

Discrepancies between the Historical Evidence and Oral Tradition of Japanese Court Music

Robert Garfias

Any study of Japanese music must take into consideration two strong tendencies in the culture. The first might be the predilection for preservation and, specifically as regards music, the preservation of cultural traditions. The other would then be the conflicting tendency to “keep up with the times.” When these conflicting ideas are applied to Japanese music traditions, one finds the pattern in history of an art flourishing then, as the culture moves in another direction, a few people are left to bravely continue the tradition in semi-isolation. With or without popular support, these arts, of course, become forcibly modified. However without this support, the change is more apt to take the form of deterioration.

For almost 800 years, *gagaku* has not been in any sense popular. In spite of this, a remarkable repertoire and oral tradition has been preserved which only illustrates the tenacity of the hereditary guild musicians to whom its preservation was entrusted. A look at the court musicians of today shows the strong, desire to preserve their tradition. Yet the need to show their awareness of the trends of the general culture, which in fact means westernization, is equally apparent. We can only surmise that during the long years when this music was not popular, this awareness was also manifested. It must be added however, that at least in the case of Japanese court musicians, the preservation drive is much stronger than that of cultural acceptance. They prefer to continue interpreting certain aspects of performance without change in spite of the fact that they are criticized as musically incorrect by

outsiders and even admitted as questionable by themselves simply because they were taught in this way. Such a situation would be unthinkable, for example, in Korea where the student might over time correct something musically unsound even though his teacher gave it to him.

Since *gagaku* has such a long history and so much of it has been documented in writings, and since in spite of its complex oral tradition we know that much of it has been modified and much deteriorated, any study, which concentrates either

on its ancient history, or its practice must take both the history and the practice into consideration. One complements and explains the other. Much of what I have to say here concerns the balancing of these two elements.

Preparatory research reveals that this music had various strata of complexity and that these strata could, to some degree, be considered individually. The first step was to learn to read the various notation systems, a different one for each instrument, as well as to learn



how to play the instruments. I was able to make use of an unusual manuscript, which gave the tablatures for all of the tonal instruments of the Togaku ensemble, Togaku being a term used to indicate the largest sub-division of *gagaku* repertoire. From this notation an analysis of the underlying melodic stratum was undertaken. This basic melodic function was fulfilled by three instruments, the *biwa*, a large lute, the *koto* or *so*, a zither of thirteen strings, and the *sho*, a small mouth organ. For each of these instrumental parts, the notation indicated only the basic melody. The

realization of these parts was highly formalized and regular, consisting of the addition of certain playing patterns and additional tones for each tone indicated in the tablature. The results of this preliminary investigation were an intimate familiarity with a large part of the repertoire as well as an understanding of the formal organization of the compositions and the underlying principle of modality.

The largest share of energy was needed for the slow time-consuming effort of learning the entire body of music literature on each of the instruments, a task which took the entire two and a half years that I spent in Japan. In this endeavor special attention was paid to the performance technique employed on two of the wind instruments, the *fue*, a transverse flute, and the *hichiriki*, a double reed pipe. Whereas the *biwa*, *koto*, and *sho* outlined the formal pattern and broad movement of the melody, it was in the *fue* and *hichiriki* line that the melody appeared in its most complete form and where the modal theory of *gagaku* was manifested to its greatest degree. The unique intonation system employed for these two instruments as well as the complex system of ornamentation and microtonal inflection made anything other than actual playing of the instruments and individual lessons out of the question

While there exist a number of *gagaku* musicians throughout Japan, it is the musicians of the Imperial Palace who trace their lineage back to the musicians of the seventh and eighth centuries when *gagaku* was first introduced from mainland Asia. These same musicians of the Imperial Palace, in fact, directly or indirectly, the teachers of most of the other *gagaku* musicians in the country and their repertoire is the most complete and most fastidiously performed one to be found. The greatest problem surrounding them is their inaccessibility. They are employed in the palace where entrance is forbidden except by special permission, which the musicians themselves can only alleviate, by an occasional entry pass. The only recourse was to work with the musicians in the evenings outside the palace, which required the entirety of most of the evenings of the week for

the period of my stay. It also involved some rather complex social commitments.

It should be added here that whereas the westerner attempting to do research in many countries in Asia often meets with enthusiastic amazement, there have been so many foreigners pouring out their fascination over Japan that the reaction of many Japanese tends rather to be one of bemused indifference. Even the study of *gagaku*, considered extremely esoteric in Japan, has attracted a considerable number of dilettantes and a number of reputable scholars such as Leopold Muller (1874-76), Eta Harich-Schneider, and Hans Eckardt. Needless to add, my arrival on the scene did not cause the sensation I had somehow hoped. In a situation such as this in which the culture has absorbed almost all the investigators that it cares to, there was no alternative but to continue with the private lessons until at last I was admitted into the palace music school regularly as an official student. I followed closely after a young Brazilian musician who was actually the first person from outside the palace to have been admitted formally to the palace. The value of the admission to the palace on a regular basis was great in that it allowed me to expand my circle of informants beyond my private teachers and now to include all the twenty-five musicians of the court. I was also able to witness rehearsals in the palace and to inspect a number of manuscripts to be found in the palace libraries.

One of the most glaring gaps in information before having made contact with the live tradition lay in the system of realization of the *fue* and *hichiriki* ornamentation from the notation. Even the first few compositions studied seemed erratic until a large part of the entire repertoire had been learned. Only then did the practice of sometimes using fingerings other than those indicated in the notation, the predictability of certain ornamental figures, and the use of inflected and uninflected variants of the same degree appear to follow some system of formal organization. The notation is only used by the court musicians as a mnemonic aid and in fact in their early training they are required to memorize a large part of the music before being allowed to use the part books. The notation itself is in three elements: a tablature

indicating the finger hole names for each instrument, a rudimentary indication of the metric structure, and a system of onomatopoeic sounds, which individually bear some resemblance to the tones indicated in the tablature but when considered in groups give a remarkably accurate outline of melodic contour. It is this system of onomatopoeic syllables that the musicians commit to memory and all discussions on the music are carried out in reference to them.

One of the most significant questions about *gagaku* that arises concerns the antiquity of the melodic ornamentation and consequently. In the eyes of many, it is authentic as well. Since these ornaments deviate from the Chinese theoretical tuning system as played by the *biwa*, *koto*, and *sho* and the deviation bears marked similarity to the melodic systems employed in the later theater and entertainment music genres, it is not without reason that these questions have been raised. The solution is not an easy one to find nor could any one factor be considered conclusive. Notation for the *hichiriki* and *fue* would not provide much assistance since even today, actual practice is not completely described in the notation. Older notation manuscripts for these instruments give only the finger hole names and no indication whatsoever of any ornamentation system at all. This has led some Japanese musicologists to assume that, in fact, no ornaments were employed. My own belief is to the contrary since after having played these instruments, I understand that it is much easier to maintain wind intensity and intonation with the addition of some ornaments.

One of the oldest examples of notation for the *koto* which dates from the twelfth century, the *Jinchi Yoroku* indicates, along with the basic melodic outline, the use of the left hand pressure on the strings to produce changes in pitch. This left hand technique is no longer employed by the court musicians of today, but the *Jinchi Yoroku* notation shows regular patterns of left hand pressure that correspond to those places in which the wind instruments produce melodic ornaments. Therefore, while the old manuscript cannot lead one to believe that the ornaments of the ninth to eleventh century are the same as those used today, it does indicate that some form of ornament was

used which was not included in the specific notation for the wind instruments and in this flexible state it might have been replaced by a more current type of melodic ornamentation.

Numerous instances could be cited to illustrate the importance of the historical works in throwing light on some of the mysteries of present practice. Some of the most relevant material on older methods of performance of *gagaku* is to be found in the works of the court musicians of the period when the first stages of deterioration of the tradition were noted by the musicians themselves. While these works were intended to preserve the disappearing body of knowledge, they in fact devoted much space to the repetition of anecdotes concerning music from older Chinese sources and the theoretical systems copied by rote from Chinese sources as well. Interspersed with those dry scholarly paraphrases one can find several passing references to intriguing aspects of practice which the chroniclers, no doubt, felt were undeserving of the dignity of more thorough treatment. One such remark concerns the fact that for the performance of the composition “*Goshoraku*” there were two families of flute players whose members could not perform together, so divergent were their traditions. Since the earliest examples of notation for wind instruments give only the tablature, the significance of this kind of discrepancy between guilds of musicians remains unknown, however, within the past two hundred years, several manuscripts appear which include both fingering names and the onomatopoeic syllables necessary for the understanding of the ornaments. By using the information gained from the histories in combination with the results of comparing part books belonging to different families of musicians, it was possible to ascertain that there were prior to the gathering together of all the musicians in Tokyo in the mid-nineteenth century, separate systems of melodic ornamentation for each of the three groups of court musicians. It was further possible to reconstruct a fair semblance of each of these styles by means of vestiges of their melodic ornaments that remain in the tradition of the present.

Paintings in several instances were useful in delineating the course followed by the

modifications in the tradition. Many works show scenes of performances of *gagaku* and one of the most remarkable of these is the “*Shinzei Kogakzu*,” a work dating from the fifteenth century that is perhaps the last of a series of copies going back to at least the eleventh century and perhaps earlier. Here are to be seen depictions of *gagaku* instrumentalists and dancers that would seem to show greater similarities to the dancers and musicians of the Korean court than to those of the Japanese court. This cannot be mere coincidence or artists’ fancy because there are too many points of notice; for example, the use of bare hands on the drums, a long thin *hichiriki* rather than a short wider one, the placing of the *koto* on the knee rather than on the floor in front of the player, the obvious use of the left hand on the *koto*, the *sho* held to the side rather than straight up and down, and even the position of the female dancers whose arched shoulders, relaxed arms, turned heads and slightly dipped position resemble more the court dancers of Korea than those of Japan.

Study of the instruments themselves from the eighth century collection in the Imperial Repository at Nara, the Shosoin, compared to those that are employed today, shows significant changes. The flutes, for example, from the eighth century are made of smooth hard pieces of bamboo which are left unbound in contrast to those flutes used today which are weighted at one end and are carefully bound with birch bark. A change of quality is effected here since in the older type flute, the natural pith of the inner part of the bamboo lines the inside of the instrument; whereas in the later flutes, the inside of the instrument is lacquered to produce a hard, brilliant tone. A change can be noted in the *sho* also. Instruments of even one hundred years ago have a larger bore and are much more difficult to play than those of today. The *sho* players of the Imperial court now can only with great difficulty play on these older instruments.

The overall tendency among modern court musicians is to play the wind instruments with a brilliant tone quality that emphasizes the higher partials and requires considerable wind pressure to produce. Great importance is given to tone quality, proper breathing, and attack, all of which

can only be fully understood through actual performance. In fact, it is necessary to spend considerable effort in trying to emulate these sounds before one begins to hear them as they are really performed. The *gagaku* musicians often spoke of *take no oto*, the sound of the bamboo, in connection with playing the wind instruments. This sound is heard at a change of fingering and produces an instantaneous flash of high partials as the finger closes the finger hole. These sounds add a live, almost electric quality to the performance and, without them, the effect is rather of a stiff, lifeless, ensemble.¹ Such techniques required prolonged practice and hearing to achieve and, while they add little to our knowledge of the musical structure, they are vital to an understanding of the aesthetic surrounding the music.

The information gained from reading through the literature of the Heian period (eighth to eleventh centuries), when *gagaku* was at its peak, often gives significant insights into musical practice. The *Genji Monogatari* includes hundreds of references to musical performances and ideas on music to which a lengthy study could easily be devoted. Among some of the most important items to be gleaned from this work is an indication of the separation of the musicians according to rank into nobles and commoners. It is especially interesting to note that rarely were the players of wind instruments members of the higher ranks. One reason is to be found in the diary of a court lady of the period in which she mentions an occasion when she heard the delightful sounds of an ensemble beginning to play when suddenly the *hichiriki* joined in and the shock made her hair stand on end. Another disadvantage was the fact that the player’s face had to become ridiculously

¹ I tried for months to understand the “sound of the bamboo” and to imitate without success. After touring the US with the court musicians for six weeks and hearing them play almost every day, I found that I was also making the “*take no oto*,” but could not understand how I had learned to produce it. It seemed to be the result of slight increase in air pressure as the finger is depressed on the next hole, which produces a sort of click as though there were a mechanical key on the instrument, like an oboe or clarinet.

distorted in order to produce the proper sounds on these instruments. The nobles tended to prefer the string instruments since one could play on them without cutting such an ungainly figure. This dichotomy continued up until the restoration one hundred years ago with very important results. The tradition of wind and percussion instrument playing was carried essentially by the hereditary guilds of musicians, who being professionals, committed their repertoire to memory, using a rudimentary notation system only as a memory aid even today. The nobles on the other hand represented the literate society and did not find it necessary to memorize their music since they essentially played not for livelihood but for pleasure. Many did instead find it a mark of pride to copy their music and often with the addition of detailed directions for performance. Consequently, whereas the oral tradition of the nobles was weak and eventually deteriorated almost completely, the books on the techniques of string instrument playing written in the Heian period provide some of the most important information available. The wind instrument players however maintained the stronger oral tradition with such rare and rudimentary examples of notation as to give only a vague indication of the older practice.

One of the areas most often neglected by the historians of former periods was actual playing techniques. There are however some notable exceptions, for example the *Nangushinno Jusoki*, a treatise on flute playing dating from the early tenth century, which originally accompanied a book of compositions in flute tablature. It has instead come down to us as a series of detailed directions for the performance of the flute in *gagaku*. Exact requirements are given for breathing in each type of *gagaku* composition. For example, musicians who were careless about the exactness of their entrances were called *tsuji sarugaku*, (“streetcorner monkey theater musicians”). When the phrase was played too long, that is, not cutting off at exactly the right moment, but allowing the tone to trail off too long, it was called *yamadori bue* or “mountain bird flute” (the mountain bird having a long tail). The opposite fault of cutting off too soon was called *uzura-bue* or “quail flute” because of the bird’s short tail. Such indications suggest that early

gagaku was as precise about performance as it is today in the matter of ensemble. But it certainly was not always so. The musicians of today talk about musicians of two generations before them who had been thrown together at the time of the restoration for the first time. These men came from their own social hierarchies so that when thrown together it was impossible for a musician of one guild to tell another how to play, much less if the other was of a higher rank. The result of this was a combination of separate traditions now combined not by principles of performance as much as by strong will, stubbornness and power of rank. To this we are owed the flexible intonation and fluid ensemble of the nineteen twenties,

Due credit must be given to the court musicians however. The oral theory of performance is something that they have managed to preserve along with and in spite of the historical or Chinese theory, which serves little in explaining anything about the music. Any of the *hichiriki* players in the palace can and will without being specifically asked, tell you that *ichi*, the pitch produced by the closed first finger hole and the thumb hole, is played low throughout the *choshi*, *hyojo* except when followed by *ku*, closed five finger holes and both thumb holes, when it must be played higher in pitch. To this they will add only one composition as a minor exception. Likewise, he can easily verbalize the fact that the syllable *ri* for the fingering *te*, is read *re* in certain *choshi* in which case it is played one tone lower. There are numerous examples of this kind of consciousness of the repertoire concerning formal analysis, metric structure, the old system of improvisation, all of which I have not been able to touch on here.

The questionable aspects of the present tradition all concern the interpretation of the string parts and the singing of the court songs both of which did not form part of the oral tradition of the guild musicians but instead were allowed to deteriorate by the nobles and were only combined with the rest of the repertoire of the guild musicians at the time of the Meiji restoration. The tradition of the guild musicians certainly did change over the hundreds of years to the present, but it was in a slow and gradual response to changes in the culture of Japan.

Discussion Following Robert Garfias' Paper

I. Reconstructing Older Performing Styles

Malm: Do you subscribe to the Pickens theory that the music has actually gotten slower over the centuries, and should be played at double or triple speed?

Garfias: No. The music may have gotten slower and faster alternately over time. But I think that Pickens' reasons for assuming that the tempo has only gotten slower are not valid. One of his strongest arguments is that the *sho* playing was originally based on a Chinese system; playing entirely on harmonizing the melody in fourths and fifths. He says that he is sure that they played it faster, so that when they got to Japan they played it more slowly than it was possible to play all these harmonies, because it would be impossible at fast tempo. However, since most of the Southeast Asian examples from which this instrument seems to originate are played in these rich tone clusters, and since the Chinese were in the middle geographically and historically between the Southeast Asian practice and the Japanese practice, and since the Chinese don't use these tone clusters, it is reasonable to assume that it was probably the Chinese who modified the playing system, but it's impossible to say exactly when.

England: Is it, in fact, difficult to play fast with these clusters?

Garfias: It can be done very rapidly, in fact. In some of the very fast tempos they do shift entire chords quite rapidly.

Powers: Is there anything in the Japanese manuscript tradition which would bear on this question of tempo one way or the other?

Garfias: No, but I think there was a period at least one hundred years ago when all Japanese traditional music became somehow very solemn and was treated with great respect in light of its valued heritage. The parallel development is that the Noh drama became very slow and stately somewhere in that period. Gagaku probably got more solemn and

stately as well. It had to be music that was befitting the Emperor.

My own subjective impression is that, if it occurred, the logical place for it to happen would be at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration where suddenly the musicians were all brought together. They were changed from being forgotten musicians in these three cities in southwestern Japan. They were suddenly made the emperor's musicians, and they became state musicians, national musicians, and they had, for a while, a very high social status. At this point, I think, this kind of solemnity might have taken place. But it is possible that it happened before that.

Kishibe: In the case of *gagaku*, we cannot prove this. In the case of the Noh play, however, we have very nice evidence.

Garfias: For example, some of the pieces in the *gagaku* repertoire of today were originally *sangaku* pieces, or music for: the accompaniment of acrobatics. Some of the pieces are still performed today without the dogs and the juggling and fire-eating and all that sort of thing, and we can imagine that the music was a bit livelier than the way it is played now.

England: Did you say that embellishments in that manuscript that you were working with were notated in some way?

Garfias: The oldest example of the notation for the ornaments is probably about two hundred years for the wind instruments themselves but, as I said, in this 12th century koto manuscript there are indications that are rhythmic for both vibrato and various pressures with the left hand on certain tones. The points at which these occur are the same points at which you have inflected tones or ornamented tones in the wind tradition today. I have often wanted to get together and have someone try to reconstruct this and play them both at the same time, but there are not too many people who are interested in that aspect of it in Japan.

Malm: Have you tried to reconstruct this in America with your own students?

Garfias: Unfortunately, we have not yet gotten beyond standard repertoire. So much of the energy is devoted to just playing what there is to play and getting over those problems. Someday I hope we will. It would be easier to do here than it would in Japan.

Hood: By all means you ought to work toward this canonic business.

Garfias: You would need four *fue* players, four hichiriki players, four sho players..., and four tape recorders!

Powers: I hope you are going through with this, because from what you say, this whole question of the relationship of oral tradition to written sources of the material in Japan is so much better than it is in India and obviously better than it is in Java. I mean they have reasonably precise notations of some kind. You have to figure out how to interpret them, but at least you said they give elaborate directions in this koto manuscript. You described a wind manual that tells you precisely how to put your fingers on the flute?

Garfias: Yes. One of the problems that concerns Japanese *gagaku* is that there is such a tremendous amount of material that it would take a lifetime to go through it all, and you would certainly find a lot of wonderful things. Life is short. There just is too much material on this music.

Bruce Brooks: I would like to raise a general question concerning an oral and a written tradition for the same music that do not completely coincide. Would it be valid and/or permissible to base a reconstruction of a given piece of repertoire on written accounts and to attempt to reconstruct a performance of it, using supplementary ethnic and oral material?

Garfias: It depends on so many different things. If it is a completely dead tradition that you are trying to reconstruct, let's say it's 75% impossible and 25% pure fun. If you have something where you have a thread of the tradition existing, you will find certain elements that correspond exactly to the present

tradition, and those elements that don't just remain an unknown factor, and you can probably make some assumptions about it. But they are still assumptions.

Hood: A very limited example of this, and one that Max Harrell could say something about, is what Mr. Lui has been doing with the T'ang dynasty pieces on *ch'in*.

Max Harrell: The notation exists in a form that is no longer used and hasn't been used since the Sung dynasty. It has precise directions for playing, the hand positions, and some inferences about the rhythm. But no references as to the tuning. The piece can be played if the player will accept the fact that he has to improvise or make up the rhythm. It sounds quite different from any other piece. One other person has played this piece and recorded it, and it sounds like relatively the same piece. In *ch'in* music, the rhythm has never been notated, and different people have different versions of rhythm while they keep the melodic line the same. So it is possible to accept this as far as the modern *ch'in* tradition is concerned, although it has died out. This one T'ang piece just represents something quite different. The things that are different, we can accept, so the only thing that we can be squeamish about is something that we are always squeamish about in *ch'in* music anyway.

Garfias: I think, in this case, Mr. Lui's use of the verb "to compose" is very apt. He is always talking about composing old music that he has really put together, rhythmically for existing notation. He is in reality "re-composing" the music.

II. Analysis of Polyphony in Japanese Court Music

Maceda: To go back to the *sho* again, is there no instance of the use of a drone?

Garfias: There is a drone. Yes, there is definitely a drone, a high drone. There are two high notes, and they are sounding in every chord. The same two notes. The only time they are not used is in the *choshi*. The two drone notes are the notes which are common to all the modes.

They are certainly not a drone in the Indian sense of drone. I don't know what the function of it is, other than to simply relate everything that is played, to give the *sho* a unified quality in whatever mode it plays.

Max Harrell: Possibly in terms of function, you can view these two notes in another way. When the *sho* plays and goes from one chord to another, it keeps all the common notes between the two chords. These two notes don't change from chord to chord. These two notes are common and, therefore, they are kept.

Garfias: There is another consideration here and that is the physical problem of playing. The hand moves around the drone notes as on a pivot. They are a kind of point of balance. Your fingers are always in one central position, and you move the other fingers all around in various patterns, but the central two always stay in one place.

Powers: If it really was a drone, you would expect them to plug those two holes up.

Garfias: Well, that would be very unprofessional. (Laughter) The point is, however, that these two pipes are sometimes used melodically in certain passages.

Malm: Do those two notes constantly recur because of a convenience in instrumental playing technique, or is this instrument constructed to have a common, musically smooth way of going from one chord to another? That is what you meant, isn't it—that they have the ability to give you a smooth transition from this chord to that chord? It is not a drone so much as it is a common chord technique, a modulation from one chord to another.

Garfias: There is no answer to that as far as I can tell, but the same arrangement of the pipes occurs in the Chinese and Korean instruments, and the Chinese don't use it that way.