IHJ Japanese Music Series, Vol. VIII

Folk Songs and Music of the Japanese Archipelago

Christopher Blasdel

The eighth concert in the IHJ Japanese Music series was presented on March 26, 2010 at the Iwasaki Koyata Memorial Hall. This concert featured folk music (*minyō*) from various regions of Japan. Folk song specialist and Tsugaru *shamisen* virtuoso Takahashi Yūjirō was accompanied by a contingent of excellent musicians: Tsukuda Issei on the *shakuhachi*, Narita Takeshi and Sudō Keiko on vocals, and Takahashi Yukie on *taiko* and *shamisen*. They thrilled the IHJ audience with renditions of folk songs from Hokkaido, Tsugaru, Nagano, Miyagi, Kyushu and Okinawa.

The music of any culture consists of vocals (song and narration) and instrumentals (wind, string and percussion). Japan has a rich history of both, but the voice accounts for over 90 percent of all Japanese music. That the Japanese love to sing is evident in the highly refined genres of stage and performance-oriented art music. Simply put, song represents the soul of Japanese music and some of the previous programs of this series, for example, *kabuki*, *noh*, *tokiwazu* and *biwa*, presented aspects of classical Japanese songs.

Song is also the mainstay of Japanese folk music, and almost every corner of the Japanese isles, from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, boasts a rich tradition of local songs. "Folk song," in Japanese, is generally called *minyō*. The term *minyō* began to be widely used by scholars of the early Meiji Period (1868-1912) as a literal translation of the German *folkslied* or the English folk song. Before this, the songs of the local folk were just called "songs" or "ditties" and classified as to their purpose or content.

From early times, *minyō* songs formed an integral part of the daily lives of the people, describing their work, religious beliefs and their relationship to nature and society. Some of the earliest songs were religious in nature, meant to supplicate the deities, ensure bountiful harvests or hunts, to pray for safety at sea. Presently, Japanese *minyō* is classified according to function: religious, work, dance, celebratory, social, or commercialized entertainment. A number of folk songs consist of unaccompanied vocals, while others have *shamisen*, *shakuhachi* or *taiko* accompaniment.

Although now most accomplished *minyō* musicians are professional—meaning they make a living performing and teaching *minyō*—the folk songs themselves originally were developed and sung by non-professionals. In other words, they were sung as part of the rural or urban daily communal experience. Songs of prayer were obviously sung by those who needed to petition the gods at shrine or temple visits, while work songs were sung by laborers. Much of the work undertaken by farmers, hunters and fishermen of premodern Japan was labor intensive, arduous and often dangerous. Song was a method which made the work easier. Likewise, love songs were a socially approved way to instigate conversation between two young people, often as a prelude to marriage or at least an evening of intimacy.

Much of the social necessity for participating in folk songs has been alleviated by the mechanization of work or the ease of social interaction by young folk, but many of the old folk songs are preserved by special societies known as *hozon kai*. These preservation societies are community based and provide their members a way to socialize while preserving a common local heritage.

Japanese folk songs contain much pathos, humor and the stamp of their locale. *Tsugaru Jongara Bushi*, with its rapidly changing

rhythms and pulsating beat, was one of the pieces performed by Takahashi in this concert. It is an energetic exposition of the sonic possibilities of the Tsugaru *shamisen*. *Esashi Oiwake* was another piece performed by Takahashi and his group. This song, sung by pack horse and wagon drivers and on the trail, originated in the Nagano region. It later made its way to Esashi, a thriving port town in southwest Hokkaido, where it became exceedingly popular, not only in Hokkaido but around Japan. Musically, *Esashi Oiwake* is characterized by long vocalizations and *shakuhachi* passages of free rhythm punctuated with fixed rhythms.

Miyagi Mago Uta, a vocal/*shakuhachi* duet, was originally sung by horse drivers of Miyagi Prefecture as they took their livestock to market. In this lovely piece, the voice and *shakuhachi* follow each other in a haunting melody, slightly disjunctive, like two butterflies flying together on a common trajectory. *Sōran Bushi* was originally sung by fishermen who braved the rough, wintry seas off the coast of Hokkaido to catch herring. The song, sung by a chorus of male fishermen, is powerful in its evocation of the back-breaking tasks during the age of non-mechanized fishing and the dangers of the stormy seas. The performers also sang some of the more gentle folk songs of Japan, for example the lilting melodies of Amami Oshima and Okinawa and the well-known folk lullaby, *Itsuki no Komori Uta* from Kyushu.

It is rare that audiences in Japan are able to experience such a wide range of folk songs in a live performance sung by consummate musicians. Takahashi Yūjirō entertained the audience not only with his musical abilities but also with humorous and revealing accounts of his rich experiences in performing *minyō* both in Japan and overseas. By the end of the performance, Takahashi had everyone singing along and enjoying *minyō* not just as audience, but as participants as well.

(Christopher Blasdel, IHJ Artistic Director)