

Invitation to Gagaku

Japan's Ancient Court Music

By Shiba Sukeyasu

Origin of *Gagaku*: Ancient Gala Concert

A solemn ceremony was held at *Todai-ji* – a majestic landmark Buddhist temple – in the ancient capital of Nara 1,255 years ago, on April 9 in 752, to endow a newly completed Great Buddha statue with life. The ceremony was officiated by a high Buddhist priest from India named *Bodhisena* (704-760), and attended by the Emperor, members of the Imperial Family, noblemen and high priests. Thousands of pious people thronged the main hall of the temple that houses the huge Buddha image to express their joy in the event.

On the stage set up in the foreground of the hall, a gala celebratory concert was staged and performing arts from various parts of Asia were introduced. Outstanding among them was Chinese music called *Togaku* (music of the Tang Dynasty). Clad in colorfully embroidered gorgeous silk costumes, Chinese musicians played 18 different instruments and greatly impressed the audience. The scene was reminiscent of a gala concert held by musicians of *Liyuan*, then the best music school in the world, opened by Emperor Xuanzong (685-762) of the Tang Dynasty.

Many participants in the event were so charmed by the performance that a number of them sought to go to Tang to learn the music by boarding Japanese ships carrying official delegations to that country. One such Japanese was Owarino Hamanushi, a *Shinto* priest at the Atsuta Shrine. He was about 20 years old when he attended the *Todai-ji* temple concert. Hamanushi, who was learning dancing and flute called *ryuteki* while serving as a *Shinto* priest, was so impressed by the live performance of



Photos: Music Department, Imperial Household Agency

"Gagaku" is performed by members of the Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency. Traditionally, *kakko* (right in the front row) is always played by the oldest band member.

Tang music that he aspired to learn the music in Tang. Legend has it that his wish was finally granted in 835 when he was aged 103. His willpower was unruffled by his old age and he returned to Japan after learning music and dancing for five years. He was 113 years old when he performed a dance of his own making before Emperor Ninmyo and later greatly contributed to the development of *gagaku* music in Japan. *Gagaku* has since been used as a term describing the Imperial court music and dancing as a whole.

Heritage of *Gagaku*: Japanization of Tang Music

The early part of the Heian Period around 820 produced a large number of talented musicians in Japan, which prompted studies on the ensemble of Tang music as well as its composition. The Japanization of Tang music started with the choice of music instruments, with eight instruments adopted from 18 Tang instruments. The eight

instruments were three wind instruments – *sho* (mouth organ), *hichiriki* (oboe) and *ryuteki* (seven-holed flute) –, two string instruments – *biwa* (lute) and *gakuso* (Japanese harp *koto*) – and three percussion instruments – *kakko* (cylinder-shaped wooden drum), *taiko* (hanging drum) and *shoko* (plate-shaped bronze gong). Furthermore, music itself was remade in the Japanese style, with *sho* and *biwa* playing tunes, and *gakuso* playing the Tang musical scale. *Hichiriki* and *ryuteki* adopted the Japanese native scale.

However, logical, imposing and articulate Chinese music turned out to be inconsistent with the characteristic Japanese rhythm and conflicted with the Japanese musical sense, which embraces seasonal colors produced by Japanese nature and consists of a delicate pitch. Furthermore, the Japanese and Chinese scales do not necessarily hit it off well and their ensemble even produced discord.

Accordingly, the ensemble of Japanese and Chinese music initially was not accepted by Japanese people.

Strangely enough, however, the discord rather helped *gagaku* express its intrinsic shade and luster, and thus added modulation and depth to *gagaku* sound. It took 50 years to reduce the number of instruments used for Japanese *gagaku* and Japanize Tang music. The Japanization prompted the Emperor, Imperial Family members and noblemen to learn *gagaku* music and dancing and enjoy the ensemble of wind and string instruments and songs, whereby *gagaku* flourished in this country.

With the rise of the warrior class from the Kamakura Period (1192-1333) onwards, *gagaku* declined fast. But *gagaku* players, protected by the feudal government as well as *Shinto* shrines and Buddhist temples, worked hard to preserve the art and pass it on to future generations. Thus *gagaku*, which embodies the aesthetic sense of the Heian Period (794-1185), has been retained for a millennium to this day.

■ Gagaku Instruments

Gagaku instruments are made mostly of bamboo and other wood. But hide, silken threads, metal and lacquer are used for some. The ancient musical instruments kept at the Imperial warehouse Shosoin in

Nara are the archetypes of most *gagaku* instruments.

Sho is a mouth organ made up of bamboo wood sticks bundled together in a ring-like shape. The shape purportedly represents the figure of a mythological sacred bird in Chinese lore. *Sho* can give a single note, as a matter of course. But as its characteristics, *sho*, unlike other wind instruments, can give chords of five or six notes. Its tone sounds like a bundle of sounds extending straight up, like the sunlight shining in through a break in the clouds.

Hichiriki is an oboe-like, end-blown wind instrument so small as to fit into the hands. The player attaches a reed into the opening in the upper part and blows over it. *Hichiriki* can give a wide range of tones, solemn to humorous, which sound like the moves of animals roaming around.

Ryuteki is a transverse, seven-holed Chinese flute made of bamboo. It originated in India and was introduced to China. Bound with cherry bark, *ryuteki* is held by the player like a flute, to the right of the face. It gives pleasant, jumping notes. The ensemble of *sho*, *hichiriki* and *ryuteki* is said to express a microcosm, with *sho* giving a heavenly note, *hichiriki* expressing animals on the ground and *ryuteki* linking the heaven and the earth.

Biwa is a lute popularly played in western Asia in ancient days. It was

introduced to ancient China after deftly adopting music from various oasis countries. Yang Guife, the famed Chinese princess of the Tang Dynasty, is said to have been a *biwa* master-hand. It is played with a boxwood pick from the low to high strings like arpeggio.

Gakuso is a zither-like string instrument with 13 strings stretched over the paulownia-wood rectangular box body. It is played with picks put over the thumb, index finger and middle finger of the right hand. Tone is adjusted by changing the position of the string bridge.

Kakko is a cylinder-shaped wooden drum. Both sides of the drum are covered by hide membrane, which is fastened on the shell with a metal frame and tightened by hide threads. The player beats the drum from both sides with a pick made of rosewood. *Kakko* has the role of giving a sense of tension to the otherwise slow tempo of *gagaku*.

Gaku-taiko is a drum hanging from a wooden frame. It is also called *tsuri-taiko* (hanging drum). Its shell is painted with three lions as a practice observed since ancient times. The player beats alternately and periodically with sticks held by both hands.

Shoko is a plate-shaped bronze gong and, like *gaku-taiko*, hangs from a wooden frame. The player beats the inside of the gong with a rosewood stick, which has an ebony ball on its tip.

Photos: Reigakusha



Band formation (from left): (Back row) *ryuteki* (2 players), *hichiriki* (2) & *sho* (2); (middle row) *gakuso* & *biwa*; (front row) *shoko*, *gaku-taiko* & *kakko*. Right photo: The instrument held vertically is *sho*, and in the back is *hichiriki*.



Photo: Music Department, Imperial Household Agency



Bugaku dance "Bairo": One of the most famous ancient "Rinyugaku" dances introduced from China in the Tenpyo Era (around 740 AC). All dancers also play "gagaku" instruments.

■ Bugaku

Bugaku is dancing accompanied by *gagaku*. Bugaku dances consist of Western Asian, Chinese and Japanese dances. They are classified according to costume and arrangement. *Rinyugaku* dance, introduced to Japan by Indian priest *Bodhisena* who performed at the *Todai-ji* ceremony in Nara, consists of eight types, all of which are masterpieces still performed frequently.

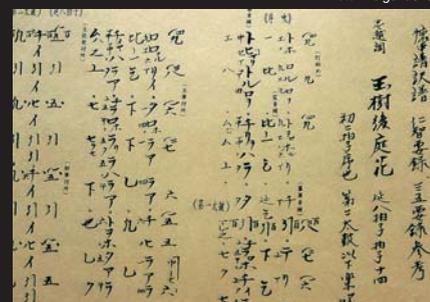
■ Guide to Gagaku

Today, Western music permeates Japan. And so, both musicians and music listeners are instilled with Western musical rules. When such rules are applied in the appreciation of *gagaku*, ancient Japanese music could sound like noise. A noted Japanese composer of Western music makes the following remark on *gagaku*: "European-originated music is based on such attributes as humanity, emotion, feeling, structural beauty and color. In *gagaku*,

however, I sense something like a universe, an acoustic world that is boundless, eternal, infinite and vast, totally unrelated to such peculiar Western sentiments."

In the past, *gagaku* may have had various attributes. But as it survived through legacy for 1,000 years, *gagaku* gradually lost feelings and sentiments, and *gagaku* performances have become uniform. I suggest that when you listen to *gagaku*, you give yourself up to the sound while thinking of natural phenomena like the flow of a long river, the waves breaking on the beach and the winds blowing through a vast plain. Also, while you listen to *gagaku*, you can enjoy it better if you remind yourself of music scenes written in old Chinese poems or Japanese classic literature. If you wish to further pursue *gagaku*, you should learn *shoga* (singing), which is essential to read *gagaku* music, and remember *gagaku* melodies. By so doing, you can find *gagaku* closer to you. *Shoga*, indeed, is the foundation that has supported *gagaku* for a millennium.

Photo: Reigakusha



A music score for a "shoga" song restored to life by the author. It describes the melody and how to play the relevant instruments.

■ Conclusion

The heritage of the Heian Period, when Japanese culture such as architecture, paintings, sculptures, literature and music bloomed, has still retained its high artistic value without losing its luster over a long period of some 1,000 years.

As the inheritor of a traditional art Japan can boast to the world, we *gagaku* players are duty-bound to learn the history and spirit kept in *gagaku*, brush up our skill, nurture successors and pass down *gagaku* to future generations. **J.S**

Shiba Sukeyasu, a former member of the Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency, is a *gagaku* player and music director of the "Reigakusha" *gagaku* ensemble performance group he set up in 1985. Actively performing in and outside Japan, he is also a member of the Japan Art Academy.