Chu Tsai-Yü Encyclopedia Article

Chu Tsai-Yü

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Contents

Chu Tsai-Yü Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Chu Tsai-Yü.....3

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fl. 1580s

Chinese Ming Dynasty prince who calculated a musical system of 12-tone equal temperament. The problem of the 12-tone scale had long perplexed mathematicians and scientists, because to create a system of equal tones that would translate from instrument to instrument required computations with numbers containing as many as 108 zeroes. One had to then find the twelfth root of such a number, an operation performed by calculating the square root twice, then the cube root. In 1596 (some sources say 1584), Prince Chu published a book containing highly accurate calculations of the string length required to produce 12-tone equal temperament on a lute. His findings preceded those of Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) in France by a number of years.