Japanese chamber music

History

The history of traditional Japanese chamber music reaches from its origins in the second century BCE to the present. This time span can be divided into five periods: prehistoric, antique, medieval, modern and contemporary. Within each of these periods specific musical forms evolved, some of which still exist today.

The first period, from the second century BCE until roughly the seventh century CE, includes those independent forms which arose before contact with the Chinese mainland.

The period of antique music, corresponding to the Nara era (645-794) and the Heian era (794-1185) is characterized by the introduction and integration of continental Chinese music, especially that of the gagaku (an academic instrumental music, sometimes danced to, sometimes sung) and shômyô (Buddhist liturgical chants).

In its medieval period, Japanese music as we know it today came into being, and indeed through wasan (Buddhist chants in the Japanese language), heikyoku (the epic of the Heike, which was recited to the accompaniment of the biwa) and nô (theater pieces which were sung, spoken, mimed and danced).

During the modern period, from the beginning of the epoch of Momoyama (1573) until the Meiji restoration in 1868, urban music reached its pinnacle in the the form of the sankyoku (“music for three instruments”: koto, shamisen [sangen] and shakuhachi) with music for koto, shakuhachi, satsuma-biwa and shamisen. Many other musical forms arose, such as gidaiyu, kiyomoto, tokiwazu, nagauta, kouta and jiuta.

Since the Meiji Restoration a new turn has been taken through contact with Western music. Contemporary musicians have assimilated the techniques of western music, lent it new impulses and developed it further. Music for Japanese and European instruments has appeared, without giving rise, however, to any new type of composition.
The instruments

Koto
The *koto* is a sort of zither with thirteen strings, each of which furnished with a movable bridge, strung over a convex heavily lacquered sounding box. It is one of the oldest Japanese musical instruments. Already in the second century CE we find *hanawa* clay figures showing people playing on a five or six-string *koto*. The instrument is part of the *gagaku*, the imperial court orchestra. Numerous literary sources testify to the popularity of the *koto* in aristocratic circles, particularly during the Heian era. The oldest surviving pieces were produced in the 16th century and are part of a collection belonging to a Buddhist monk, Kenjun, who lived in northern Kyôshû. At the beginning of the 17th century the *koto*, like the *shamisen*, became an instrument often chosen by blind musicians who joined together in a guild which had a leader (*kengyô*) and which was sponsored and protected by the authorities. This assured an uninterrupted transmission, thanks to which the classical pieces for the *koto* have survived to this day. The first *kengyô*, the founder of the Yatsuhashi school, ushered in a new era for the *koto* in that he adapted the pieces to the tastes of an urban public. At the end of the 17th century, two new schools arose, the Ikuta in Kyôto and, somewhat later, the Yamada school in Tôkyô. Their playing technique was characterized by the use of artificial fingernails, a sort of plectrum for the thumb, index and middle finger of the right hand, which executed the plucked notes and glissandi, whereby the left hand changed the pitch (by pressing down upon the vibrating strings on the other side of the bridge) and allowed the tones to sound longer or shorter.

**Shamisen**

The origins of this three-stringed lute go back to early Egyptian times. The instrument spread throughout Persia, India, Tibet and China and reached Japan in the 16th century via the Ryûkyû Islands. The *shamisen* gradually replaced the *biwa* as an instrument for the accompaniment of recitations. Two sorts of music arose: the first, a sort of theater music for
bunraku (puppet theater) or kabuki; and secondly, vocal music like the jiuta and nagauta, folk songs from the Kyôto and Nara areas which the urban populace of the time truly appreciated. The strings of the shamisen are plucked with a large ivory plectrum which occasionally also strikes the sounding box. This lends the instrument its characteristic percussive sound. The left hand supports the long neck of the instrument and the index, middle and ring fingers determine the pitch and execute vibrati, glissandi and pizzicati.

Music for Koto and Shamisen

The relationship between the music for koto and for shamisen is very close. The reason for this can be found in the history of the two instruments. When the shamisen was introduced into Japan, it was first an instrument used to accompany all sorts of narratives, so it “borrowed” its repertoire from the kumiuta, which are suites of sung poems, connected by instrumental interludes and originally written for koto. Already in the 17th century these instrumental sections were growing in importance. They lost the particularities and delicacy so characteristic of the koto and became a sort of music closer to the character of the shamisen. The interludes were now called tegoto and enjoyed great popularity with the urban public. The basic structure of the music of both instruments is monophonic, so melodies for one instrument can be adopted by the other – thus the mutual influence. Some musicians – and this was particularly the case with Yatsuhashi – mastered both instruments perfectly. In the middle of the 18th century, pieces written for shamisen and koto appeared. With the Meiji restoration, when the shakuhachi became in 1871 a secular instrument, the duo expanded into a trio, henceforth named sankyoku (“music for three instruments”). Occasionally, they were joined by the kokyû, a two or four-stringed instrument.
The structure of these pieces is essentially monophonic. All instruments play the same melodies, albeit with variations characteristic of each particular instrument. Yet when hearing Japanese music it is clear that monophony is not entirely unambiguous. The individual voices, played in unison, do not produce any sort of congruent homophony. Everyone plays the same thing, but not at exactly the same time. These minimal displacements, which sound like clumsy music-making to European ears, are in reality highly organized “imprecisions”. It may easily be imagined that these displacements, once they transgress a certain level, give the voices a sort of independence. This technique of displacement of generally short melodic elements (zure) is a wide-spread form of Japanese polyphony. A further form is to be found in the assemblage of various pieces (dan) layered on top of one another. This technique, called dan’awase, “placing pieces together”, yields a quite striking voice-leading, as the simultaneously played sections have often nothing more in common than their length. Thus a certain movement arises: monophony, polyphony, monophony.

The pieces thus are polyphonic, but strangely in two extreme ways: either they occur entirely together in unison or in parallel octaves, or they move as independently as if the other did not exist at all. This is in a certain way another form of monophony: for the first case cannot really be called polyphony; and in the second case, it is a double-monophony, since the voices have no relation to one another. What we hear is simultaneous but independent. Yet this difference is still rhythmically connected. The same rhythm connects both voices leaving no doubt that the result is the product of intentional creation and not one of chance.

Overall, one has the impression of hearing something unfinished, like witnessing an experiment. Against the overwhelmingly dominant monophonic background, polyphony in Japanese music was always a fringe movement which was never seriously pursued in any sustained way. This can be seen in the small number of two-voiced pieces.

One of the greatest achievements of Japanese culture is the consistent and widely promoted development of simplicity as opposed to complexity. It is no contradiction that this simplicity involves such extreme refinement, consisting of developments in the area of microtonality as well as in instrumental and vocal sound quality. It makes sense that a second voice would disturb rather than enrich such subtleties.