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MUSICS OF NORTHEAST ASIA

Osamu Yamaguchi

Northeast Asia is the large continental land mass of China, Mongolia, and Korea, plus the chain of islands to the east—principally Japan, the archipelago of the Ryukyus (including the island of Okinawa), and Taiwan (Formosa). This area has often been called “the Orient” and “the Far East” by “occidentals” of Europe and America. Those who write in English about this area as a cultural unit often use the term “Sinitic” (or some descriptive phrase such as “China-based”) because of China’s antiquity and its influence throughout the area. Of course,

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surrounding cultures also have made important contributions to what we think of as Chinese culture—West Asia, beginning before the Christian era; South Asia, especially with the spread of Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era; the southern and eastern neighboring states, especially through trade and tribute missions to Chinese emperors; and the states to the north, especially at the time of the Mongol invasion.

A consideration of the cultures of the smaller states of Northeast Asia must recognize the importance of their early native cultures; the significant, though intermittent, influence of Chinese ideas and material culture during thousands of years; cultural exchanges among the smaller states themselves; and direct cultural importations from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and more recently, Europe and America. In the case of

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Japan, an important factor in the development of its distinctive cultural patterns was the period of self-imposed isolation that began about 1600 and lasted more than two and a half centuries.

Thus, the rich heritage of cultural traditions in Northeast Asia—including those of music, dance, and drama—derive from differing combinations of the native cultures, various foreign influences, selectivity of adoption, uniqueness of adaptation, and internal creativity. The resultant manifestations serve as focuses for cultural identity by persons who are citizens of a nation, an island, a prefectural unit, a city, town, or village. This cultural identity may also extend to membership in a specialized occupation or profession. The feeling of belonging—of having a particular place within society—has been highly valued in Northeast Asia not only in governmental, economic, and family affairs, but also in the arts. This trait is readily apparent in Japan, where many genres and subgenres of the traditional arts have been faithfully nurtured through the *iemoto* or *ryū-ha* system (schools or institutions based primarily on family lines). Each *ryū* strictly enforces observance of its highly codified inventory of subtle refinements. As a result, a student of a traditional performing art tries to imitate his teacher's performance as closely as possible; nonconformity results in expulsion from the *ryū*.

Within the large categories of religious, theatrical, folk, and court musics, there are a great number of traditions with significant differences in details. Nevertheless, some characteristics of Northeast Asian musical instruments and musics may be summarized for comparison with generalizations of other large culture areas. Plucked zithers are among the most ancient of Chinese instruments and are still considered the most prestigious stringed instruments (*ch'in* and *cheng* in China, *kayageum* and *komungo* in Korea, *koto* in Japan, and *dàn tranh* in Vietnam). Lutes, both plucked and bowed, were introduced from West and South Asia and now tend to be associated with narrative, theatrical, or light popular musics. One notable exception, the *biwa*, is played in *gagaku* (Japanese court music).

Instruments in Northeast Asia are tra-



2. Photo by Fredric Lieberman

1. Kwanak, a Korean court music, performed by musicians of the National Classical Music Institute of Korea. Instruments shown L to R are 2 taegum, 3 piri, changgo, jwago, and ajaeng (haegum is out of camera range). Kwanak is heterophonic in texture, as is true of most Korean ensemble musics. Several instruments of kwanak correspond to instruments of Japanese *gagaku*—piri (double-reed pipes) to the *hichiriki*; changgo (a double-headed hourglass-shaped braced drum) to the *san-no-tsuzumi*; and jwago (a hanging double-headed tacked drum) to the *taiko*. Taegum is a transverse flute made from a special hard bamboo, and ajaeng is a bowed board zither. Haegum (not shown) is a two-stringed bowed fiddle, related to several instruments of the same general type in China.

2. A scene from a Peking Opera as performed by a mainland China troupe on tour in Japan. In these operas, both men's and women's roles are played by men.



ditionally classified by the sounding material. As early as the Chou dynasty (eleventh century to the third century BC), the Chinese classified the instruments of the Confucian ritual "orchestra" as metal, stone, skin, gourd, bamboo, wood, silk, and earth. Each material was associated not only with musical instruments but also with points of the compass, the seasons, and natural phenomena. Concern for the kind and also the quality of a specific piece of material to be used in making a musical instrument is still very much in evidence in Japan today. In making *hyōshi-gi* (clappers used in the kabuki theater), the pieces are selected from large quantities of the prescribed kind of wood by choosing those that make the best sound when they are struck together. (The purchase price will clearly reflect the difference between an excellent and a merely acceptable pair.) Even more demanding is the acquisition of suitable bamboo for the pipes of a *shō* (mouth-pipe organ) because

the required species is now quite rare and the bamboo should have been located over a farmhouse cooking area as part of the roof for one and a half to two centuries in order to be properly seasoned by heat and oils.

Attention to and appreciation of a single tone is highly valued in traditional North-east Asian musics—although, of course, there are exceptions, especially in some folk musics. When the Chinese *ch'in* (a zither with seven silk strings) is played, a string is plucked by the right hand in one specific way, chosen from a large inventory of carefully differentiated movements by different fingers, using nail or flesh. Tradition may require that the resultant tone, especially one of long duration, be ornamented by a specific kind of slide (again chosen from a large number of subtly different varieties) by the left hand as the tone dies away to the limit of audibility (and sometimes beyond). Korean *shijo* is a genre of poetry traditionally accompanied by



musical instruments. When shijo is chanted, a single, long-extended tone is varied in a prescribed way in timbre and rate and width of vibrato. On the Japanese shakuhachi (a vertical bamboo flute), a tone of a given pitch may be produced by several different fingerings and mouth positions; the differences in timbre and loudness, as well as vibrato and special breath sounds, are essential to the aesthetics of its music.

Melodic instruments in the early Confucian orchestra consisted of sets of like units—a set of tuned metal bells for the bell chimes, a set of stone slabs for the stone chimes, a set of pipes in the pan-pipes and mouth-pipe organ, a set of strings on a zither. Pitch relationships among the separate components of these instruments were carefully controlled and based on a remarkable knowledge of acoustics. Theories of tonal relations were based primarily on the cycle of fifths, although the overtones of strings were also known and employed in the ch'in. These sophisticated theories were correlated with Confucian philosophy, with

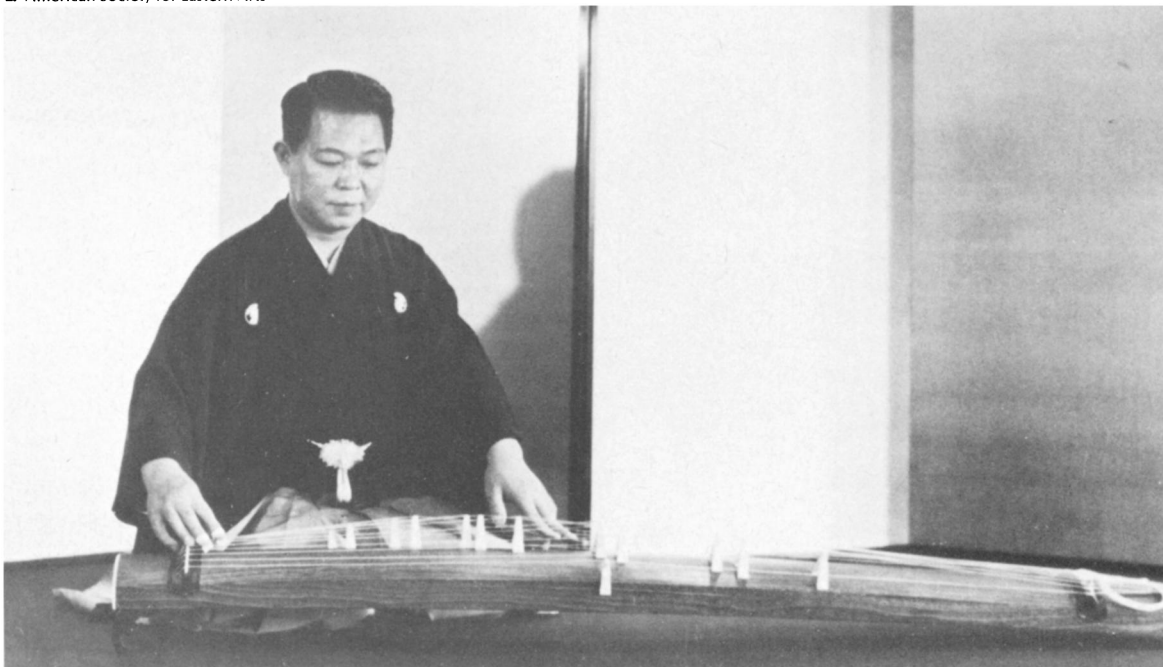
1. Kangata, the musicians for bugaku, perform at the Meiji Shrine, Tokyo. Music from both branches of the repertoire—Togaku and Komagaku—will be performed, so the instruments of both are in place.

Instruments L to R are ōteki (transverse flutes), hichiriki (double-reed pipes), shō (mouth organs), and san-no-tsuzumi and kakko (drums).

2. Keiji Yagi, artist teacher-performer, plays the Japanese koto (or ō-koto, as it is more formally called), a 13-stringed zither.

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1. Namino Torii, artist teacher-performer of the shamisen. The most popular instrument of hōgaku (traditional music) today, the shamisen is a 3-stringed lute, the prototypes of which were introduced into Japan from China through Okinawa. The shamisen is used primarily for accompaniment to the voice, either alone or in ensemble with other instruments.

2. Lui Tsun-Yuen, virtuoso on the Chinese p'i-p'a. The prototype of the p'i-p'a came from West Asia. The p'i-p'a is closely related in shape and construction to the Japanese biwa. It is plucked with the performer's fingernails, which must be kept quite long.

codes of behavior (for example, the prescribed relationships of subject to king, son to father, younger brother to elder brother), and with the economic system (when one blows across the top of a bamboo tube of a certain size, it will produce a given pitch and will also hold a fixed quantity of rice or millet, so the size of the measuring device can be controlled by reference to the pitch of a stone chime in the palace). Thus, music was firmly integrated into the social structure.

In traditional Northeast Asian musics, the tonal systems are mostly pentatonic, although there are important exceptions. However, not all systems observe the early Chinese emphasis on the circle of fifths. A basic tuning of the Japanese koto, for example, contains two half steps. These musics are essentially melodic rather than harmonic. When a basic melody is played simultaneously by a group of instruments, with or without voice, it is considered desirable to maintain the aural identity of each instrument. Thus heterophony is the most highly valued multipart relationship (in contrast to the Western idea of ensemble in which "all instruments sound as one"), and the divergence in time, pitch, and ornamentation of the several instruments simultaneously playing the same basic melody is both appreciated and required (and in the formalized genres, prescribed in great detail). Aesthetically, nonsimultaneity in approaching a final unison may, and often does, function as tension and release in delineating musical form.

It is more difficult to generalize about rhythm in Northeast Asian musics. Although duple meter predominates in most areas and genres—in many cases with asymmetrical patterns—triple meter or triplet patterns are characteristic of most Korean musics. Free, nonmetric rhythm is characteristic of some genres throughout Northeast Asia. ㊦