

A member of the popular drumming group Kodo pounds a rhythm on an enormous *dadaiko* drum (Buntaro Tanaka).



# MUSIC by Christopher Yohmei Blasdel TO THE EARS

For many non-Japanese, the first encounter comes with Kodo. Though featuring other instruments, this troupe of musicians centers its vibrant performances on the huge *taiko* drum. Kodo has made a great impact outside Japan in such ways as performing at the official concert of the 2002 World Cup, playing on the soundtrack for the spectacular Jet Li film *Hero* and touring extensively overseas. While Kodo may be its most dynamic expression, the taiko represents just a small part of the extraordinarily rich field of traditional music in Japan.





One time when the taiko is almost certain to be heard occurs during Japan's exuberant religious festivals. Then, along with that of the flute, the sound of the taiko is heard echoing throughout the precincts of Shinto shrines. Among the great range of instruments played in Japan, the taiko is one of the most accessible to the Western ear, with Kodo being its best-known proponents. This taiko group has become well known for its high level of physical and artistic discipline and commitment to preserving local Japanese folk traditions. Kodo have earned a reputation for their energetic performances of both traditional and contemporary taiko music.

For Kodo artistic director Motofumi Yamaguchi, the taiko is primarily a tactile instrument: one feels the beat and sound with the whole body rather than just with the ears. "Because of its physical immediacy, the taiko has long been used for communication as well as music," explains Yamaguchi. "In ancient times, villages used the taiko to spread news, and the boundaries of the community were defined by how far the taiko sound traveled."



The music of any culture consists of vocal (song and narration) and instrumental (wind, string and percussion) genres. Japan has a rich history of both, but vocal music accounts for over 90 percent of all traditional music. A revered Living National Treasure (master in the traditional arts),

Made up of a series of 17 pipes, the elegant *sho* handheld mouth organ is the only traditional Japanese instrument whose main role is to play harmony.



Imperial Household Agency

koto player Shoin Yamase stresses the importance of the voice in Japanese music. "The voice," she says, "whether in ancient times or the present, represents the soul of Japanese music."

Vocal music in Japan has sacred origins. Like the taiko, the voice was a means of communication between the secular and spiritual worlds, and this is exactly the role of *shomyo* sutra chanting. Shomyo was introduced to Japan from China as part of a Buddhist ceremony in the early sixth century and consists of songs and chants of sacred Buddhist texts. It is still practiced today, notably in the beautiful mountain temples of Enryakuji, near Kyoto, and Koyasan, south of Osaka. Shomyo originated in India, but the organization, structure and writing system of the texts used in Japan are based on Chinese sutras and were learned from Chinese teachers.

The monks who chanted shomyo did not consider themselves musicians, rather they were religious devotees whose daily life revolved around singing as ceremony, prayer and meditation. Shomyo can be compared with the Western musical tradition of plainsong, sung and chanted by Gregorian monks, who also approached song as prayer. Even though plainsong began as purely religious music, it had an enormous impact on the subsequent development of Western music. Likewise, most of Japan's great vocal traditions were influenced by shomyo sutra chanting.



Japan imported much from Chinese culture during its formative centuries, including gagaku. Gagaku originated in China and was aligned with Taoist and Confucian philosophy, and in Japan gagaku became systemized as the music and dance of the imperial court during the Heian period (794–1185). Gagaku is to Japanese instrumental music what shomyo is to Japanese vocal music — the cradle from which most traditional Japanese instruments developed.

"Gagaku has been a continuous musical presence in Japan for over 1,200 years," explains





Clockwise from below right: *komuso* Buddhist monks wander the countryside and play the *shakuhachi* flute in a bid to attain enlightenment; the koto player wears finger plectrums and plucks with the right hand while adjusting the tones with the left; the 13-stringed koto is tuned with moveable bridges; every year, the Imperial Household Agency puts on a gagaku concert for the public.



Jun Takagi



Jun Takagi



Kenichi Nagata



gagaku master Sukeyasu Shiba. "Even though government, politics and society changed drastically throughout the centuries, gagaku remained and is still heard today, both in and out of the confines of the imperial court." Teacher and composer, Shiba descends from a long line of distinguished gagaku musicians reaching back to the twelfth century. In 1984, he quit his prestigious job as senior musician in the Imperial Household Agency Music Department, where he performed both gagaku and Western music for official imperial functions, to teach gagaku at university.

Gagaku instrumentation consists of woodwinds, strings and percussion, and is perhaps the oldest extant orchestral music in the world. Wind instruments include the *sho* handheld mouth organ, its harmonies evoking fleeting images of deities floating on the clouds, the double-reed *hichiriki*, whose shrill voice plays the main melodies, and the serene *ryuteki* flute, which follows and embellishes the *hichiriki*

Jun Takagi

National Noh Theatre

Jun Takagi

Clockwise from above: the instruments of the No theater are the *nokan* flute, the handheld *kotsuzumi* drum, the *otsuzumi* lap drum and a *taiko* drum; the *shakuhachi* has only five finger holes but is extremely versatile; the vertical end-blown *shakuhachi* is made from the root of the bamboo.



melodies. Gagaku percussion instruments range from the gigantic *dadaiko* drums to delicate bronze gongs struck with handheld mallets. Descriptions of gagaku instruments and music and their importance in the imperial court of a millennium ago is evident in *The Tale of Genji*, a complex psychological work penned in the early eleventh century that has claims for being the world's first novel.

Music instruments in Japan are not only functional; they are also highly crafted works of visual art. Many ancient gagaku instruments are adorned with mother-of-pearl inlays or delicately carved ornamentation. Even the drums are elaborate: one set of Japan's most impressive gagaku drums is a pair of gigantic *dadaiko* owned by the grand shrine of Kasuga Taisha in Nara. Each measures 2.3 meters in diameter, and they are adorned with carved, crouching dragons and flying phoenixes. These ornate instruments, over 2 tons in weight and over 3 meters high, were specially ordered in the 1980s and together are said to have cost over ¥60 million.

**A**s court music, gagaku was enjoyed only by the elite, but most instruments in the ensemble developed a parallel life beyond this exclusive environment. One of these is the *biwa*, a plucked lute with four or five strings that was most notably used by itinerant, troubadour priests to sing and narrate tales of the tumultuous civil wars that ravaged Japan towards the end of the twelfth century. Other kinds of *biwa* also developed, like the stoic Satsuma *biwa*, used by samurai, and the Chikuzen *biwa*, developed during the nineteenth century by women who were interested in the more elegant aspects of the instrument.

The *koto* developed into a popular instrument around the mid-sixteenth century and is now one



The *kotsuzumi* drum is threaded with an orange cord, which alters the pitch of the instrument.

of Japan's most beautiful stringed instruments. Made of paulownia wood and about 180 centimeters long by 25 centimeters wide, the

*koto* has 13 strings tuned with a set of moveable bridges. The shape of the instrument is said to have been

inspired by a dragon, and the names of the *koto* parts refer to this mythical beast. Traditionally made from ivory, the moveable bridges allow for a number of tunings. *Koto* music utilizes over 25 different tunings, although most tend to be variations of a few basic types.

*Koto* sounds are instantly recognizable by their delicate tone. In fact, one could say that the beauty of the instrument lies in its simple yet profound timbres. "The *koto* tones are like the individual tastes in exquisite Japanese *kaiseki* cuisine," observes Yamase. "Each tone is given its fullest flavor yet complements the others. It is different to Western orchestral music, which is replete with complicated harmonies and fullness of sound. Both types of music are important, but in Japanese music a maximum effect can be created with a minimum amount of material."

**J**apan's representative vertical bamboo flute, the *shakuhachi*, is simply constructed but has an extremely wide range of musical expression. It can dramatically alter tone color through delicate use of microtonal pitch changes, unique fingering and blowing techniques. During the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, devout itinerant Zen monks called *komuso* wearing straw-basket hats used the *shakuhachi* as a tool for



Zen meditation and enlightenment. Most traditional shakuhachi pieces were not composed as musical entertainment but as meditations on sound. Nowadays, these pieces, played in the hands of a master, are supremely relaxing.

At the same time, the shakuhachi is an extremely versatile instrument and is widely used in contemporary jazz, rock and experimental music. The shakuhachi is quickly becoming popular outside of Japan, and workshops, concerts and festivals are held yearly in such diverse places as the United States, Australia, the Czech Republic and Argentina.

In Kabuki theater performances, the sound of the shamisen, a three-stringed plucked lute, is certain to be heard. The shamisen originated not from gagaku, but entered mainstream Japan much later, around the sixteenth century, from Okinawa, then an independent kingdom, where it was known as the *sanshin*. The instrument rapidly became popular, and by the end of the Edo period (1603–1867) the shamisen was the most commercially popular of all Japanese instruments and became the instrumental mainstay of such musical genres as Kabuki, Bunraku puppet theater, *jiuta* chamber music and the numerous songs and ditties sung in the entertainment districts.

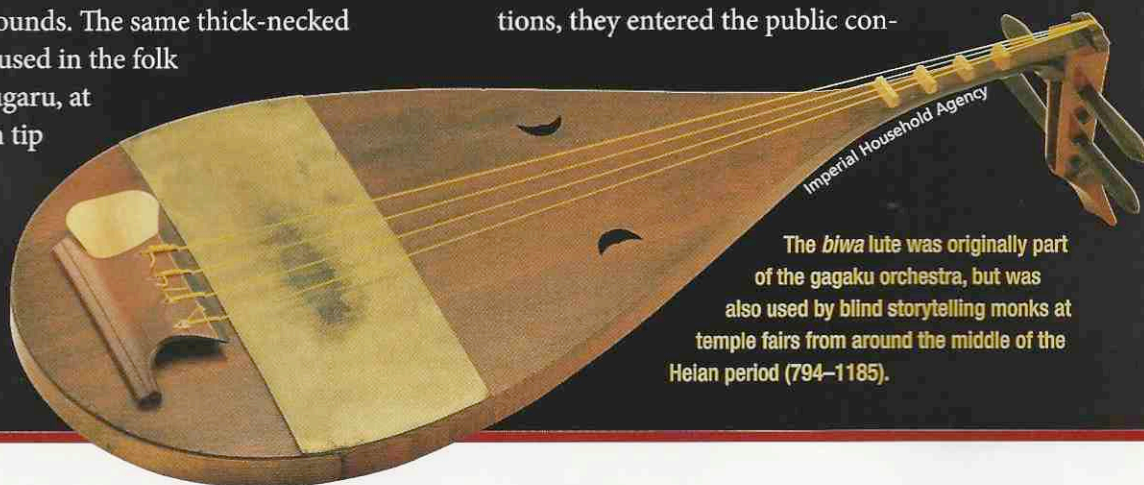
The term “shamisen” actually refers to many different types of instrument, all with basic similarities but important differences. For example, the shamisen used in most Kabuki stage music (*nagauta*) has a very thin neck and delicate expression, while the shamisen played in Bunraku has a very heavy, thick neck and is capable of extreme, percussive sounds. The same thick-necked shamisen is used in the folk music of Tsugaru, at the northern tip of Japan’s main island, Honshu. A mid-

neck-sized shamisen is played in Edo-period ensemble music, accompanied by the koto and shakuhachi.



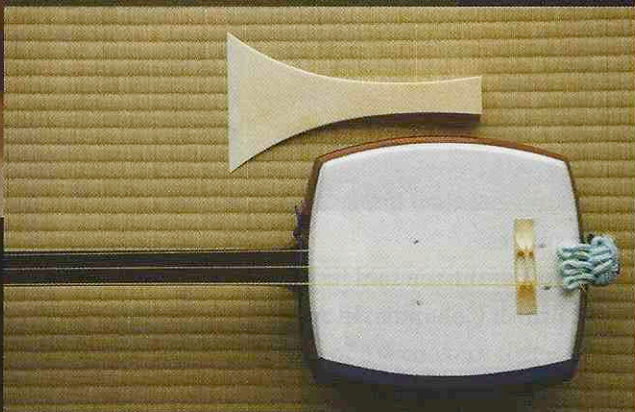
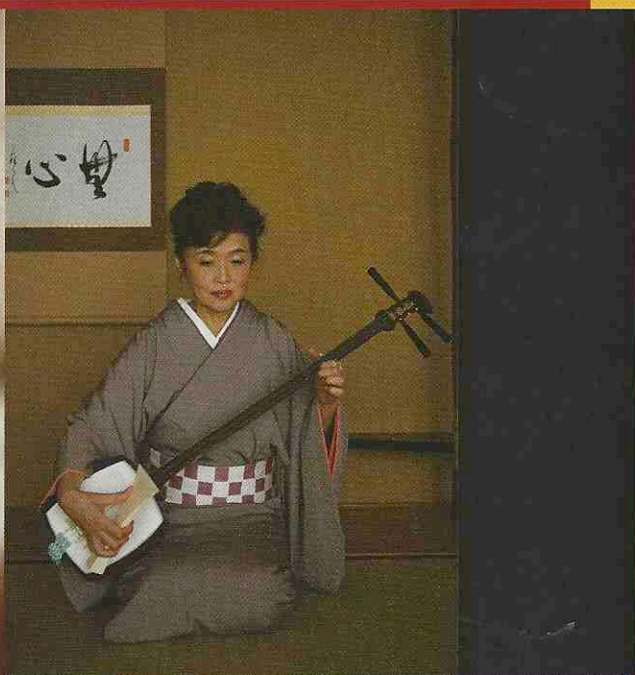
Along with the rest of Japanese society, the music underwent significant changes when the country opened up to the world in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Today, there are musicians who specialize in traditional music, modern music and both. Many of these musicians have found a world stage for their work. One of Japan’s most prominent composers in the last century was Toru Takemitsu, for whom the traditional element in music was strong. “The Japanese are a people who have been endowed with a keen receptivity towards timbre from ages past,” he wrote when describing musical development in Japan. It was Takemitsu who brought the beauty of gagaku to the attention of the world in his seminal work for gagaku ensemble, *In an Autumn Garden*, composed in 1973 but arranged into a longer piece in 1979. It consists of a series of slow, deliberate movements, utilizing the beautiful tones of the gagaku instruments. “This composition,” notes Shiba, “exhibits the beauty of both the traditional and contemporary aspects of gagaku.”

With its energetic strumming, pulsating melodies and sections of free improvisation, the Tsugaru shamisen is presently enjoying huge commercial and artistic success. The Yoshida Brothers, who hail originally from Hokkaido, began learning the Tsugaru shamisen at a very young age. After winning various nationwide competitions, they entered the public con-



The *biwa* lute was originally part of the gagaku orchestra, but was also used by blind storytelling monks at temple fairs from around the middle of the Heian period (794–1185).





Clockwise from top right: the shamisen is one of the most popular of all traditional instruments, though it did not reach mainland Japan until the sixteenth century; the instrument has three adjustable strings and is played with a large plectrum; the left hand adjusts the tones by pressing on the neck (all photos, Jun Takagi).

sciousness in 1999 with the release of their first duo album *Ibuki*. With their boyish good looks and stunning technique, they took the country by storm and made their first overseas tour to Los Angeles and New York in 2003. Reaction to their music in the U.S. was phenomenal, and they presently tour there every year.

Other Tsugaru shamisen performers have also appeared, each adding something to the genre. Hiromitsu Agatsuma's popularity rivals that of the Yoshida Brothers, but he comes from a slightly more diverse background. "I was interested in its sense of driving beat and tone color," explains Agatsuma, who counts among his musical influences Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis and Carlos Santana. "I wanted to do something new in grade

school, and I wanted my classmates to enjoy the shamisen, which wasn't popular at all."

Traditional Japanese music has long remained a hidden treasure, known only to a small number of performers, students and admirers. After the Edo period, national musical education policies focused entirely on Western music. In the past few decades, however, Japan's traditional instruments have spread around the world and been performed, taught and enjoyed both privately and on university campuses. The timbres of Japanese music are now world treasures that all can enjoy. The great appeal of Japanese music stems from its ability to achieve a rich diversity of sounds from basic instruments. "Simplicity is universal," observes Yamaguchi. "Anyone can beat a taiko and have fun." ◎