

Research  
Meeting of All Private Junior and High School Teachers

in Niigata Prefecture no.30” Arai City , Niigata 2003

Special Education

Committee

Theme: Diversity in Private Schools for a New Age

## **An Experiment in the Use of Traditional Japanese Sound Sources**

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### **1. Introduction**

It's been twenty years since I first came to teach in Joetsu. My research is currently focused on Japanese music. I started out my academic career in Western music, but my mentor in college, Professor Fumio Koizumi, taught me that world music could be approached from many different perspectives. I was so excited by the possibilities he presented to me in class that I decided to begin studying Japanese music. During my years in graduate school, I began working in the production office of the National Theatre of Japan, and continued to work there for about six years after I received my graduate degree. During my tenure there I assisted in the production of virtually all types of traditional Japanese performance art, ranging from folk forms to courtly *gagaku*. It was after this experience that I came here to teach. Currently, I'm involved in something that's quite different from what people normally think of as "regular" music. Although my original background is in Western music, the various musical experiences I have had over the course

of my career have led me to experiment here in Joetsu with practical musical education from a wider perspective.

In Japan today, music education is based on Western music and instruments, which have been adopted as a standard. When Japanese music and culture are measured by that standard, we can find no point of entry. In fact, however, the world is full of music that embodies many different values. Just as every country has its own unique culture, each has its own mode of expression through music. In my work, I've been motivated by a desire to convey to college students an idea of the diversity of world music, which I learned myself during my college years.

## **2. Diverse Values: The Example of Music Education in Schools**

In cultural exchange outside the realm of music, it is of course also possible to foster diverse viewpoints and value systems. Currently, my university is hosting two exchange students, one from Germany and the other from the Netherlands. Soon after they arrived in August, they asked me about a strange noise they were hearing outside every night. When I asked them to describe it, I soon realized that they were talking about the buzzing sound of cicadas. Their question was no surprise to me; in fact, exchange students and researchers from Europe and the US are often puzzled by the sound. It seems that, though cicadas exist in Europe, they apparently make no sound.

As this simple example demonstrates, people in different places get used to different things in their everyday lives. Visitors who saw a Japanese fish-grilling rack, for example, asked me to tell them what it was. It's not

that they don't grill fish in their own countries; it's simply that the tools they use, in this and many other instances, take a different form. This suggests that cultural exchange can help to instill diverse values, whether it be cuisine, clothing, or even religious beliefs...

Because my specialty is music, I want to see my students develop a diversity of values through a musical medium. For example, it's often said that to be considered music, sound must have the following three characteristics: melody, rhythm, and harmony. According to many people, music is sound that is free of noise. These definitions, however, do not apply to the traditional music that the Japanese have developed and enjoyed through the ages.



I have brought with me today an African thumb piano, also known as a *sansa*. I'd like you to hear what it sounds like. The friend that found it for me said it was a strange object and wondered if it could even be called a musical instrument. As you can see, it's covered with bottle caps. Let's hear how it sounds. (*Play*

*sansa*)

So, is this an instrument? Instruments are supposed to produce melodies, but this has no clear tone. And yet, for Africans, this is an important musical instrument. And if you ask an African why the bottle caps are attached, he'll tell you it's because it creates a richer timbre.

There are many instruments like this *sansa* in the world that are intentionally designed to include noise as a component of their tone. In fact,

most Japanese instruments are like this. The fact that an instrument does not produce a clear scale doesn't mean that it isn't an instrument. If one requires an instrument to have a clear and precise tuning, or expect it to produce a clear melody, or create harmony, or beat out a precise rhythm, how does Japanese music measure up? How do Japanese instruments measure up? Japanese music doesn't depend on a written score. It's not based on a tempered scale. (*Play a traditional bamboo **shinobue** flute*)

This is the scale produced by a traditional Japanese flute called the *shinobue*. It doesn't produce a tempered Western scale. The scale it does produce makes it ideal for use in Japanese festival music. But when judged by the standards of European music, it's "out of tune," Therefore, beginning in the 1960s, the Japanese began to manufacture flutes under Western influence that play a tempered scale, like this. (*Play a modernized **shinobue** flute*) As you can hear, it produces a very nice Western scale. But Japanese instruments are not the only ones that do not produce a tempered scale when played. Take Indonesian instruments, for example. This is a glockenspiel-like gamelan toy that I bought in Bali. Usually, if you see an instrument like this, you expect it to produce a tempered scale, but this instrument is different. (*Play*) The scale it does produce, which is constructed by dividing the octave into seven equal steps, is what gives the music its distinctive Indonesian character.

There are many ways to make a scale. And many ways to create



at the same time  
"timbral



harmony, as well.  
Here's an example  
of Japanese  
harmony. (*Play an*

*old bell tree "Suzu"*) It  
consists of many  
different pitches played  
to produce what I call a  
harmony." In Japanese

music, special attention is paid to the timbre of the voice or instrument, and reverberation is given priority over rhythm. Just imagine the sounds of the gongs used on Buddhist altars or the tolling of a temple bell. They are hit once, and the reverberations are allowed to continue for as long as they are audible.

If we stop to consider the concepts behind Japanese or Indonesian music, we arrive at a very basic question: just what is music, anyway?

In India, music that is played from a written score is considered less exalted than improvisational music, and it's rare to find a rhythmic sense in which the music continues at a steady pulse of 4/4 or 3/4 time. In Indian music, the most important things are the least common multiple and greatest common factor, and musicians must be able to play with these kept in mind. Now, there is a principle that an eight-beat phrase provides a common sense of stability to music lovers throughout the world, and Indian music is no exception. Like many other forms, it has a standard unit of eight beats. Take the sitar, for example: a stringed instrument that is often played with *tabla*, a

two-drum set consisting of a small *dayan* drum and larger  *bayan* drum. In the course of performance, the drummer plays in groups of five beats, while the sitar player plays in groups of three. The least common multiple of three, five and eight is 120, and it is at this juncture that all of the phrases—the underlying eight-beat unit, the five-beat unit of the drummer, and the three-beat unit of the sitar player—all end at the same time. The persuasiveness of the performance hinges on how well the musicians sustain the tension leading up to these major sectional divisions, and this is achieved through improvisation.

In Islamic countries, the scales include tones that lie between the notes of a tempered scale. There are tones, for example, that lie between a C and a C#. Singers must be able to clearly distinguish these subtle notes. In music school, vocal students are tested on how well they subtly bend notes, and fail the test if they cannot do so.

These examples demonstrate how unproductive it can be to apply Western musical standards to non-Western musical traditions. Measured by Western standards, the music of many countries can only be considered out of tune, without rhythm, full of noise, and without harmony. Obviously, this is ridiculous. It's just that the world contains many different kinds of music. It is my belief that, by teaching my students that any object that makes a sound can be considered a musical instrument, they can be trained to think in original ways. There are many factors that need to be considered, such as: how should a given instrument be played? Should the melody be cyclical or through-written? Are there strong and weak accents in the rhythm? Should the tempo be steady throughout? Should noise be included as part of the

timbre? Parameters like these come into play, even when deciding how to sing.

One exchange student I know from Amsterdam said he wanted to study Buddhist music. When he started actually chanting Buddhist *shomyo* chant, he told me that everything that the priests do when chanting violates the rules he learned when he studied choral singing in Amsterdam. He is currently studying the *shomyo* chant of the Tendai sect, which does have a scale. However, to chant *shomyo* well, the notes must be connected with glissandi, something that is frowned upon in Western singing. In this case, Western and Japanese standards of good singing are diametrically opposed. For students who have found it difficult to get good grades in Western music class, this is good news: they can improve their standing by studying Japanese music, or perhaps the music of other non-Western countries. If they have trouble with Western harmony, perhaps they'll do better with producing the varied timbre required by other types of music. Indeed, by studying Japanese music, students who have always hated music class may find that they will enjoy an entirely different world of sound.

### **3. The Adaptability of Japanese Music and Its Emphasis on Individual Expression**

One of the most fascinating things about Japanese music is its adaptability, as you will see in the following video.

The tape shows a scene from a kabuki dance called *Fuji Musume* (*Wisteria Maiden*), performed by kabuki actor Bando Tamasaburo. As you will see, there is no conductor directing the musicians. (*Show tape.*) The dancer has withdrawn upstage to change his costume, and there's no way to

tell exactly when he will come downstage again to resume the dance. While the costume change is taking place, the musicians must continue to play. The lead *shamisen* player plays and waits, watching the dancer for his cue. In kabuki, the lead musician decides when to end the ensemble playing while taking his cue from the dancer.

I myself have had a performance experience that illustrates this point in a slightly different way. I was once asked on short notice to play *kokyū* (bowed lute) in a performance of the dance *Cho no Michiyuki* (*Travels ? ? of a Butterfly*) presented at the Asakusa Kokaido hall. The piece ends with the butterfly dancer circling several times and falling to the floor in a sequence that is accompanied by the *kokyū* and other instruments. I was playing from the score, but on that day the dancer suddenly fell to the floor earlier than expected. The *shamisen* players were watching and stopped on cue, but, because I had learned the piece through a written score, I had no idea how to end my part early. The quick ending to the dance was nothing remarkable for the other players, who were used to adjusting their playing to match the action on stage. After the show, one of them came up to me and joked, "That butterfly sure died fast today, didn't it?"

It's under conditions like this that musicians who rely on written scores find themselves unable to adapt to what's happening on stage. As we saw from the kabuki dance video I just showed you, the overall length of a given piece will change depending on the dancer. Applying the same principle to the musicians, the vocalization method and instrument will also change depending on the performer. This is how different schools and modes of performance come into being. The essential musical structure remains the

same, but differences emerge in a thousand performance details. This may be a phenomenon unique to Japan, which, if we look at the commercial sector, has many regional products that can only be found in their own, limited geographical area. This acceptance and approval of diversity has generated many genres of performance art, in the same way that it has given rise to a plethora of different products today.

But what exactly does "diversity" mean in a musical context? Well, it means different materials used to make instruments. Different performance methods. Different folk music traditions. Different folk instruments. Different vocal qualities. When practicing Western choral singing, the first goal is to study voice production in an effort to get all participants to produce the same tonal quality. But in traditional Japan, the ideal was for each voice to be uniquely its own.

My field of specialty is the *yoruri* singing style that accompanies the *bunraku* puppet theater. Each singer that performs has a unique vocal quality. In contrast to opera, in which it is assumed that the same person will play a given role from beginning to end, the singer/narrator and *shamisen* player in *bunraku* puppet theater typically change from scene to scene. In fact, a significant part of the audience's enjoyment comes from listening to how different performers interpret the same role.



Photo: Sujoruri concert in Rome 2003 (supported by Japan foundation)

Performer: TakemotoTsukomadayu (left), Takezawa Sousuke (right)

The same principle applies to Buddhist chant. Some time ago, when I was teaching at the Tokyo College of Music, I took my students to

participate in meditation exercises at **Soji-ji**, a temple of the Soto sect of Zen Buddhism. When the students began chanting the **Hannya** sutra in unison, they were asked by a priest to stop singing together like a chorus. Instead, he urged each of the students to concentrate on singing in his or her own voice. As this example illustrates, the musical culture of Japan places priority on bringing many disparate sound sources together to create an extremely rich world of timbre.

Next, I'd like to show you an example of how performers learn their craft through individualized training. (*Show example of **shoga** mnemonic syllables.*) This shows a portion of the *Wisteria Maiden* dance I played for you earlier and recreates how each instrumentalist learns the rhythms for his part. In traditional Japanese music, instrumental melodies are learned through a system of sung syllables called **shoga**. In the case of the shamisen, this method is also called **kuchi-jamisen**, or "mouth shamisen." Once the melody is memorized as a set of sung mnemonic syllables, it is actually applied to the instrument. This is how the same melody sounds when actually played on a shamisen. (*Show tape of same dance portion in actual performance.*)

My next example demonstrates how the same song can be sung differently by different performers. This is taken from a research project I conducted with saké brewmasters in Niigata



Prefecture. (*Show tape of brewmasters' songs.*)

One of the wonderful things about traditional breweries is that each wine maker has his own song.

In this next scene, they are working together to wash the rice. (*Show rice-washing song*). The workers are required to keep the same rhythm, but are free to sing any notes they like. Also, each worker is encouraged to sing in his own distinctive voice, so that the foreman can hear who is working. The signal to stop the song comes when the words "tobacco" or "pipe" are sung. Because all of this is improvised, each worker must be sensitively attuned to the leader and react to his cues.

In Japanese music, the sound comes before the notation. Through the process of assimilating the music into their bodies, students also acquire the ability to change and adapt their performance to meet outside needs. From the examples I've shown you from kabuki and saké-making songs, I think you can see that the Japanese place priority on maintaining an individualized role for each participant and creating a whole out of many disparate parts. Traditionally, they have not placed priority on making sure all participants conform to a single performance standard.

For the past ten years or so, I have been working with 50~60 brewmasters like those shown in the video in an attempt to preserve their singing tradition. Last year, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology gave me the opportunity to spend six months in Germany. Wanting the Germans to hear Japanese wine-making songs and to encourage an exchange involving German beer-making songs, I arranged for about ten Japanese brewmasters to visit Germany. Unfortunately, however, there are no beer-making songs in Germany now, although there may have been in the past. It seems that the practice of singing while working is also a special characteristic of Japanese culture. One of the reasons that the

Japanese like karaoke so much surely lies in the fact that we have traditionally had a vast repertory of songs to sing. Despite this musical past, in which the Japanese sang and enjoyed songs at every opportunity, today's Japanese have lost their freedom and confidence after being told that they can't make music unless they can read a score and sing in tune.

The brewmasters I work with never considered themselves to be good singers. When I pointed out to them that they were the only ones in the world who could authentically sing their songs, however, they soon formed a better opinion of their musical abilities and can now be found performing in various venues throughout Japan. (See [www.uni-bamberg.de/ppp/ethnomusikologie/pdf-Files/Sake-Arbeitslieder](http://www.uni-bamberg.de/ppp/ethnomusikologie/pdf-Files/Sake-Arbeitslieder))

Let me play you another example of music made through the combination of disparate elements (*Play the CD Japanese Traditional Sound Sources by Kiyoko Motegi, published by Ongaku no Tomo-sha*).



The bird calls you hear on this CD are made by a collection of Japanese bird whistles and other flutes. The CD is included with a book I published about Japanese sound sources. I collected various types of bird whistles and flutes, asked composers to write some compositions for them, and arranged for them to be performed. One thing I found out in the process, however, was how difficult it was to create pieces using Western compositional techniques. Since each instrument only produces one sound, the only way to create a melody was to have one performer play ten or more instruments in succession. It was then that I

realized that, rather than try to create a melody, Japanese musicians concentrate on creating pieces based on timbre. It's precisely because each instrument has its own unique voice that their combination is so appealing. This is the world of Japanese music.

#### 4. Training in Japanese Music: An Emphasis on Process

My university, Joetsu University of Education, has elementary and middle school teachers enrolled as graduate students. Today, the phrase "Japanese music" generally means koto, shakuhachi and shamisen music. In a class I recently taught, however, we experimented with sound sources that



have a closer relationship to people's daily lives, and used them to investigate the adaptability of Japanese music. (*Show video of graduate school class.*)

I brought in instruments like the ones you see here today, and we proceeded to talk about various issues while looking at them. The students then began experimenting with making sounds through trial and error. For me, the important thing in this class was not the composition and performance of a piece, but rather the thought process itself.



As a result, we completed several performances. The most interesting thing was that each group of students came up with a different approach. One group

experimented with Western musical structure to see how it differed from Japanese musical structure. A group that had a Brazilian exchange student for a member created a samba. Others experimented with clearly defined rhythms, or concentrated on timbre without a clear rhythm in the Japanese manner. This is the kind of experimentation we engage in at the university.

## **5. Conclusion**

The important things in Japanese music, and indeed in Japanese culture generally, are to try out different things in innovative ways, to create variations from a single starting point, to acquire diverse ways of thinking, and to develop the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. This is the essence of our traditional culture, from which was born the culture of Japanese technique.

We're not used to creating something from scratch. But once something has come into being, the Japanese have proven themselves to be very good at adding value to it. By experiencing traditional Japanese music, one can come into direct contact with this feature of our culture.

I believe that it's time for us to free ourselves of the standards that tell us that people cannot make music unless they read a five-line staff; that people can't sing in a chorus unless they do voice training exercises; that people can't play in instrumental ensembles unless they can match pitches exactly. I believe it's time for us to base our music education on a different standard.

In my graduate classes this time, I placed priority not on composing finished pieces, but rather on the process of composition itself, requiring only that participants give a final report on what they thought about as they underwent that process. Until now, music education in Japan has focused too tightly on competitive performance results, whether it be instrumental or choral presentations. Because of this, we've lost sight of the meaning of learning through a classroom process. True music education is not fixated on results. The important thing is developing a mental approach to sound through the learning process. Through experimentation with sound using trial and error, students can develop their ability to think, and learn to adapt their results to various circumstances and requirements. Conventional music education seems to have forgotten to ask the most basic of all questions, which is: What is music for? I believe that conducting Japanese music education in the ways suggested by the examples I have shown you today is a very effective way to reconsidering this basic question.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.