

## **Thoughts on the Teaching of Japanese Traditional Music in Schools**

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### **1. A New Mandate to Teach Japanese Music in Schools**

In fiscal 2002, the government introduced new official curriculum guidelines that were universally implemented. One of the major changes made in the old guidelines was the requirement that Japanese instruments and singing techniques be used in music class. Specifically, middle school educators are expected to: 1) use at least one traditional Japanese instrument during the three years of middle-school; and 2) include materials that will encourage students to experience the beauty of Japanese culture and language. Similarly, elementary school teachers are expected to: 1) introduce materials to encourage the appreciation of Japanese music (including *shakuhachi* and *koto* music); 2) select percussion instruments in each grade that represent both Japan and other countries; and 3) include Japanese children's songs and folk songs in vocal music classes. There can be no doubt that these additional requirements have caused some consternation among many elementary and middle school teachers. However, we must not forget that a small minority of teachers in middle and high schools have been actively incorporating Japanese culture and music in their curricula for many years.

On the college level, only a few private music schools have shown a positive interest in incorporating Japanese music in their course offerings in recent years. In nearly all universities that offer music-related courses, training in Japanese music performance has been at best an ancillary concern. In national universities of education in particular, teachers of Japanese music performance have been extremely few in number and have generally been hired on a part-time basis. Therefore, students at these universities, who in turn became teachers in public schools, have been focused

almost exclusively on Western music performance, leaving them ill-equipped to provide their students with guidance in Japanese music.

In the case of my own university, from the first stage, I took the rather bold step of calling the Japanese music classes "Instrumental Music" and "Solo Vocal Music." I did not want to use special terms "Wa Gakki" or "Hougaku", because I wanted to emphasize that Japanese genres are no more and no less instrumental or vocal than any other type of music, and that all should be treated equally. With regard to vocal music, I decided to take on the part-time task of teaching on an experimental basis, with the intention of providing instruction that is different from the usual practice of singing Japanese songs with Western vocal techniques.

This time, therefore, I would like to place the focus on the following two basic issues:

- 1) What is important for teaching Japanese music?
- 2) What elements of Japanese music should be taught?

## **2. What is Important for Teaching Japanese Music?**

I would like to emphasize that, in teaching Japanese music, the important point is to teach the special characteristics of expressive methods used to create the music. Similarly, it is important not to apply the standard values of Western music, which have tended to be given priority in music classes. For me, those values include the ideas that:

- 1) Melody, harmony and rhythm are essential to music.
- 2) All participants should match their pitch and rhythm when singing in chorus.
- 3) Music should be based on a Western tempered scale.
- 4) The purpose of practicing vocal and instrumental music is to perform composed pieces.

If the standards I have listed above are rigidly applied to Japanese music, we are led to conclusions such as the following:

- \* Instruments that do not stay "in tune" make it difficult to create harmony and should therefore not be used.
- \* The holes in a traditional *shakuhachi* do not produce uniform notes; therefore the holes should be modified. Similarly, traditional *shinobue* festival flutes should be replaced with modified flutes that can play a "regular" tempered scale.
- \* Because it's best to have everyone singing exactly together, choruses should be led by conductors.

- \* *Koto* players must tune their instruments before class in order to play. Japanese instruments are inconvenient because they take a long time to tune.
- \* Since the only purpose of the *koto* is to play a melody, it should be no problem to shorten the left side of the instrument, which has no bridges.
- \* Musical notation should be standardized, preferably in the form of a five-line staff.

Even if traditional Japanese instruments such as the *koto* or *shamisen* are used under such conditions, students will not be learning Japanese music. If a *koto* piece is performed in 4/4 time under the guidance of a conductor, or if the instrument is re-tuned to a tempered scale in order to play a piece by Vivaldi, it simply results in the performance of Western music on a *koto*. That might have been interesting 30 years ago, but times have changed. Traditional *koto* music already has its own perfectly acceptable numerical notation and system of mnemonic syllables that enable performers to learn and play pieces. I have serious reservations about converting those systems into 5-line staff notation just because people erroneously feel it's easier to understand. When people say it's "easier to understand," aren't they really saying that teachers find it difficult to teach any other way? From my own experience, I know that students who have trouble reading five-line staff notation can be helped by using numerical notation instead.

To take another example, let's consider the *shinobue* festival flute. It already has its own tuning. There is no need to purchase, at higher cost, flutes whose hole sizes have been modified in order to produce a tempered, Western scale. Doing so perverts the essential nature of Japanese music instruction from the start. Many justifications are given for this modification: people complain that traditional flutes don't match the pitches of other instruments, or say they want the scale tones to match, or want each hole to produce a tone that's uniform with all the other tones. But no one asks the basic question: Why is it important to have a uniform sound? Why must all instruments be tuned to the same scale? In my view, the ideas of uniformity and homogeneity are in themselves foreign to the values of Japanese culture, and by extension foreign to the values embodied in Japanese musical instruments. Consider the Japanese phrase, *meimei chawan*, which means "personal teacup." The idea behind *meimei*, which might be translated "to each his own," is a wonderful expression of traditional Japanese culture, and the very symbol of a time when each Japanese could freely assert his or her own unique personality. There is no reason why we can't also have *meimei* music, and

n fact, it's no exaggeration to say that the unique sound we associate with Japanese music is born when a variety of individual timbres and pitches are brought together and heard simultaneously.

### 3. What Elements of Japanese Music Should Be Taught?

In setting about teaching Japanese music, what exactly should be taught? At this juncture, I'd like to propose the following three approaches.

- 1) Concentrate on the unique timbre of each Japanese instrument used.
- 2) Take care to preserve characteristic melodies and scales.
- 3) Avoid homogeneity and uniformity.

**Let's talk about timbre first.** The different timbres produced by different instruments are important for the creation of timbral harmony. In Japanese music, harmony is made not by manipulating different simultaneous pitches, but by manipulating different textures of timbre. This approach can be clearly perceived in such genres as *gagaku* court music and *shomyo* Buddhist chant, but it is perhaps experienced in its most extreme form in the drum and flute music played at festivals such as the *Gion Matsuri*, or in folk performance arts where several flutes tuned to slightly different pitches play at the same time.

To emulate this type of timbre, one can use several soprano recorders with the lengths of their upper sections adjusted to create different tunings. When they are played together, they create a sound that's similar to that of the *ryuteki* flutes used in *gagaku* music.

It's also fun to collect and use bird whistles, toy drums, bell trees, clickers, and other sound sources one encounters in daily life. When toy flutes of different pitches are played together, they create a truly fascinating timbral harmony. However, to succeed in this approach, the teacher must have a well-developed and rich sense of sound.

**Next, let's talk about melody.** In traditional Japanese music, the important thing is not so much precise pitches as it is the way in which the performer moves from one pitch to the next, via a variety of ornamental techniques that include vibrato, glissandi, and grace notes. Melodies always include these ornaments, which is why the left hand, and the left-hand fingers, play such an important role in *shamisen* and *koto* performance. The main concern of performers on these instruments is not the production of a precisely tuned pitch, but the way in which the pitch is

approached, played, and then modified. This is why the left-hand part of the *koto*, for example, is extremely important. Although the strings are not directly played to the left of the bridges, that space is used to modify the notes with the left hand after or before and during the strings are plucked. Recently, a short version of the *koto* has been developed that eliminates this space to make the instrument more portable. It was no doubt designed to produce pitch-accurate melodies and harmonies. In teaching Japanese music, however, it is important to remember that the left-hand part of the instrument, which seems to have no particular purpose, does in fact play a crucial role in producing a typically Japanese sound.

**Let's turn now to the question of scales.** Japanese melodies are naturally constructed out of Japanese scales. These scales, however, differ markedly from the Western tempered scale. This fact is especially evident when it comes to transverse flutes. The flute used in the performance art of *noh*, for example, has a sleeve inserted inside the main tube between the blowhole and the first finger hole. This insertion results in the production of intervals other than an octave when notes are overblown, producing an eerie quality that heightens the mysterious atmosphere of *noh*. If Japanese flutes are modified to produce a tempered scale, the emotional quality of traditional festival music and the elegant beauty of *noh* are lost.

Several years ago, a middle-school teacher who was also a graduate student of mine was researching the *Kurokawa sansa* folk bon dance form of *Iwate* prefecture, north of Japan. One day she came to me with some very interesting information. She had discovered that many of the groups that currently perform *Kurokawa sansa* were switching to flutes that are tuned to the tempered scale, acting on the advice of a music teacher in Junior highschool.

Apparently, this teacher had told them that traditional flutes were not properly tuned, and sounds of traditional flutes are not clear, they should change to something that plays a "regular" scale. I've had similar experiences myself. At a conference I attended, a highly respected authority on music education said, "The scale of the Japanese *shinobue* flute is out of tune, after all." I remember begin shocked and flustered by this, and saying to him that no, it isn't out of tune, it's just tuned differently from a tempered scale. But why do people think it's out of tune? It's because they apply the standard of a tempered scale when they listen to Japanese music. I wish to point out here that, though perhaps done unconsciously, the application of Western musical norms threatens to distort the essential nature of Japanese instrumental music.

### **The Need to Avoid Homogeneity and Uniformity**

Another question we should ask is this: why do the notes on the traditional *shakuhachi* lack uniformity? I once attended a workshop on *shakuhachi* performance given by **Reibo Aoki**, a living national treasure. He said, "Some notes are difficult to produce on the *shakuhachi*, and I gave quite a lot of thought to finding ways to make all the notes sound the same, as they do in Western music. But then I realized that the very difficulty of some of those notes gave them a unique flavor, and therefore a special significance." In other words, instead of thinking of those notes as difficult, he came to emphasize their unique timbre.

*Shamisen* players who accompany the puppet theater change the thickness of their strings and the weight of their bridge depending on the piece being performed. The thickness of the skin used to cover the body of the instrument also varies depending on the individual performer. If everyone sings in unison when chanting *shomyo* Buddhist chant, it's not *shomyo*. In *gagaku*, it's that subtle difference in pitch between the *yokobue* flute and the *hichiriki* oboe that gives the music its distinctive character.

### **3. Learning How to Create a Variety of Timbres Generated by "Body-Specific Measurement"**

As we've seen, the practice of creating music by gathering individual components that conform to different standards is firmly rooted in Japanese culture. To describe this phenomenon, I'd like to use a term that was coined by **Yoshio Akioka**, a specialist in the field of ergonomics: "body-specific measurement." In traditional Japan, the length of a tool or accoutrement was modified to fit the body of the user. The way kimonos are measured provides a good example. In the case of musical instruments, as well, the size of the instrument and the materials used changed depending on the user. Similarly, the pitch at which a song is sung changes depending on the singer. The underlying principle is that the instrument or mode of production is modified to fit the person involved. Details concerning this phenomenon can be found in my article, *Getting to Know Japanese Traditional Music* (published in "Frontiers of Music Learning" issued by Tamagawa University Press (June, 2003 pp.123-148).

In elementary and middle schools, where time is limited and where the number of music classes is being cut, it's no doubt difficult to find enough time to provide adequate guidance concerning Japan's native musical culture. For this very reason, it might be better to focus attention on the learning process itself rather than on getting a piece ready for public performance. Tuning the strings of an instrument is part of the practical training involved in learning Japanese music. Creating a world of rich timbre by playing differently tuned flutes at the same time is likewise a learning experience. If this can be done without using a conductor, with all participants playing their own ways, it becomes possible to propose a whole new way of providing guidance in Japanese music education. I believe that it is this kind of focus that can change the direction of current result-oriented educational practices, and that this type of change is truly needed.

I also recommend that we go beyond such established instruments as the *koto* and *shamisen*, and pay more attention to the percussion instruments, flutes, whistles, and other small sound sources that are found all around us in our daily lives. The instrumental musical culture of Japan, which revolves around flutes and percussion instruments, is one of the richest in the world. And by percussion, I don't just mean conventional *taiko* drums. Bell trees, rattles, children's toys, and a host



of other instruments abundant in Japan, as one can see from the following photograph. If instructors have a broad vision, a strong sense of curiosity, and a flexibility that is not bound by any one value standard, it is possible to discover a limitless number of materials fit for use

in providing guidance in Japanese music. It is my hope that we can adopt this perspective as we teach our students, who will in turn become the teachers of the future.

