

Introduction to Joruri (2003.10.15 lecture in Oslo)

Motegi Kiyoko

Music department of

Joetsu university of education



Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I am most grateful that you have come in such numbers to attend this evening's performance. But first of all please allow me to introduce myself to you: My name is Motegi Kiyoko. I am a musicologist and I teach about the traditional music of Japan at the National University in Niigata Prefecture.

The piece of music which you have just heard is called 'Manzai'.

This music is played at special festive occasions, more specifically to celebrate the joy of the new year, or the very old age of a specific person. The

precision of its melodic line as well as its well-marked rhythm present similarities with the music of the Western world.

Pieces of this genre are however not frequently found in the musical repertoire of 'Gidayu bushi'.



First of all I would like to explain to you the characteristics of 'Gidayu bushi'. Then the musicians will let you listen to some short fragments, illustrating what I have just explained to you.



The pieces which have been sung form the major part of the repertoire of the traditional music of Japan. As far as the instrumental music is concerned, this music developed as an inseparable element to the human voice. 'Gidayu bushi', much better known as 'joruri', represents the very essence of the vocal music of Japan. It applies to a long story in which the sung narration of the storyteller, (the tayu) is intermingled with the playing of the Shamisen.

It should be clear that the recitation of joruri, which is of a magnificent literary quality, hides a musical quality which is wonderfully apt to sung expression.

The relation between the human voice and the sound of the Shamisen is not the same as that of a song and the instrument 'accompanying' it: the two relate to each other as if they are on an equal level, a duo as it were, or sometimes a duel.

Originally the 'Gidayu bushi' consisted of a simple narration, combined with the music of the Shamisen. Consequently, when it became an integral part of the 'Bunraku' (the famous puppet theater), the text was enriched by a visual dimension which, in its turn, allowed for a more concrete expression.

The largest 'puppets' of the Bunraku theater are more or less my size, and each of them is manipulated by three 'operators' (puppeteers) who by means of a certain number of small mechanisms give it an animation which almost seems to give it human essence.

In the fundamental form of 'Gidayu bushi', the couple of narrator -- instrumentalist incorporates quite a variety of personages of all social levels, men as well as women, youngsters as well as the elder.

Equally well this couple portraits the psychology of these characters, the subtle variations in their sentiments and emotions. Of the different procedures which are used to give expression / to these personages, I mention the modification in timbre of the voice or the instrument, the variations in tempo in one and the same melody, the change of sound-register, or even the addition of ornamentations which are graft upon the fundamental melodic scale.

Using his face as a resonator-box, the narrator is capable of creating a complete gamut of vocal expressions. The Shamisen, however, has only three strings and, quite different from a guitar, it has no frets. However, it is exactly this simple construction, which gives way to almost infinite possibilities at the level of sonority and interpretation.

In the musical expression of the 'Gidayu bushi' the characteristics are neither the chanting of a beautiful melody, nor the production of a correct sound, nor the faithful indication of a given rhythm. First and foremost is the importance of underlining the content of the story, in such a way that it will be understood by the audience, as well as of the psychological setting and the context in which the story is to be perceived.

In the case of a performance of 'ningyo-joruri', traditional Japanese puppet theater, each puppeteer is always responsible for the same 'marionette'. On the other hand the couple of narrator hamisen-player is replaced at each scene. Consequently, the narrative part corresponding with the role of one and the same puppet returns in the course of the scenes with the narrator each of whom disposes of a specific vocal timbre and range. In this way, like at the opera, the incarnation of a protagonist was entrusted successively to several singers.



Why this practice? That is because of the fact that the pleasure of the audience prevails over the interpretation which each narrator will give to this or that scene.

Not only the voices of the narrators -- now sharp, then grave, then again hoarse -- are different from each other: also the musicians playing the Shamisen are aiming at diversity as much as possible, thus giving much variety to their interpretation, but they are also choosing, according to the type of repertoire, thicker or thinner strings or skins for their instrument as well as heavier or lighter plectrums.

In our daily life in Japan we perceive as 'pleasing to our ears' all kinds of sounds which are evoked by nature: the rustling of rain, the whistling of the wind through the foliage, the murmuring of the river, and the grumbling of the waves. Thus in Japanese music, talking about for instance a nice melody, we tend to use expressions like: 'it is in harmony with the sound of the wind in the pine trees', or with the sound of the waterfall'.

Each of these sounds has its own characteristic color, which is often mixed with some extra noise. Like the other traditional music genres, the Gidayu bushi is tributary to this concept of sonorities. That is why we feel that these extra noises, combined with a given tone, give an extra addition to the musical expressiveness. At the other hand however, a tone which is in all clarity perceived by its pitch seems to be simplistic and without emotion.

In the middle of the 1880s, Germans and Americans who visited Japan noted their impressions about Japanese traditional music in their reports and diaries. For example, sounds of Japanese vocal music is like the cry of a cock, musical instrument's sounds are like the noise of a wooden sliding shutter. And still worse, one of them wrote that he could not find any music in Japan at all. These Western visitor's estimation much influenced our music education until the 1960s. And most of the music teachers in Japan have been thinking that our traditional music was inferior to western music.

Fortunately however, through the works of composers of the twentieth century (like Erik Satie, Edgar Varese, John Cage, and Mauricio Kagel), various kinds of sound and timbre, and various ways to realize these musical sounds and the compositions in which they appeared, at last we came to have a better opinion and feeling for our own traditional music.

And now, we are very pleased to be able to present this evening, here in Oslo, he 'Gidayu bushi', the incarnation of a sound culture on which Japan is really proud.

Two performers will now join us in order to give you some examples which illustrate the style of 'Gidayu bushi'.

Mr. Toyotake Mutsumidayu does the narrative part, while Mr. Toyozawa Tomisuke will play the Shamisen. (performance)

The narrator is now going to show you in succession different kinds of voices corresponding to different characters. To start with he will, as if it were a dialogue, present the voice of an old lady, mother of a warrior, and then that of the wife of this warrior (performance)

And now you are going to listen to the voices of two warriors, at first one from a distinguished family of good birth (Moritsuna), while the other is an example of a person of fearless and unaffected mind [Wada Byoei] . (performance)

Let us now have a look at some respiratory techniques with the narrator.

In the case of this essential element of expression in the narration, you will have to realize that the way of inhaling plays an equally important role as the exhalation. Especially the expressive action of laughing clearly shows the technique of inhaling. We have chose to present to you the big laughter of a daring warrior who tries to expose his prestige and physical power. (performance)

I am sure that you have succeeded in distinguishing the passages in which the voice is generated by inhalation.

Let us now turn to the Shamisen. Its role is more particularly to be a prelude to a scene, to evoke its environment and atmosphere. To this end the Shamisen-player plays the same melody in different ways, so that at first it brings us to the residence of the noble family and then to the house of the common folks.(performance)

You will see that the Shamisen is capable of producing sounds of which the gamut is much richer than the diatonic scales. The example that we have chosen evokes by its sonorous transposition the gestures of a rower who manipulates his scull in the opposite direction. (performance)

The strokes on the skin of the Shamisen give an extra richness to the sounds of this instrument. One and the same melody gets a totally different color when the instrumentalist uses his plectrum with heavy force or when he is satisfied by just letting the strings vibrate softly. (performance)

During the course of a musical piece the variations in gamut and tone color are made very often, which causes the instrumentalist to change the bridge while playing. This will also be the case in the piece which will be performed in a moment, and I would like to ask you not to be surprised: it is an intended action, not something that happens to happen by accident.

Finally let us state precisely the major role of the Shamisen, which is to support the evolution of the extended narration, which the Joruri is a narration of which the development is marked by variations n respiration and tempo. That is why it is so important that the musician knows how to use well his expiration. In fact, the respiratory techniques are of great influence on all the

expressive rhythmic modifications which contribute to the precision of the interpretation.
(performance)

After my introduction, we have 20 minutes intermission, and then, today's piece of the Gidayu bushi repertoire, "Moritsuna", begins. The music which you are going to hear will be executed by three different narrators and three different Shamisen players in succession.

I hope that you will be able to catch the differences which separate it from the piece which was presented at the beginning, and that you will fully enjoy the charm of the traditional vocal music of Japan.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

