

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 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.

Gagaku performance

This performance of *gagaku* instrumental concert pieces (*kangen*) is being given on the grounds of the Imperial Palace by the musicians of the Imperial Court Music Department.

© Imperial Household Agency

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



Bugaku performance

Gagaku music is sometimes performed as accompaniment to a form of masked dance known as *bugaku*.

© Imperial Household Agency

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.

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

A performance of *sokyoku* (music for the koto)

From left are a *koto*, a *shamisen*, and a *shakuhachi*.
© Haga Library

the ages and songs (*dojo*) 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



Karaoke

Japan is the birthplace of *karaoke* (singing to recorded accompaniment). People enjoy *karaoke* in bars, at parties, at home, and even at the beach. The most elaborate systems display lyrics on a video monitor. Popular tunes include pop numbers and sentimental *enka* ballads.

© Haga Library

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, 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 a singer-songwriter genre originally referred to as “new music.”

The singer-songwriter side of this



dichotomy consists of individual singers and groups that perform their own material and, for the most part, guide their own careers. They tend to spend much of their time touring and appear relatively seldom on television. Performers like Yazawa Eikichi, Chage & Aska, Southern All Stars, Yuming, and B'z have remained popular for decades. A more recent example is rock/hip-hop group Orange Range, one of the many pop and rock acts to come out of Okinawa. Talented young R&B diva Utada Hikaru also falls into the singer-songwriter category.

On the other side of the divide are idol singers, who are generally recruited, trained, and marketed by talents agencies. Traditionally most idol singers have been young girls who are heavily promoted over a relatively short period (appearing in advertisements and TV commercials as well as on TV music programs), after which they tend to rapidly fade away. A long-lasting exception is top idol Matsuda Seiko, one of the bestselling Japanese singers of all time. In the 1990s very young girl groups such as Speed and Morning Musume became very popular. There is also a long tradition of cute boy bands, most of which (SMAP, Kinki Kids, KAT-TUN, etc.) have been products of talent agency Johnny's Jimusho.

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.

New National Theatre, Tokyo

Completed in 1997, the New National Theatre, Tokyo contains three theatres and a variety of other facilities. Shown here is the Opera House, which was built in standard European theater architecture to provide an ideal setting for the staging of grand opera. © New National Theatre, Tokyo

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

A chorus said to number 10,000 participated in this performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony given at the Osaka Castle Hall. © Yomiuri Shimbun

