

An Overview 解説

Contemporary Rendition of Traditional Styles of Japanese Music (Hogaku)

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疾風怒涛の変革期に突入した現代邦楽

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History of Traditional Japanese Music

Traditional Japanese music, or *hogaku*, literally means the music of one's homeland. Most music dictionaries define *hogaku* as a general term for Japanese music that includes gagaku, which can be described as imperial court music, and *shomyo*, which covers liturgical chants in Buddhist music and folk songs. However, *hogaku* does not in most cases include Ainu and Okinawa music. Today in Japan, we are exposed daily to music from different countries and cultures, and *hogaku* accounts for only a small fraction.

A Japanese music scholar was quoted as saying, "Japanese music was first impaired when Western music was imported to Japan during the move toward civilization and enlightenment in the Meiji period, and then by American culture that exploited the country after Japan's defeat in the Pacific War." As the quote indicates, music education in Japan since the Meiji period was based on European and Western classical music. This music was taught as the only "real" music; vocalization of Belcanto was considered beautiful, while the husky or thick vocals of *gidayu* and *rokyoku* were said to be distasteful. Such beliefs, which continued for 100 years, stripped homeland music from people's lives.

It comes as no surprise to find that many people of the Beatles generation who have tried playing the guitar at some point in their lives, but you would find hardly anyone trying the shamisen; likewise, many children take piano lessons but not koto lessons. Many Japanese associate traditional music with the background music played on TV or at department stores during the New Year holidays.

However, there was a period during which traditional music returned to the spotlight. After World War II, a new style of music emerged. It was a cross between traditional and Western classical music, and was referred to as "contemporary traditional music." This genre experienced a boom from around 1964. "November Steps," composed by TAKEMITSU Toru, incorporated the *shakuhachi* by YOKOYAMA Katsuya and the biwa by TSURUTA Kinshi with the sounds of a classical orchestra. Shakuhachi master YAMAMOTO Hozan in Ginkai (Silver World) also tried playing jazz with his shakuhachi. Both of these events created a new form of music that went beyond the framework of East and West, capturing the hearts of the young generation. Many *hogaku* musicians then in their 40s and 50s decided on their profession after being shocked by this new movement toward contemporary traditional music.

Contemporary traditional music trends since the 1990s

In the 1990s, people started to show renewed interest in *hogaku* thanks to its new form. This was after the international music trend of young musicians forming bands that used the instrumental techniques applied to pop music. At the time, the media reported on the popularity of these bands, and some even went on TV but that fad passed quickly. Meanwhile, talented young musicians were also seeking ways to attract listeners from their generation. For those people who experienced equal temperament scale and music from the West during compulsory education, there does not seem to be much difference between Western and traditional music. They find both worth listening to and consider them both as modes of expression.

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For example, Tsugaru shamisen player KINOSHITA Shinichi hangs a shamisen on his shoulder with a strap instead of sitting with his legs folded under him and strums it like a guitar. He has been doing this since his days as a member of a backing band to ITO Takio, known as the wayward son of the *min'yo* (folk song) world. Kinoshita also participated in a rock band composed of shamisen, Japanese drums, guitar and conventional drums.

rokyoku actors usually perform a scene about human feelings and moral obligations, accompanied by shamisen music. But KUNIMOTO Takeharu wears jeans and sunglasses on the stage and plays an electric shamisen. This so-called "shamisen rock" attracted new listeners to a traditional art that was on the verge of extinction. The Den-no-Kai nagauta-shamisen musical group and the Noh musician ISSO Yukihiro are among the active performers of such classical stage arts as kabuki and Noh who have also attracted a wide variety of fans, both male and female and young and old, through their own unique live performances.

The movement brought about by the *hogaku* new wave preceded an unprecedented shift that was to come at the end of the 1990s. This is when big stars appeared, attracting people to *hogaku* for the first time in their lives.

TOGI Hideki, a forerunner in the movement, is a *hichiriki* (Japanese flageolet) player for gagaku. He studied gagaku as one of the musicians of the Imperial Household Agency, and after his retirement, he started a career as a soloist. At the time, the popularity of therapeutic music helped him capture the attention of many women listeners. His noble-looking features contributed to his successful career, he appeared on TV dramas and had a collection of his photographs published, reaching unprecedented popularity in the world of *hogaku*. People in the *hogaku* world were taken by surprise when the Yoshida brothers, a Tsugaru shamisen playing duo, became popular. They appeared in traditional formal black kimono and had their hair dyed brown, a radical step in the world of traditional art.

The brothers were very good at promoting themselves, and this contributed to their success. Many *hogaku* musicians handle their own promotional activities, but Togi and the Yoshida brothers both have agencies and record companies that are aggressively involved in their promotion. These two successes proved that *hogaku* could become popular. Seeing the potential for this market, the music industry began scouting new talent.

Results started to show in 2000. Young, good-looking musicians like *shakuhachi* player FUJIWARA Dozan and Tsugaru shamisen player AGATSUMA Hiromitsu became widely recognized through appearances on TV. The concerts by these musicians were continuously packed. Soon after a documentary program on Tsugaru shamisen player KINOSHITA Shinichi was aired, a photo-journal put together an article on AGATSUMA Hiromitsu. One musician even appeared in the gossip column of a sports newspaper. Critics say this popularity is based on the way performers look rather than the way they play. But it is also true that Tsugaru shamisen players tend to improvise much as jazz musicians do, and the unmatched techniques of Agatsuma and Kinoshita are tied closely to them looking good. In fact, they are making significant contributions by increasing the number of young people who actually want to become musicians like them.

This transition is helping to create a climate for rediscovering Japanese culture. This is largely due to the declining influence of Western music as international music has been attracting more followers. People who began listening to various types of ethnic music found freshness in Japanese traditional music in the same manner that they did in Bulgarian voices and the Indonesian gamelan.

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Hogaku in compulsory education and other major changes

Education has gone through changes to be consistent with the times. In 1998, the Ministry of Education (the present Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) revised its curriculum guidelines, making it compulsory to teach about traditional Japanese musical instruments in junior high school music classes starting in 2002. The ministry also included in its primary school guidelines a strong recommendation to use traditional instruments in music classes.

It is now mandatory for college students studying to be music teachers to take courses in traditional Japanese songs and drums. With this "big bang" in music education - 130 years after the previous reformation - teachers and schools that have been studying and teaching Western classical music are making a concerted attempt to change their focus.

The first to react to this shift was the music industry. Leading companies, including Yamaha Corporation, were also eager to develop new instruments. Traditional instruments are very expensive and made from natural materials that are difficult to repair. In addition, these instruments are made by ultra-small-scale enterprises and couldn't produce the quantity required for schools. The educational changes developed a market for inexpensive, easy-to-manage, mass-produced instruments, and a new range of traditional instruments was created to meet this demand.

In order to reduce costs, drums were made by joining thinned wood together, and the body was coated with plastic, instead of hollowing out a tree trunk and stretching animal skin over the head - a process that costs several million yen. The koto was shortened to two-thirds its original length for easier handling, and manufacturers used high-density plywood for the body instead of expensive paulownia wood. The cheaper production methods were meant to give people easier access to the instruments and to win more advocates of *hogaku*, including those who have wanted to practice it but had second thoughts because of the cost. Meanwhile, development of instruments had been going on to satisfy the desire of musicians seeking a more sonorous sound. This is represented by the electric shamisen, "Mugen 21," developed in 1990. The emergence of this instrument allowed the shamisen to be played with high-volume drums and synthesizers, and this has further broadened the field for young musicians.

Barriers between music schools erode quickly

Hogaku had for a long time passed on its artistic tradition through *ryuha*, the branches of schools operated by disciples of the *iemoto*, the founding family of a school. This system effectively hands down intangible culture in a consistent fashion. At the same time, however, even with the same instrument being used, different schools employ their own method for music notation and there is constraint on playing with the musicians from other schools. Although Japanese classical music may be a single category, there is music that certain schools are prohibited from playing because of *iemoto* rules. This is a factor blocking the musical development of *hogaku*.

However, the rise of young musicians has created a spurt of activity that crosses traditional boundaries. There was recently an incident in the shakuhachi world that symbolizes this trend. In the past, a specific *shakuhachi* honkyoku (solo piece) of Kinkoryu (a particular school) had been passed on at a mendicant Zen temple (Komusodera). This piece was not to be performed by players of other schools, but any *shakuhachi* player would want to play this piece during the course of their

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career and there was an unending demand to learn it. Tozanryu (another school) finally succeeded in inviting a Kinkoryu player to hold a workshop.

The trend for people of the younger generation opening live houses dedicated to *hogaku*, and music competitions featuring traditional instruments and vocals at the National Theater of Japan held uninterruptedly, for instance. As you can see just from these examples, for the past five years the world of *hogaku* went through a transition that can be described as a period of storm-and-stress. Yet the interest of the media and the public has not reached the real world of classical Japanese music. The growing interest is still in a phase at which people are drawn to novelties like Beatles songs and other rock

pieces played with the *koto* and *shakuhachi*. Meanwhile, both *koto* and *shakuhachi* advocates are falling in number and fewer people are playing. "Classics are the cream," says *shakuhachi* player Hozan Yamamoto, but there are players emerging who are good in contemporary music but unable to play the classics. The fact is that the new shift is toward a mixture of Japanese and Western music, and current musical expression based on the traditions of *hogaku* has significant scope to mature.

Lastly, what follows is a brief note on Japanese drums that have also become very popular overseas. Their popularity comes from the easy-to-learn technique and the wide age range of the drummers. The towns in some regions are taking the initiative in forming drum groups to revitalize the tradition. These steps have resulted in so many professional and amateur groups being formed that the actual figure is unknown. Since World War II, creative drumming developed from regional entertainment like festivals. This was referred to as "contemporary folk art," although a majority of the performances are fairly standard and there are few professionals who have actually developed the music into something worthy of admiration. Above all, HAYASHI Eitetsu is an outstanding asset and a trailblazer among soloists who pursue artistic quality in music and refined stage direction. Kodo, a school producing many drummers (Hayashi graduated from this school), is notable for drum groups. In the generation following Hayashi, the work of HIDANO Shuichi, ETO Leonard and Tokyo Dagekidan are drawing attention.