

# MUSIC

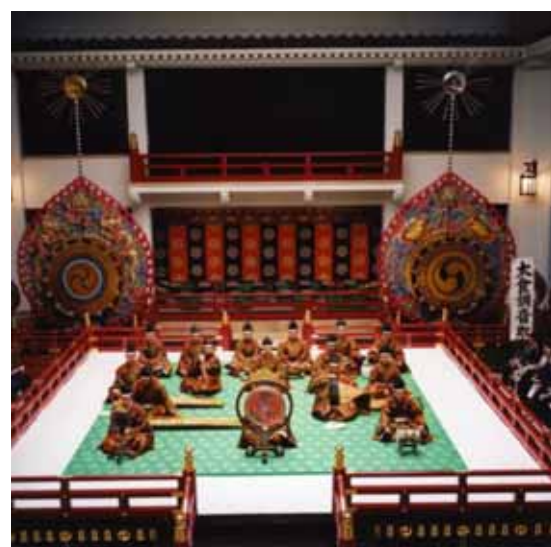
## Reflection of traditions from the East and West

Japanese music derives from an ancient tradition whose folk origins and early influence from the Asian continent are wrapped in the midst of history. It also comprises the associated musical tradition of Okinawa and the autonomous tradition of the Ainu people of Hokkaido.

### Gagaku

*Gagaku* is a type of music, strongly influenced by continental Asian antecedents, which has been performed at the Japanese imperial court for more than a millennium. *Gagaku* is made up of three bodies of musical pieces: *togaku*, said to be in the style of the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907); *komagaku*, said to have been transmitted from the Korean peninsula; and music of native composition associated with rituals of the Shinto religion. Also included in *gagaku* are a small number of regional Japanese folk songs, called *saibara*, which have been set in an elegant court style.

An extensive collection of musical styles was transmitted to Japan from the Asian continent during the Nara period (710–794). In the Heian period (794–1185), these were ordered into two divisions, *togaku* and *komagaku*, and performed at court by nobles and by professional musicians belonging to hereditary guilds. With the rise of military rulers in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), *gagaku* performances at court languished but the tradition was preserved in the mansions of the aristocracy and by three guilds of musicians situated in Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka. Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the guild musicians were assembled in



#### Gagaku performance

Musicians from the Imperial Music Department give a performance of *gagaku* instrumental concert pieces (*kangen*) in the grounds of the Imperial Palace. (Photo courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency)

the new capital of Tokyo. The musicians who serve today in the Imperial Palace Music Department are, for the most part, direct descendants of members of the guilds formed in the 8th century.

### Religious Music

The most prominent type of Japanese religious music is that of Shinto ritual. The earliest extant description of Shinto music, or *kagura* (music of the gods), is preserved in the myth of the sun goddess Amaterasu, who, having been offended by her brother, has hidden her light in the Rock-Cave of Heaven.



She is lured out by a dance set to music, performed by the goddess Ama no Uzume no Mikoto. The myth echoes the convention that the gods are invoked to witness a performance and, by so doing, revitalize the community. *Mikagura*, or court *kagura*, is distinguished from *sato kagura*, or village *kagura*, which comprises a range of local music associated with particular regions or shrines. Village *kagura* may be heard on the occasion of festivals, when musicians accompany their songs on transverse flutes and a variety of drums.

## Biwa, Koto, Shakuhachi, and Shamisen

The short-necked lute (*biwa*), the zither (*koto*), and the end-blown flute (*shakuhachi*) were all introduced from China as early as the 7th century, and were among the instruments used to play *gagaku*. The *shamisen* is a three-stringed plucked lute that is a modification of a similar instrument introduced from Okinawa in the mid-16th century. Combinations of these four instruments, along with the transverse flute (*shinobue*) and small and large drums, comprise the ensembles of traditional Japanese music.

**Shamisen**  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)



### The Biwa

In court music, the *biwa* plays simple figures to accompany the melodic instruments of the *gagaku* ensemble. Although the *biwa* never came to be used in solo instrumental performances, there is a record of its use by itinerant lay-priest entertainers (*biwa hoshi*) to accompany their recitations of stories. From the 13th century on, the most important work in this repertoire was the *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*), a lengthy history of the downfall of the Taira military clan at the hands of the Minamoto clan. The *biwa* is a four-stringed lute that is plucked with a large plectrum.

### The Koto

The earliest *koto* had only five strings (later six) and was about a meter long. In the Nara period (710–794), the thirteen-stringed *koto*, measuring about two meters in length, was introduced from China and used in the court music ensemble. The *koto* is made of paulownia wood, has a movable bridge for each string, and is plucked with picks attached to rings worn on the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand. The left hand is used to raise the pitch of strings or modify tone.

### The Shakuhachi

The *shakuhachi* is an end-blown bamboo flute with a notched mouthpiece. In the 7th century it had, like the Chinese model, six finger holes, but today has only five, four being placed equidistant on the front face with a thumb hole set into the rear face. In the late 17th century, the *shakuhachi* was taken up by the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhist priests, who established its playing as a spiritual discipline.

### The Shamisen

The *shamisen* was originally associated with the *kabuki* and puppet theaters of the Edo period (1600–1868). A variation of the Okinawa three-stringed lute (*sanshin*), *shamisen* come in many different sizes, varying from 1.1 to 1.4 meters in length. When the *shamisen* is played as an accompaniment to a singer, which is often the case, the fundamental pitch is set by the singer. Consequently, *shamisen* notation indicates interval, or *ma*, rather than pitch.

## Folk Songs

Japanese folk songs may be classified into four basic groupings: (1) religious songs, such as the Shinto *sato kagura* and the Buddhist Bon dance songs; (2) work songs such as



rice-planting and boatmen's songs; (3) occasional songs for parties, weddings, and funerals; and (4) children's songs, including both traditional pieces (*warabe uta*) passed down through the ages and songs (*doyo*) written in the 20th century by noted poets and composers. During the midsummer Bon festival, many Japanese, particularly in rural areas, dance and sing to local melodies played on *shamisen*, flute, and drum to welcome the spirits of their ancestors, who are thought to return for a few days each year to the world of the living.

## Music in Modern Japan

The Meiji government, with the intention of modernizing Japanese music, introduced Western music instruction in schools, and in 1879 Izawa Shuji, a government bureaucrat who had studied in the United States, commissioned songs which were written using a pentatonic melody derived by exclusion of a major fourth and seventh. He compiled these songs, along with Western airs of a similar tonal structure (such as "Auld Lang Syne") in a textbook, which was used in schools throughout the country. The gradual entrenchment of this pentatonic scale resulted in it becoming the basis for a genre of commercial music. Another type of Western music with broad appeal was the military march, which was introduced by the Meiji government as an element in its modernization of the Japanese armed forces.

In 1874, Japan's first political party was founded, and the call for direct election of a national parliament gained strength. Leaders, who were often prohibited from speaking in public, had songs written to air their message and singers walked the streets selling copies of the songs. This was the beginning of *enka*. The performers themselves gradually developed from street-corner political agitators into purveyors of sheet music and paid professional singers. Before the spread of radio and phonographs the *enka* singers were an important medium for the publication of music.

In the first half of the 20th century, Western influence on Japanese popular music gradually grew. However, while Western instruments came to be widely used, either exclusively or in combination with native instruments, melodies were still based on the Japanese pentatonic scale. The earliest commercial phonograph records in Japan date from 1907, and during the 1920s an increasing amount of popular music was recorded. In the 1930s jazz played a significant role developing a popular music scene in bars and clubs. Although it was banned in World War II, since then jazz has continued to have a relatively small but dedicated group of fans and native performers, some of whom (Watanabe Sadao, Akiyoshi Toshiko, etc.) are famous internationally.

In the postwar era, Japanese popular music has followed two distinct paths: one being J-Pop (see below) and the other being *enka*. Unlike the political *enka* of the Meiji period, modern *enka* ballads are concerned almost exclusively with lost love and nostalgia. Its most distinctive feature being the slow vibrato in which melodies are sung, *enka* continues to be very popular among Japan's older generation and is a mainstay of *karaoke* playlists.

## J-Pop

The term J-pop encompasses almost all genres of Western-influenced Japanese popular music. Setting a pattern for the import of each new Western pop music genre, the rock-and-roll boom sparked by Elvis Presley in the mid-1950s spawned a large number of home-grown rock-and-roll bands. The 1960s saw the development of both a Bob Dylan-influenced folk music movement and the "group sounds" movement spurred by the Beatles. Subsequently, pop music genres such as psychedelic rock, country rock, heavy metal, punk, reggae, funk, rap, techno and hip-hop developed their own followings and their own groups of Japanese performers. Since the 1970s, the commercial core of J-pop has evolved along two contrasting lines :

pop idols and the singer-songwriter genre.

Pop idols are often discovered by talent scouts, then undergo training in singing and dancing before making their debut either as a solo artist or in a group. In most cases, they appear in TV commercials and shows for a short time before retiring or disbanding. But some pop stars endure, like Matsuda Seiko who continues to release new hit songs more than 30 years after her debut. There are an increasing number of boy bands that are very popular mainly with young girls, especially groups such as SMAP, Kinki Kids and Arashi which are promoted by the agent Johnny and Associates.

The term singer-songwriters refers to individuals or groups who perform songs that they have written themselves and covers a wide range of artists from a variety of musical genres. In contrast to pop stars, even if their songs are used, they rarely appear themselves on TV shows. Yazawa Eikichi, Yuming, Southern All Stars, Chage and Aska, and B'z are some of the musicians whose popularity has endured over a few decades. Yellow Magic Orchestra, a 3-man techno-pop band who made their debut in the late 1970s, were well-known inside and outside Japan for their songs using computers and synthesizers. The 1980s saw a boom in so-called “*visual-ke*” bands typified by the band X-Japan. These were bands who played mainly heavy rock and metal, with an emphasis on the visual aspect of their performances, featuring dramatic make-up such as white skin with dark eye liner, blue lips, radical hairstyles in

**An orchestra**  
(Photo courtesy of  
Getty Images)



extreme red, blue or purple, or dressing in what looks like medieval women’s clothing. These unique visuals were copied all over the world and this became one of Japan’s most influential music genres.

Exile, a vocal and dance group comprising 14 men, and the pop group AKB48 with about 48 female members became popular in the world of J-pop from around 2005. Exile had many fans among both young men and young women, whereas AKB48’s fans are mostly men. AKB48 has a unique system of fan participation, and the appearance of individual members in the media is determined by fan voting. Another popular act, in the genre of techno-pop, is the three-person female group Perfume, which grabs attention with its unique dancing and vocals.

## Western Classical Music in Japan

By the early 20th century there were connoisseurs of Western classical music in sufficient numbers to attract the attention of European performers, some of whom came to Japan to give recitals or mount concert tours. In 1926, the New Symphony Orchestra was formed and, in 1927, regular performances began. In 1951, the orchestra was renamed the NHK Symphony Orchestra. Today, it is sponsored by the NHK Broadcasting Corporation and is Japan’s leading orchestra. Since 1950, the Japan Contemporary Music Association has held an annual festival to promote composition. Notable postwar composers include Dan Ikuma, who wrote a charming opera, *Yuzuru* (1952; *Evening Cranes*), based on a Japanese folk tale, and Mayuzumi Toshiro, who composed symphonic pieces inspired by esoteric Buddhism. Takemitsu Toru, a composer of respected avant-garde pieces, has also written music for the cinema and is known worldwide. Many Japanese musicians have gone abroad to study, and some, such as the conductor Ozawa Seiji, the violinist Goto Midori, and the pianist Uchida Mitsuko, have established enduring international reputations. Conductor Ono Kazushi and violinists Daishin Kashimoto and Sayaka Shoji have also done some brilliant work.