

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE MUSIC: GENRES AND TRANSMISSION OF *HOGAKU*

Traditional Japanese instrumental music was closely linked to music from northeast Asian countries like China and Korea. However, these instruments with foreign origins have already become parts of a local music tradition that has gone through centuries of development and transformation, representing a unique Japanese artistic style.

Since the end of the Shogunate Era and the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Western culture has become increasingly influential in Japan. Elements of Western music were introduced to Japanese music, resulting in the emergence of various classical, serious and popular genres as well as performance practices. To the other end of the spectrum are those traditional music genres rooted in royal court and local communities that have been nourished for generations.

Consequently, a system for the categorisation of music genres is being adopted, with the term “*Hogaku*” referring to traditional Japanese music and the term “Music” referring to newly emerged musical genres influenced by Western culture.

Hogaku still being performed today includes several major categories -

- Court, religious and festive music: including *Gagaku* and ritual music of Shinto
- Regional vocal music, instrumental music and related genres: *minyo*, *jiuta* and *sankyoku*, as well as music for instruments like *koto* and *shakuhachi*
- Theatrical genres: *noh-kyogen*, *kabuki* and *bunraku*



Left:
Performance of the Noh play *Okina* at the Noh theater of the Kasuga Shrine in Sasayama, Hyogo Prefecture



Right:
Bunraku play *The Love Suicides at Amijima* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

Since the end of the Second World War, Japanese government and local communities have put great efforts on the revival of traditional culture, leading to the enactment of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai Hogoho*) in 1950. One of the most important aspects of the Law is the designation of Intangible Cultural Properties (including artistic genres like music and theatre) and related preservation policies, a concept comparable to the recent notion of “intangible cultural heritage”. Since 1955, the Minister of Education has started to recognize individuals or groups of individuals who are masters of the designated intangible cultural properties, commonly called National Living Treasures.



Left:
Hozan Yamamoto of the Tozan-ryu (1937-2014)
Designated as “Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Properties” in 2002



Right:
Aoki Reibo II of the Kinko-ryu (1935-)
Designated as “Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Properties” in 1999

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL *HOGAKU*

- Mainly monophonic texture
- Mainly with rhythm in duple meter
- Great varieties in tempo among different music genres or within the same piece of music
- Form is influenced by the concept of “jo-ha-kyu”. Music typically starts in unmetered rhythm with slow tempo, gradually becoming faster with regular pulses
- Emphasises contrast in tone colour and dynamics; frequent use of microtones, particularly in music for wind instruments
- 2 pentatonic scales are most typical: *in* scale (*miyakobushi* scale) with semitones and *yo* scale (*minyo* scale) without semitone

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

GAGAKU: CEREMONIAL MUSIC AND DANCE ESTABLISHED AT THE IMPERIAL COURT FOR MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS

Gagaku is the genre of *Hogaku* with the longest history, established at the royal court since the Azuka-Nara Period for over a thousand years. *Gagaku* was linked to the Chinese concept of “refined music” (*yayue*) influenced by the teaching of Confucius, though the Chinese and Japanese concepts of “refined” music were not exactly the same. After centuries of Japanisation, *Gagaku* is still performed in court and Shinto rituals and ceremonies today. Currently *Gagaku* in the royal court is performed by the staff from the Music Department of the Imperial Household. *Gagaku* was inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO in 2009.

Current repertoire of the Japanese *Gagaku* consists of 3 categories -

- Music and dance employed in imperial and Shinto ceremony (*Kuniburi-no-utamai*): repertoire of indigenous origin, including *Mikagura*, *Azuma-asobi*, *Kume-mai* and others
- Music and dance of foreign origin from Asian mainland: the 2 main categories are *Togaku* and *Komagaku*; performance styles are divided into *Bugaku-samai* (*Togaku*, or Dance of the Left), *Bugaku-umai* (*Komagaku*, or Dance of the Right) and *Kangen* (pure instrumental music)
- Accompanied vocal music created during the Heian Period: *Saibara* and *Roei*

Well known *Gagaku* pieces include *Etenraku* (*Kangen*), *Ranryoo* (*Togaku*), *Nasori* (*Komagaku*) and others.



Left:
Kangen



Right:
Bugaku

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GAGAKU: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

There are 3 types of musical instruments used in *Gagaku*, including -

- Winds: 3 transverse flutes (*kagurabue*, *ryuteki*, *komabue*), *hichiriki*, and *sho*



ryuteki

- Strings: *wagon* (or *yamata-goto*), *so* (or *koto*), and *biwa*



biwa

- Percussion: *shakubyoshi*, *kakko*, *san-no-tsuzumi*, *taiko* (*gagu-taiko*, *dadaiko*), *shoko* (*tsumi-shoko*, *oshoko*)



gagu-taiko

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Below are brief introductions to 2 unique instruments employed in the performance of *Togaku*: *Sho* and *Hichiriki*.



Sho

Sho was introduced to Japan during the 7th Century as one of the musical instruments in *Gagaku*. Modern practice employs the *sho* in performance of *bugaku* and *kangen* in *Togaku*, as well as *Saibara* and *Roei* introduced since the Heian Period. The construction of the *sho* is similar to the Chinese *sheng* with 17 pipes and it is necessary to keep warmth of the instrument during performance. *Gagaku* music often begins with the *sho*. It also plays harmonic progression known as “*aitake*” to enrich the texture and tone colour of the music.

Hichiriki

Hichiriki was a double-reed instrument introduced to China from Central Asia before it was transmitted to Japan. The double-reed *hichiricki* used in *Gagaku* is made of bamboo pipe with reed made from the stem of a water reed. There are seven finger holes on the front and one on the back. Range of the instrument is somewhat narrow, slightly more than an octave. *Hichiriki* is one of the most noticeable instruments in *Gagaku* because it usually plays the main melodic lines. The technique known as “*enbai*” in controlling the reed to play portamento and changes in tone colour is vital in performance.



EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

HOGAKU: TRADITIONAL JAPANESE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

During the Tokugawa Period, artistic preference of public audience in places like Edo (Tokyo) became more crucial in influencing the development of music performance. *Shamisen*, *koto* and *shakuhachi* gradually became the most popular traditional musical instruments, first as accompaniment for various vocal genres and folksongs, later developed into specific performance schools.



Koto

Koto was first introduced from China in *Gagaku*. The construction and performance practice of the *koto* had gone through various changes in history (court *koto* of the Asuka-Nara Period, *tsukushi-goto* of the Muromachi Period

and *sokyoku* of the Edo Period), however, the instrument retained a 13-string design.

Development of the *sokyoku* tradition was attributed to Yatsunashi Kengyo (1614-1685) and he was generally considered the pioneer of modern *koto* music. Currently Ikuta-ryu and Yamada-ryu are the two major traditions of Japanese *koto* music, established by Ikuta Kengyo (1656-1715) and Yamada Kengyo (1751-1817) respectively.

Since the Meiji Period, various new designs of the *koto* were being introduced. The most notable change was the 17-string *koto* developed by Miyagi Michio (1894-1956). *Koto* with 20 to 30 strings were also developed by artists like Keiko Nosaka since the time of Miyagi. Today, teaching of *koto* in music conservatories in Japan is still restricted to 13- and 17-string *koto*, focusing on traditional repertoire. *Haru-no-Umi* (The Sea in Spring) by Miyagi Michio remains one of the most famous works for *koto*.



Miyagi Michio

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2 different types of *shamisen*:
chuzao (middle-neck, above) and *hosozao* (thin-neck, below)

Shamisen

Sanxian was first brought to Ryukyu (Okinawa) during the late 14th century (Ming Dynasty in China). Named *shamisen*, the instrument was mainly used in accompanying vocal music. In the 16th century the instrument was introduced to mainland Japan, originally played by blind monks who used the *biwa* to accompany narrative singing. During the Edo Period, *shamisen*

became the most popular instrument to accompany vocal genre known as *kumiuta*, later expanded to genres like *jiuta* and *naguata*. As a popular instrument, *shamisen* of different sizes have been developed to meet the performance needs of specific genres.

Shamisen music does not exclude innovative ideas. For instance, *Tsugaru Shamisen* incorporates many lively new techniques in its music, making it very popular among young audience in recent years. Performers like the Yoshida Brothers even add popular and world music elements in their works, transforming an instrument only for traditional vocal genres into a household name.



"Woman Tuning a *Shamisen*", woodblock print by
Yashima Gakutei (1786-1868)

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Shakuhachi

Shakuhachi was also brought to Japan as an instrument in *Gagaku*, though the instrument was dropped from the ensemble after reform of the genre in the Heian Period. Eight *shakuhachi* dated back to the Tang Dynasty are still stored in the Shosoin treasure house of Todaji temple in Nara. During the Kamakura Period, a one-

segment *shakuhachi* was performed by *mekura hoshi* (blind monks). Another thin *shakuhachi* named *tenpuku* was popular in Kyushu from the Muromachi through the Edo Periods. The modern *shakuhachi* can be traced back to music performed by beggar-monks called “*komuso*” (monks of nothingness) of the Fuke sect of Zen during the Edo Period. The imperial government abolished the sect in 1871. As a result, Buddhist monks began teaching people to play the *shakuhachi*.

During the 18th century, a monk named Kurosawa Kinko (1710-1771) standardized the music of 36 pieces for *shakuhachi* as the “*honkyoku*” of the Kinko-ryu. The school is generally regarded as the classical tradition of *shakuhachi* music. In late 19th century, a monk named Nakao Tozan (1876-1956) brought important changes to *shakuhachi* music and had composed numerous new works for the instrument. He found the Tozan-ryu, which has remained the most prominent school in *shakuhachi* today.

Recent masters of *shakuhachi* include Aoki Reibo II (1935-) of the Kinko-ryu and Hozan Yamamoto (1937-2014) of the Tozan-ryu. Another well-known *shakuhachi* master among foreign audience is Katsuya Yokoyama (1934-2010), who has performed in Hong Kong.

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

HOGAKU: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Historical Period	Major Development in <i>Hogaku</i> and Genres	Major Musical Instruments
Ancient Japan		
Asuka–Nara Period (538-794)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foreign music genres were introduced to Japan through the spread of Buddhism, including <i>Gagaku</i> and Buddhist <i>Shomyo</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical instruments of <i>Gagaku</i>
Heian Period (794-1185)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Gagaku</i> was divided into two major categories, <i>Togaku</i> and <i>Komagaku</i> Some practices and repertoire of banquet music originally performed in court were allowed to perform among commoners and were further developed as other music genres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Togaku</i>: <i>hichiriki</i>, <i>sho</i>, <i>ryuteki</i>, <i>kakko</i> <i>Komagaku</i>: <i>komabue</i>, <i>san-no-tsuzumi</i>
Age of the Samurai Class		
Kamakura Period (1185-1336) Muromachi Period (1336-1573) Azuchi–Momoyama Period (1573-1603)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blind musicians, who were also monks, performed narrative based on <i>The Tale of the Heike</i> with <i>biwa</i> The father and son Kanami and Zeami developed the artistic form <i>Noh-Kyogen</i> during the Muromachi Period <i>Shamisen</i> was introduced to mainland Japan from Ryukyu Emergence of puppet theatre employing narrative style known as “<i>yoruri</i>” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>biwa</i> <i>Hayahsi</i> ensemble in <i>Noh</i>: <i>nokan</i>, <i>kotsuzumi</i>, <i>otsuzumi</i>, <i>taiko</i> <i>shamisen</i>
Early Edo Period (Tokugawa Shogunate) (1603-1704)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early form of <i>Kabuki</i>: <i>Okuni Kabuki</i> Vocal genres accompanied by <i>shamisen</i> and <i>koto</i> gradually became popular 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical instruments of <i>Gagaku</i> and <i>Noh</i> <i>shamisen</i>, <i>koto</i>, <i>biwa</i>
Post–Genroku Period (1704-1830)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Puppet theatre adopting <i>yoruri</i> style known as <i>Gidayu-bushi</i> and <i>Kabuki</i> became the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment Chikamatsu Monzaemon was one of the most important playwrights Various vocal genres mainly used <i>koto</i>, <i>shamisen</i> and <i>shakuhachi</i> as accompaniment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical instruments of <i>Gagaku</i> and <i>Noh</i> <i>shamisen</i>, <i>koto</i>, <i>shakuhachi</i>, <i>taiko</i>, <i>biwa</i>
Modern Japan		
Late Edo Period (1830-1868) Meiji Restoration and Constitutional Monarchy Period (1868-1945)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Western music genres gradually become mainstream Emergence of the “music / <i>hogaku</i>” distinction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical instruments of <i>Gagaku</i> and <i>Noh</i> <i>shamisen</i>, <i>koto</i>, <i>shakuhachi</i>, <i>taiko</i>, <i>biwa</i>
Post-World War II New Constitution Period (1945-)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government has initiated new policies to support the transmission of <i>Hogaku</i> More new compositions for instruments of the <i>Hogaku</i> tradition like <i>shakuhachi</i> and <i>koto</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical instruments of <i>Gagaku</i> and <i>Noh</i> <i>shamisen</i>, <i>koto</i>, <i>shakuhachi</i>, <i>taiko</i>, <i>biwa</i>

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF JAPAN

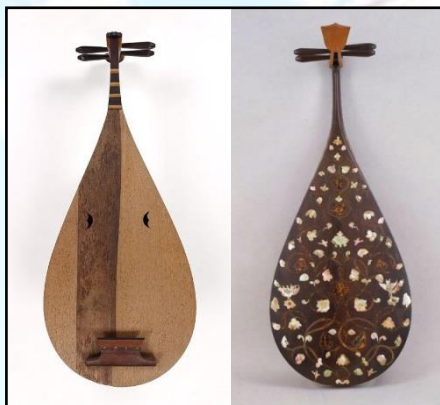
FINAL WORDS

On one hand, transmission and development of *Hogaku* are supported by government policies as well as social structures of transmission deeply rooted in historical tradition. Teaching of *Hogaku* is also successfully adopted to the modern education system. On the other hand, preservation of tradition does not reject the introduction of new creative ideas and performance practices. In fact, the addition of modern and popular music elements has given a vibrant life to *Hogaku*, enabling it to reach a wider public. People should be inspired by such perseverance and openness to tradition in understanding of our own traditional musical culture.

Music instruments stored in the Shosoin treasure house of Todaji temple in Nara:



shakuhachi



biwa of *shitan* with pearl inlay



genkan of *shitan* with pearl inlay

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