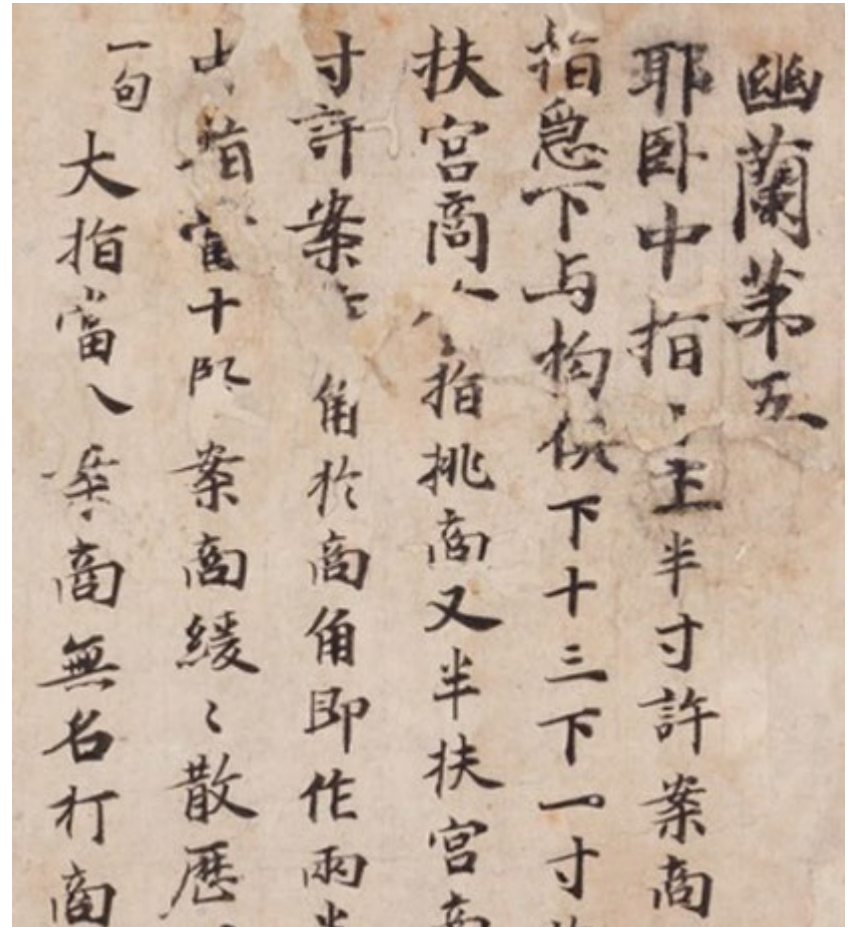
# Structure and mechanism of Guqin



- Right hand plucks, left hand stops string
- Mechanism: a seven-string laid-down fretless guitar
- Little fingers are banned
- Left hand controls open string, stopped string or overtones

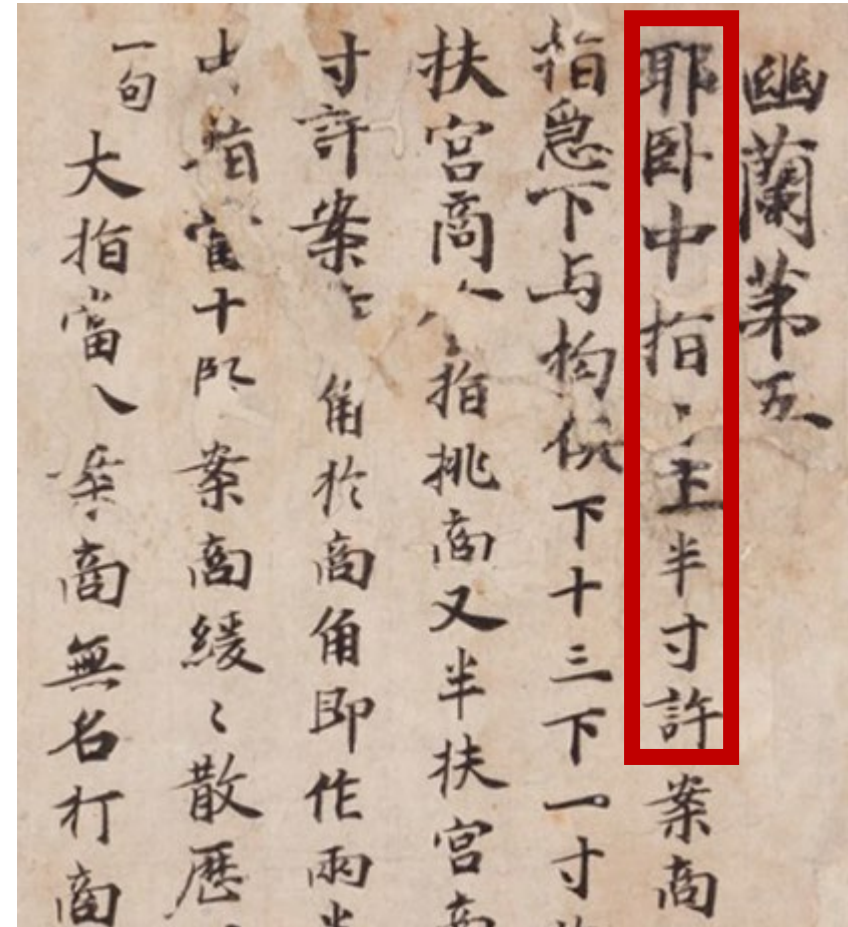
# Before Tang: Longhand Tablature (1)

- Only one score remains till today: *Jieshi Diao Youlan* (碣石调幽兰)
- Paragraphs of fingerings



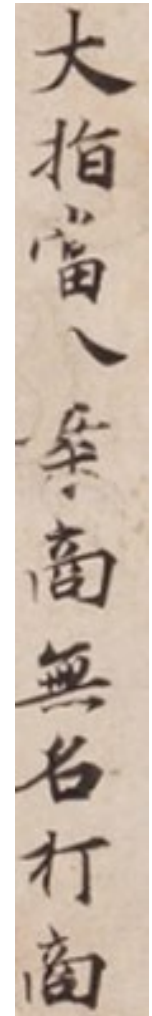
# Before Tang: Longhand Tablature (1)

- Only one score remains till today: *Jieshi Diao Youlan* (碣石调幽兰)
- Paragraphs of fingerings
- First line (left hand only) translated:
  - 耶臥中指十上半寸許案商
  - Lay straight the (left) middle finger about half a *cun* (about an *inch?*) above mark 10 on the second string



# Before Tang: Longhand Tablature (2)

- Another example:
  - 大指當八案商無名打商
  - Press the left thumb on mark 8 of the second string and pluck the second string inwards with the right ring finger



大指當八案商無名打商

# Before Tang: Longhand Tablature (2)

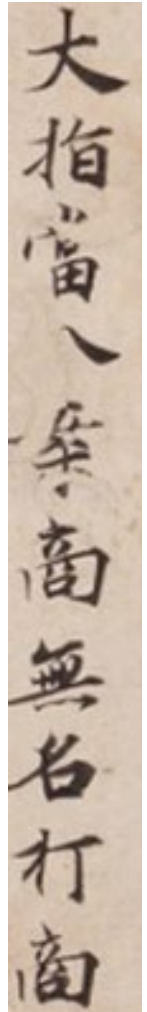
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- Score also have embellishments and structural instructions
- Convoluted notation: “its text is extremely convoluted as one can write over two lines without finishing a single phrase” (*Taigu Yiyin*)
- Imagine writing each part of Mahler in this notation – it would probably take centuries...





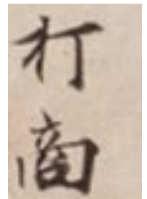
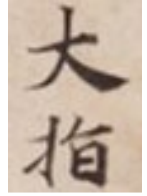
# Efforts in Tang Dynasty to improve notation (1)

- How to condense a sentence into a shorter object?
- Example:
  - 大指當八案商無名打商
  - Press the left thumb on mark 8 of the second string and pluck the second string inwards with the right ring finger
- Inefficient communication
  - No need to say “press”
  - Word “打” already means “pluck the string inwards with the right ring finger”, whereas “無名” means ring finger
  - “商” (Second string) appeared twice



# Efforts in Tang Dynasty to improve notation (2)

- After condensation:
  - 大指 (left thumb) 八 (mark 8) 打 (right ring finger inwards) 商 (second string)
  - Improved efficiency by 200% already!



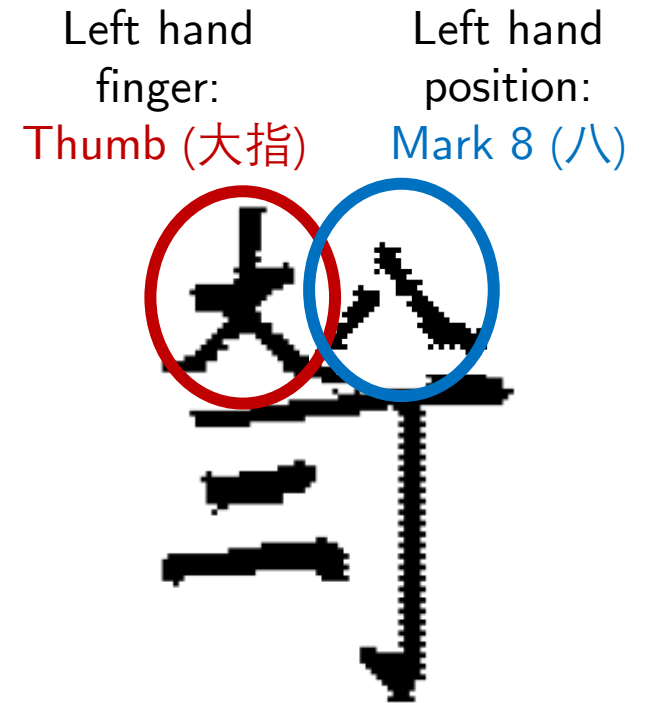
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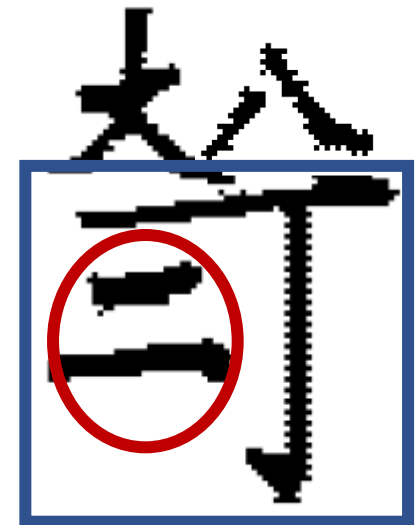
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  - Top: describes left hand motion
  - Bottom: describes right hand motion and which string being played
- Much more efficient!

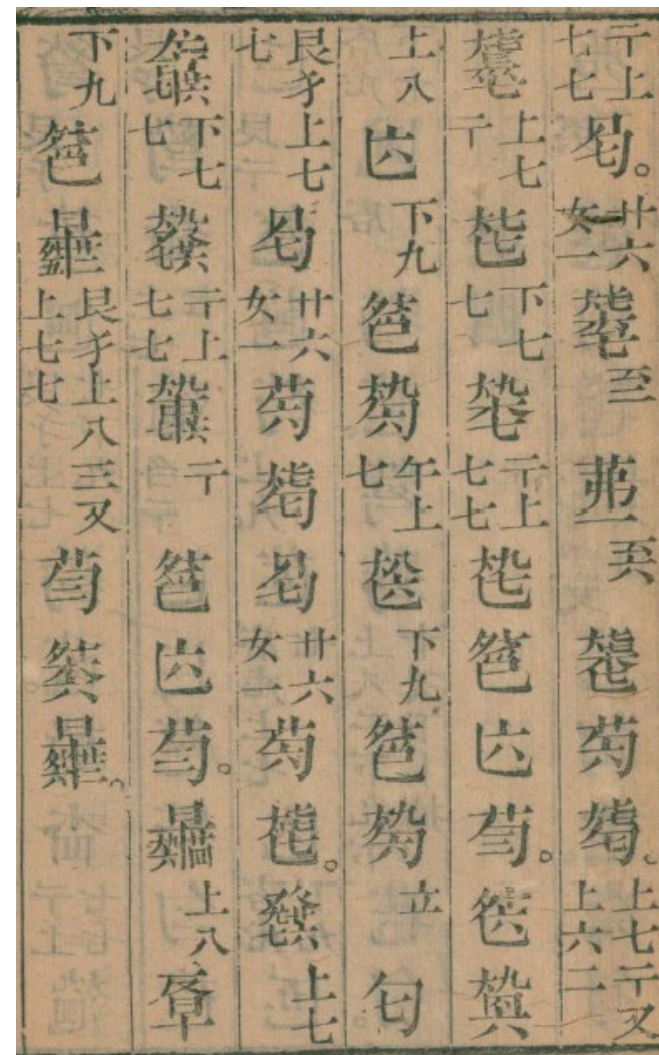


String played:  
second (二)

Right hand  
motion:  
Ring finger  
inwards (打)

# Shorthand Tablature

- In Chinese: 减字谱 (Reduced character score)
- Usually attributed to Rou Cao and other Guqin theorists in Tang Dynasty
- Scores become less cumbersome, and made the instrument much more available to the public
- Guqin players are still reading this tablature today!



# Shorthand Tablature after Tang

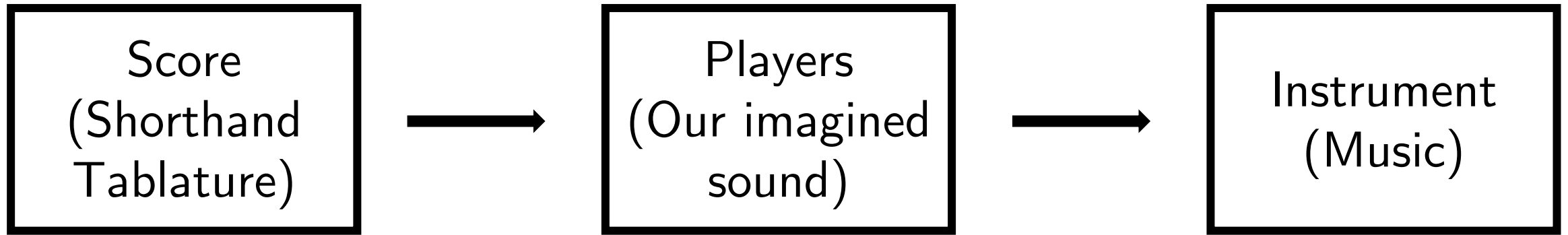
- Lots of imperfections:
  - Which words do we throw away?
  - Which parts of the characters to take?
  - How to prevent two symbols meaning the same thing?
- Ming Dynasty (500 years later): finally standardized
  - Lots of war and instability and suppression of Guqin culture before that
- Musically, Guqin music transitioned from one that focuses on right hand plucking techniques to left hand embellishment techniques.

What are your opinions on Guqin tablature?



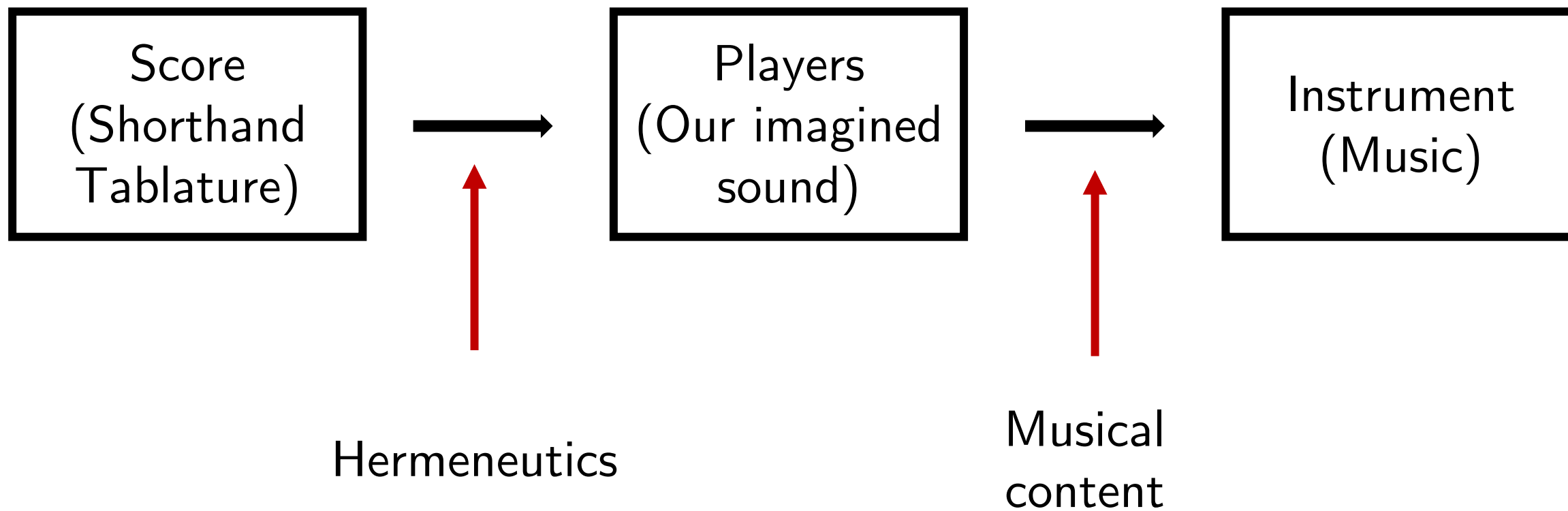
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How does information flow when we play from sheet music?



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The shorthand tablature is ambiguous in both aspects!

# Ambiguities in Hermeneutics (1)

- Hermeneutics: what fingerings are the tablature trying to convey?
- Ability to decipher decays with time separation
- Example 1:
  - 十上半寸許
  - half a *cun* (*about an inch?*) above mark 10
  - What is a *cun*??
  - Different schools solidified into different interpretations of tablature



# Ambiguities in Hermeneutics (2)

- Example 2:

- 倚蠲
- Several versions of interpretation: plucking inwards, index-middle-index-middle or index-index-middle-middle?

倚

- Example 3:

- 末
- Usual meaning: right index finger plucks inwards
- In ancient score, also means some obscure left-hand technique

末木

# Ambiguities in Musical Content

- Are fingerings enough to help us imagine sound?

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- Are fingerings enough to help us imagine sound?
- Fundamental aspects of music:
  - Pitch
  - Volume
  - Rhythm
- Pure tablature only provides the first one!
- Volume – Guqin is not great in changing volume
- Rhythm – Some of tablature is combined with rhythmic notation, but it is also highly school dependent

# Ambiguities: difficulty and opportunity

- Historical reasons for ambiguities:
  - Disciple-master relationship
  - “This section is very profound. One must receive personal instruction to avoid the problem of not playing smoothly and continuously...”
- Modern players: recreating instead of reconstructing
  - Artistic freedom in interpretation
  - Production of new Guqin sounds using new instruments
  - Direct dialogue with the composer
  - Musical puzzle!

# Current Status of Guqin Tablature

- Scores with famous interpretations are published
  - Contains rhythm indications, and sometimes dynamic indications
  - Not “Urtext”
- Less and less people devote effort to make their own interpretations and rely on famous interpretations on famous pieces

幽 兰

1=C  
正调定弦: 1 2 4 5 6 1 2

据《古逸丛书》  
管平湖记谱  
王迪记谱

[-] ♩ = 48

5 1 5 3 . 3 - 2 . 1 2 2 1 2 . 3 5 5 3 5 | 5 6 5 |

5 5 - | 7 6 3 - | 6 . 7 1 . 2 1 - 1 - |

3 2 3 2 2 2 2 3 2 . 1 1 - 1 - | 1 . 2 2 1 3 . #4

5 . 6 5 1 . 5 5 . 6 5 5 5 . 6 5 - 5 - - | 6 . 7 1 - |

5 . #4 5 . 3 5 5 3 5 6 1 - | #4 3 . 2 3 2 3 . 2 3

2 1 7 1 1 1 . 2 1 1 . 1 1 . 6 1 1 1 . 2 1 2 -

1 - - - | 3 . 2 3 . #4 5 . 6 5 1 . 5 5 . 6 5 5 5 . 6



Thank you!