

"Japanese Music In the Context of Everyday Life: Musicological Research on the Diaries of the Heian Period"

MOTEGI Kiyoko (Music department of Joetsu University of Education)

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The research described in this paper is part of a larger project which aims at making clear the connections between musical culture and the everyday lives of Japanese people in the past. Specifically, I am interested in what writings from the past can tell us about the musical perception and aesthetic values of the Japanese people. It is my contention that there are certain characteristics peculiar to the traditional Japanese perception of aural phenomena and that some of these influence how we listen to and react to music today. The literature I have used for the basis of my analysis in this research consists of the writings, and particularly the diaries, of female authors during the Heian Period, which lasted from approximately the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Because the way of life of these aristocratic women was far-removed from that of the common people, it is important to caution that the conclusions reached here concerning the special characteristics of the reigning musical culture pertain only to the upper class of the Heian Period. One reason for working within this limitation is that few literary works survive from the lower classes of this era, but also it must be pointed out that it was within this upper class and during this period that much that is unique to Japanese culture -- in literature, aesthetics, and music, for example -- first developed.

The method of analyzing descriptions of musical events appearing in diaries and other literature has been often used in the field of Japanese literature, but their object of research normally has restricted the definition of music to the performance of musical instruments and song. Here, I would like to extend the definition of "music" to include any kind of sound, for the purposes of this analysis.

In particular, I will treat the diaries of *Murasaki Shikibu*, a female writer active from the last years of the tenth century to the eleventh century. She is best known as the author of "The Tale of *Genji*," but her diaries are a fascinating account of her life as one of the women serving the emperor of the early eleventh century. The court of this time, as a center of complicated political and amorous intrigue,

served as a rich background for both her fiction and her personal diaries.

Previous to this research, I have analyzed a work by another female writer of the same period, *Sei Shonagon*, entitled "*Makura no Soshi*" ("The Pillow Book"). Through that research, the following five conclusions emerged concerning the kinds of contact Heian Period Japanese had with sound and music. Since there is a relationship between my current analysis and these five points, I would like to state them briefly here.

1. There are many descriptions of sounds from the natural world, such as rain, wind, birds, insects, and so forth. The feelings of the characters are often transferred to these sounds.
2. In the midst of everyday life, various miscellaneous sounds are heard and described. From within this atmosphere, certain specific voices or sounds are then extracted and focused upon.
3. When listening to musical performance, the writer described primarily the beauty of the shape of the instrument, or its origins, or the posture of the performer, rather than the music itself or any feelings instilled by listening to the music.
4. When listening to an instrumental or vocal performance, there is a tendency for people to listen to and enjoy the music indirectly, that is, from behind a door, a shoji screen, or blinds. In other words, rather than listening in an active, direct fashion, people receive sounds in a passive, indirect way.
5. There is often the tendency for the writer to transform abstract sounds such as musical or natural sounds into words, thus giving them specific meanings. For example, the sound of an instrument might be described as that of a particular insect, or the cry of an insect could be described as its call for its father.

Using these conclusions as a base, I found that the first two characteristics -- the transference of human emotion to natural sounds and the presence of a chaotic sound environment -- appeared often in the diaries of *Murasaki Shikibu*. As for the third characteristic -- the description of things normally considered "extraneous" to the music --, of the 20 incidents involving music mentioned in her diaries, none include specific mention of the musical product. Instead, they only briefly mention who is playing what instrument, and so on. The fourth and fifth characteristics found in the diaries of *Sei Shonagon* -- the tendency toward indirect, passive listening and the assigning of specific meanings to abstract

sounds -- do not appear in the diaries of *Murasaki Shikibu*.

Therefore, as the first two characteristics from the diaries of the other *Heian* writer were most relevant to the diaries of Murasaki, I would like to give specific examples of them. In addition to the *Murasaki* diaries, I will also take examples from "The Tale of *Genji*" and a collection of *waka* poems that have been ascribed to her, both of which have a close relationship to her diaries. (*Waka* poems have lines with syllables numbering 5 or 7, and have been frequently written since the *Heian* Period.)

As for the first characteristic -- that there is an abundance of natural sounds and that emotional feelings are often transferred to them --, *Murasaki* evokes many natural sounds, the sounds of wind and water being the most numerous. In her diaries, the sound of wind is used as a reverberation of an empty, desolate feeling in one's heart, while the sound of water conveys the feeling of loneliness. Of the wind sounds found throughout all her works, one finds the sound of *kogarashi* (or wintry wind), *yamaoroshi* (a wind that comes off the mountains), and *kawakaze*, or river wind. Different kinds of water sounds include the sound of rivers, waves, and waterfalls.

These various wind and water sounds are not simply descriptions of nature, but also play an important role in psychological description as well. Various, they can produce the effect of arousing feeling of instability, fear, loneliness, or exasperation.

It is interesting to note that the sounds of wind and water play similar roles in the kabuki music of the latter part of the Tokugawa Period. These kinds of natural sounds, produced through the *odaiko* drum, together describe particular scenes: the sound of wind arouses feelings of instability, while the sounds of water, rivers, waterfalls, the shore, waves, and rain also convey certain feelings and bear the task of conveying to the audience a sense of tension in an upcoming scene.

Going on to the next characteristic -- that various sounds simultaneously fill scenes of everyday life -- we find in the *Murasaki* diaries several examples related to Buddhist ceremony. The birth of a young prince, with accompanying prayers by priests, is described at great length, but not as an isolated aural event. Rather, it is typically described in a confused "soundscape" of which it is just one more sound event. In one passage, for example, *Murasaki* describes first the voices of the ladies-in-waiting, then the signal of the bell tolling outdoors. As the bell begins to toll, a group of priests begin to recite the sutras in a variety of ways. Then a line of twenty priests enters, led by a head priest, their entrance marked by

the sound of their noisy footsteps over the wooden floor. In describing this scene, *Murasaki* adds one sound on top of the other, making it clear that each new one adds to the growing reverberations already present, and concludes that the resulting aural scene was "impressive."

I would like to play two examples of a mixed sound environment, as described in this literature and still found in some Japanese music performances today. The first example is a recording of a 1978 recreation of a Heian Period Buddhist ceremony. In the passage just described from *Murasaki's* diaries, we can imagine the mix of various sounds, such as *shomyo* (the chanting of the Buddhist sutras), the playing of metal instruments by the priests, the voices of people talking, the sound of footsteps, and the sound of temple bells tolling outdoors. Some of these sounds can be heard in this recording. Tape example No. 1: *Shomyo* and *gagaku*

In an excerpt from the *geza* music of the kabuki theater, we can hear a somewhat exaggerated example of this same tendency. Together we hear the running around of a boar, a lively musical ensemble, a firearm going off, and the sound of the wind -- all of these on top of the music of the *shamisen* and *tayu* narrator, who are relating the plot. In all, a situation of aural chaos results. This kind of musical condition reflects the most common method of making kabuki-like music. Tape example No. 2: Geza music.

One might conclude, from listening to examples such as this, that the enjoyment of this kind of simultaneous mixture of different sounds shows an insensitivity to how sounds combine with one another. However, I would interpret such a phenomenon in a different way. Among the sounds enjoyed by the Japanese people, those containing complex tone colors, that is, with many overtones, are most appreciated. Since such sounds mix well with sounds from nature, the fact that the Japanese appreciate the simultaneous progression of instrumental and natural sounds should not be surprising.

The following example of a *gagaku* piece called "*Chogeishi*" shows this characteristic well. Used to accompany the departure of the dancers from the stage at the end of a dance, this piece was traditionally performed outdoors, where the sound of the wind blowing through the surrounding pine trees was echoed by the sound of the flutes and drums. Tape example No. 3: "*Chogeishi*" In "*The Tale of Genji*," we also find a passage which states, "the string instruments go well with the sound of the wind through the pine trees." The next unusual example relates to a passage in the diaries in which a baby in the palace begins to cry in the middle of a *gagaku* performance. Upon hearing this, a lord says, "The music of

Manzairaku fits well to the voice of the baby." Due to the sincerity of the comment, it seems that the baby was then just left to cry, rather than comforted or being immediately taken away. This is, I think, an extreme example of how different kinds of sounds were thought to fit together. Here is a sample from the piece "*Manzairaku*." Tape example No. 4: "*Manzairaku*"

In this last example, the human voice can be included in the category of "natural sounds." In Japan, nature and human beings are considered as parts of one whole, and so the distinction between natural sound and the human voice is not emphasized. This idea is supported in other descriptions concerning the harmonious fit between the human voice (especially in Buddhist chanting) and natural sounds. For example, one passage in the *Murasaki* diaries states: "The voices of the Buddhist priests reciting the sutras and the sound of running water fit together very well."

In summary, one can recognize the sensibility of the Japanese of this time of perceiving natural sounds, which include the human voice, as closely related to musical sounds, and not as an entirely different category of sound. In other words, one could say that, for the Japanese, the tone colors of music are not so different from those of natural sounds. This reflects a basic tonal characteristic of Japanese music, which tends to utilize tone colors that include many overtones. Furthermore, it seems that instead of listening to one tone with a careful ear, people listened casually to music within a chaotic sound environment.

I would like to draw three conclusions from this analysis: 1. Instrumental sounds and natural sounds were not regarded as abstract sounds, but rather there was a tendency for people of the time to attach specific feelings to them, using metaphoric language. 2. There was no clear differentiation between instrumental sounds, the human voice, and natural sounds. The Japanese of these times seem to have experienced music as a mixture of these categories of sound, not separately. 3. The musical sensibility that recognizes various tone colors within a chaotic sound environment survives to the present in the music of kabuki and the folk performing arts, for example. Given this context, one can understand better the fact that the Japanese did not develop specialized musical environments such as concerts. Because music was heard through ears that heard music as a part of a whole sound phenomenon, one may surmise that it was difficult for people to become interested in instrumental or vocal performance by itself, in isolation. Therefore, in the diaries and other literature of the Heian Period, there are few instances when the musical sound alone is described. Rather, music is always

mentioned as a part of a larger aural and visual environment.