

6 Wire: Flow

Belinda T. Orzada, M. Jo Kallal, Cheyenne Smith, Mikayla DuBreuil, and Wing Tang

Key words: FEA Model, music, performance attire, apparel design

Conceptual statement

The flow of notes on sheets of music were visually translated to an undulating ribbon effect on an evening dress for an erhu musician's performance attire.

The impetus for this design came from a call from a colleague in the music department at my university requesting performance attire for a major venue for the three-person musical ensemble, *6-Wire* in which he performs and also directs. Usually each member of the group purchases garments from retail stores to wear during performances, but this event was special, a premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Custom performance wear was a new experience, but opportune for such a significant event. With the assistance of a design team, I ultimately designed and executed two garments for each of the three musicians to wear at this and future performances; the focus of this paper is one custom design for the female musician who plays an erhu.

Aesthetic properties and Visual Impact

"Line, material and decorative detail combine to create [a] costume's movement quality" (McLean, 2012, p. 206). Performance attire for musicians must allow expression and be aesthetically pleasing, while at the same time be perfectly fitted to the musician to enhance movement not hinder it. Lamb's and Kallal's (1992) FEA Consumer Needs Model provided the theoretical framework for this design. Garments for musical performances necessitate a perfect balance between the three components of the FEA Model. Functional, expressive and aesthetic design criteria were considered during the design process.

Conversations with the group regarding their clothing needs during performances led to sketches and further conversation. Design considerations focused on how the erhu, a two-stringed Chinese violin, was held and played. The erhu is held upright by the musician while playing. The musician may sit to play and rests the erhu upon her lap, or she may stand while playing. When standing, a belt with a wire attachment that supports the erhu is worn. The design needed to work aesthetically and functionally with this belt.

Process, technique and execution

The resulting sleeveless evening dress has a silhouette that flares from the hip and a center back godet for additional flare. The dress has a curved, asymmetric neckline and an asymmetric ribbon illusion embellishment (Lehman, 1997) that crosses the body in front and back from the right shoulder. Couture design techniques used include a boned bustier and faced hem with horsehair braid support. An invisible zipper on the left side provides the closure.

Page 1 of 4

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ITAA Proceedings, #76 - <https://itaonline.org>

To accomplish this design, personal measurements were taken of the musician and a basic princess dress with flared skirt was draped on a dress form with similar measurements. The prototype dress was then fitted to the client, and the pattern and fit was finalized. Design lines for an embellishment to draw the eye toward the instrument, but not interfere with her ability to hold/play the instrument, were positioned on the muslin prototype and refined. Finally, the princess seamlines and neckline were adapted to incorporate the undulating ribbon shape.

The dress was constructed of black 4-ply silk which was purchased with a pre-fused interfacing backing and has a black rayon lining. The backing provided essential body and eliminated any need to underline the fashion fabric. Free-motion stitching was used to create a ribbon illusion design line through the dress. Blue silk taffeta was used for the foundation of the 'ribbon' areas. Blue glass beads trim the neckline and outline the embellished 'ribbon' areas. Pewter leather strips border one side of each 'ribbon', while free-motion embroidery using metallic thread to catch the light provides shading highlights to the curved shapes.

Significance

Very little use of a theoretical framework during creative practice has been documented in the literature. The FEA criteria (Lamb & Kallal, 1992) were purposefully applied during the design process of this dress. This submission contributes to the understanding of creative design practice for performance attire (Bye, 2010) and demonstrates the usefulness of the FEA Model as a theoretical framework for creative practice.



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