

To Each His Own
~Listening to the Sounds of Tradition~

(From the program notes for the 42nd *shomyo* performance featuring the *bugaku-hoe* Buddhist ritual, in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the National Theatre in Tokyo, Saturday, September 18, 2006)

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(1) Soundscapes

The *shinrei* hand bell reverberates through a temple hall at dawn. A monk runs with thumping footfalls down the corridor, shaking the bell he holds to signal to his brethren that the day's devotions are about to begin. The dry clack of a mallet striking a hanging *moppan* wooden board accompanies the monks as they wash their faces, and a large *ôdaiko* barrel drum and *hanshô* half-size bell announce the passing hours. As the *hyakuhachisei* (literally, "108 strikes") temple bell tolls the evening hour, the flat *unpan* metal gong signals the end of a zen sitting session. These were typical Zen temple sounds I heard at a performance presented in the *shikantaza* sitting meditation program by a Sôtô Zen Buddhist group at the National Theatre in Tokyo in 1979.

Or take another scene: the cherry trees in full bloom at Zojoji Temple. A line of pilgrims walks through the grounds, led by the full-voiced power of a traditional fireman's song.

The singer strikes an *ôshakujô* staff rattle, its sound punctuated by the occasional clang of an *inkin* gong. The rich ring of the temple bell seems to reverberate forever, even as various, lively pitches are produced by several *sôban* bronze gongs that are struck during the Buddhist chanting. The faithful chant their sutras in the *goeika* style, sometimes producing very high notes to exaggerated effect. When they reach the main hall, Gagaku musicians begin playing to welcome them inside. Zojoji Temple in the springtime overflows with these and many other sounds.

The aural world of temples and shrines, and particularly that of Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto, is described in great detail the *Pillow Book*, written by Sei Shonagon around the turn of the 11th century. Here's a selection of relevant quotes:

"...with those things called high clogs on their feet, (monks) were hurrying up and down the steps without the slightest precaution, reciting the sutras..."

"...kneeling on the platform of worship, (he) held up his petition in both hands and read it aloud."

"...strained voices..."

"The bell rang for the recitation of the sutras."

"...reading the sutras almost inaudibly..."

"...broken by the loud noise of a conch-shell."

"...call for acolytes in a voice so powerful that it echoed among the hills."

"...the sound of the temple bell growing louder..." (1)

The clomp of high clogs, the chanting of sutras, the individual voices of priests reading holy petitions, the ringing of bells accompanying chanting, the blast of conch shells, the calls to young acolytes: this is the confused aural world that we Japanese have lived with for centuries, and that has informed our traditional music, as well.

(2) Individual Shapes and Colors, Individual Sounds

Akioka Yoshio has spent his distinguished career introducing people to the wonderful culture of Japanese traditional tools. Here's what he has to say on the subject of chopsticks:

Wakasa is the most famous spot in Japan for lacquered chopsticks, and one of the artisans there told me this: "Listen, professor, we have to make many hundreds of kinds of chopsticks to make it in this business. Every Japanese feels like he has to have a pair that's different from everyone else's." (2)

Akioka identifies *meimei* ("to each his own") as the key term that

characterizes Japanese culture. He notes that Japanese family members typically have their own rice bowls and chopsticks, which are different in size and pattern from the others, and notes that this contrasts sharply with the uniformity that typifies Western dinnerware.

It's said that the word *meimei* (which literally means "each person individually") is derived from the word *menmen* ("each face"), implying that, just as everyone has their own unique face, they have their own unique likes and dislikes, and their own methods of expression. In this context the use of plates, cups, and even spoons and forks of varying sizes and shapes in daily life seems completely natural and proper. But in recent years, this natural preference for diversity has increasingly been viewed as a deficiency in our traditional music, and indeed, downright inconvenient.

Traditional Japanese music has always placed priority on the unique vocal timbre and range of each individual performer, which are prized for their constant variation. In this spirit, Japanese musicians never developed a fixed and standardized notational system for their art. Through the centuries, individualized art forms arose with their own styles and techniques, and new genres were developed such as *Gidayu*, *Tokiwazu* and *Kiyomoto shamisen* music, among others.

Compared with Western music, which entered Japan in the late 19th century, the native music that developed within the Japanese cultural milieu seemed to have no clear "result" and struck listeners who had adopted Western values as "immature" and "un-modern." These sentiments were crystallized in the comments of the American naturalist Edward Morse, who, in his book *Japan Day by Day*, noted: "From a foreigner's standpoint the nation seems to be devoid of what we call an ear for music. Their music seems to be of the rudest kind. Certainly there is an absence of harmony."

(3) "To Each His Own" in *Bugaku-hoe*

Bugaku-hoe, a traditional ritual that combines *bugaku* dancing with *shomyo* Buddhist chant, the sounds of Buddhist percussion instruments, and the sonority of *gagaku* court music, is perhaps the most straightforward example of the "to each his own" concept in Japanese music.

To produce the sound that typifies *shomyo* chant, for example, the performers must use their own individual vocal timbres. This preference is illustrated by the following anecdote: One student of Western vocal techniques who participated in a performance of composer Mayuzumi Toshiro's *Nirvana Symphony* in 1970 was told to sing a half-tone off to get the authentic sound of the original chant.

Once, when I took some college music students to listen to the sounds at the Zen temple Sôjiji in Kanagawa prefecture, the monks were truly disconcerted when the students chanted the *Heart Sutra* with their beautiful voices before eating their early, simple breakfast. So disconcerted, in fact, that they specifically asked the students not to match their pitch and vocal timbre to each other when chanting.

Because Japanese instruments are made by hand from natural materials, each instrument has its own unique timbre. Traditional Japanese transverse flutes have wide blowholes and finger holes that enable the player to vary the pitch considerably. In the case of the double-reeded *hichiriki* used in *gagaku* court music, the reeds are large compared with the length of the instrument, so that notes in the upper range can vary by as much as a perfect fourth depending on how the reed is played. The minute variations that occur in performance are precisely what give *gagaku* its distinctive sound.

In the piece *Enbu*, which serves as a prelude in *gagaku* performances, the instruments play a kind of canon, with each instrument playing in free rhythm. The "to each his own" approach

is especially evident here. Listeners who are used to the precisely matched tones and rhythms of Western music have a hard time appreciating the expressiveness of this piece, and apparently often conclude that it's merely sloppy playing.

(4) What One Hears in Combinations of Different Pitches and Timbres

I have a set of bells (the kind that often appear in the *ukiyo*e prints of Katsushika Hokusai) and some old horse bells that have the same shape as the first set. The small, forged-metal bells are in a cluster of about ten, each with a different pitch. I also own cast-metal bells made in Germany, but in their case each bell in the cluster has the same timbre and pitch. I attributed this contrast to the difference between forged and cast metal, until I thought about another set of cast-metal bells I have (similar bells, I've been told, date to the 16th century, the era of Uesugi Kenshin), which are made in different sizes and have different pitches. This fact seems to support the contention that the concept of "to each his own" is firmly embedded in Japan's aural culture.

Of course, it's possible to argue that the idea of combining disparate elements into a single whole applies just as well to Western orchestras that combine different types of wind and string instruments. But in the case of so-called classical music, instruments of the same type (like the flute section) make no attempt to play slightly out of tune with each other, nor do professional choruses allow hoarse-voiced baritones in their midst. The whole premise of creating an ensemble and mixing different elements in Western ensembles is very different from that of *shomyo*, *gagaku*, and other traditional Japanese ensembles. In the end, it's a matter of taste: in music, the Japanese have historically favored disparity, in contrast to the Western preference for uniformity.

Perhaps because of Japan's adoption of Western values, however, traditional Japanese instruments designed to produce

individualized tones and pitches (even when multiple instruments of the same type are played together) lost their status as musical instruments after the Meiji Restoration. Similarly, singing methods that valued individual voices were considered primitive and "pre-harmony," and were somehow no longer thought of as a means of musical expression. This state of affairs lasted roughly until the 1980s, when certain types of modern music appeared and the fields of cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology became more generally recognized. Unfortunately, however, the Western standard of "do-re-mi" music is still given precedence in Japanese school education even now in the 21st century.

Traditional Japanese music is increasingly being left in the hands of performers who have been educated on the basis of modern (Western) values. As a result, their music is becoming the norm, with less and less priority given to the charms of subtle differences in timing and tone. This is a very serious problem.

I personally believe that the true appeal of Japanese music resides precisely in the variation in pitch and timbre that makes it unique. This is why I feel so strongly that the current trend must somehow be reversed, and I have devoted a great deal of time and thought to the issue.

Of course, it's also true that the "to each his own" approach that typifies Japan's traditional auditory culture can lead to a loud and chaotic sound environment, which is probably why the streets and other public places in Japanese cities are so often filled to overflowing with annoying, unnecessary noise. I believe that the next step in the new development of Japanese music lies in honoring the beauty of individual voices while imposing some kind of unity upon them.

It is my hope and expectation that the National Theatre, which is now celebrating its 40th anniversary, will contribute to the rediscovery of the true nature of Japanese traditional music, and will take that next step toward ensuring its continuation.