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GRADUAL MODIFICATIONS OF THE GAGAKU TRADITION

Robert Garfias

In May and June of 1959 the Gagaku musicians and dancers of the Japanese Imperial Household made a performance tour of the United States. Since mid-1958 I had been doing research on the present practice of Gagaku, Imperial Court Music, in Japan and from the beginning of 1959 had been taking regular lessons in the Palace Music Department. When plans for the tour to America were made I was asked by the Japanese Government to accompany the group as an attaché to the Imperial Household Board of Ceremonies. With this personal experience as a background, I would like briefly to describe the training system and social structure of the Imperial Palace musicians as well as attempt to evaluate their position at the time of their return from the successful tour of America.

The musicians and dancers of the Japanese Imperial Household form what is probably the oldest continuing performing tradition in the world. Many of the musicians still bear the family names of the early musicians who introduced the music from China and Korea to Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries. Until about the eleventh century, Gagaku was used for both court ceremonies and as the entertainment music of the court nobles and peers. The military and later merchant classes which subsequently came to prominence in Japan developed their own art forms, thus ending the entertainment usage of Gagaku. However, up through the mid-nineteenth century, the small nucleus of traditional families were allowed to continue the practice as ceremonial music in a few special Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples and as a kind of ceremonial entertainment in the Emperor's small court in Kyoto. In the mid-nineteenth century when power was nominally restored to Emperor Meiji, the musicians of these ancient families were gathered together in Tokyo and were placed under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Household Agency under which they remain to this day.

As in any musical tradition, the practice cannot be understood in its totality by a study of recorded theory alone. The gap between theory and practice is too great. In Gagaku emphasis is placed on just those aspects of performance which the theory and notation have left to oral tradition; expression, phrasing and melodic inflection. Of Gagaku up until the twelfth century we know very little, for it seems that it was such a flourishing art at that time that there was little need to record it. From the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries when Gagaku fell out of popularity and into seclusion the musicians realized the complex practice of the earlier periods was disappearing. During this period some of the court musicians wrote great historical and theoretical works on the art, which together with the examples of early notation form almost the complete resource material on ancient practice.

By the time of the writing of these historical and theoretical works there were already many aspects of practice which could not be explained by the authors themselves. In many instances we can be sure of the path that gradual modification has taken. We know, for example, that in place of the present system of six modes there was a system of twelve modes, and that the tunings for the stringed instruments were more complex than the present pentatonic tunings. We know further that before the musicians were gathered together in Tokyo in the Meiji period (mid-nineteenth century) there were different schools of playing among them, so widely divergent that the musicians of different schools could not perform together. These performance styles were combined when the musicians were centralized in Tokyo and the style of the most influential members took precedence.

With this brief consideration of the dilution of the tradition of these musicians let us now consider their position in the present day. Training begins at the age of about eleven or twelve years old. This training period lasts ten years. From the first year the young musician is taught the ceremonial vocal music, one of the three wind instruments and the dance. Since the Meiji period, Western music has also been a requirement of the Imperial Household Musicians for use in the Emperor's entertainments and therefore, the first year student also begins learning some instrument of the Western symphony orchestra. He continues all these studies throughout the



ten years of the training period and in the third or fourth year he will also be taught to play on the Gagaku stringed instruments. During this period he spends about six hours a day in the palace music department with his lessons and practice. After this he attends night school for his regular education and in former times would return home each evening to be given additional private lessons by some member of his immediate family though this practice is no longer much in use.

During this training period, several examinations are held, the most important of these is held at the end of the ten-year period. It has been remarked by some of the musicians that it is the teacher who is actually being judged by his peers rather than the student during this examination. The examination once passed, the student, now about twenty-one or twenty-two years old, is admitted to the ranks of the *Gakushi*, or music teachers, which includes all the court musicians except for the two *Gakuchō*, or chief musicians, who are usually chosen from among the elders of the group by officers of the Imperial Household Agency.

The young musician then assumes all the responsibilities of a full-fledged court musician. He must take part in the weekly dance, instrumental and western music rehearsals. He must also perform Gagaku for the fifty or so occasions a year which are required of the musicians besides the several performances of western music for the Emperor's banquets. These Gagaku performances are, for the most part, ceremonial occasions surrounding the life of the Emperor. The musicians also make several trips during the year to play at the special Imperial shrines scattered throughout the country. Only in very recent years has the Imperial Household Agency initiated the practice of having public performances. Two such performances are given annually in the Palace Music Department. This means that by far the largest number of performances by the court musicians are never heard by the general public.

Almost all the musicians of the Imperial Palace ensemble are the direct descendants of the traditional families of musicians to the court. There have been, however, many additions to these families, most commonly by the *yōshi* system, or adoption by marriage. In such a case, a man from outside the court would marry a woman of one of the court families, take her name and afterwards become one of the regular court musicians. The *yōshi* system is falling out of favor in Japan today, and recent members from outside the court have been allowed to keep their own names. There are a number of marriages by court musicians to members of the other guild families, but endogamy is not required.

There has been a great liberal tendency in Japan in post-war years. One result of this trend has been the fact that many of the court musicians will no longer force their own sons to follow in their profession. There are very few boys of eleven or twelve who would be willing to give their lives to the rather strict ten-year training period in order to end up with a very low salaried job under rather feudalistic social conditions playing a kind of music which few people in Japan have ever heard. The Imperial Household Agency well realized that if the art was to survive and the musicians themselves could not supply enough new members to the department it would have to be opened to people from outside the traditional families. At the present time, the music department entrance examinations are open to the sons of employees of the Imperial Household Agency. Applicants from outside the Palace are accepted on the condition that someone within the Palace will act as personal sponsor. It would seem that if the

examinations were to be opened to applicants outside the palace some needed additions could be made to the ranks of the musicians. However, it was remarked by one of the younger members of the group that were members to be recruited from outside the palace they are apt to be more enthusiastic because they would be members by choice and not solely by birth, and in the eyes of some of the elder musicians, it would not do to have their own sons, the bearers of the ancient tradition, outshone by outsiders. It is because of the pride that the musicians have had in their long hereditary tradition that they have resisted its dilution.

The continuation of the tradition poses a serious problem. At the beginning of the Meiji period (mid-nineteenth century) there were gathered about 100 court musicians in Edo (now Tokyo) from the various shrines and temples in Japan. This number gradually dwindled to forty-six just before World War II. Half of this number were conscripted into military service and of this number only half returned alive. The difficult post-war years forced many of the musicians to seek other means of livelihood and at the present time there are only twenty-five regular musicians plus six students. The rapidly decreasing number of performers greatly hampers the flexibility of the group and consequently many of the larger complex dances and instrumental pieces can no longer be performed.

The present court musicians believe that their additional ability to perform Western Art music is of great advantage to their general musicality, an asset which earlier generations of court musicians lacked. This is a moot point. Certainly the price of this advantage was a high one, for the time and energy devoted to the study and practice of Western music has weakened the Gagaku tradition. Earlier musicians may not have had the advantages of a knowledge of western music, but the Gagaku repertoire of the present court musicians is only a fraction of the vast repertoire of former generations. Each year the number of pieces taught to the younger musicians and practiced by the ensemble becomes smaller and though the present tradition still makes use of about 150 pieces the loss of the various complex performance techniques is regrettable.

The tempo of life in the twentieth century has also had its effect on the Gagaku tradition. If one listens to the recordings made by the Imperial Court Musicians of thirty-five years ago, one notices that the tempo is much slower than that of today. There has also been a general tendency to shorten the dance pieces because in their complete length they would be so long as to be unrepresentable under ordinary conditions. Even in its present shortened and accelerated condition there are few people who would say that Gagaku is lively. It is an art which makes use of gradations in gravity and broadness of tempo to a degree that a western trained ear may not be able to differentiate. Consider also the fact that almost all the compositions that have been performed in public and recorded by the Imperial Court musicians are in the classification of fast music (*hayagaku*). There are yet two more classifications for compositions of even slower meter and tempo. These are rarely performed or even rehearsed much any more.

All indications are that the tradition is well on the way to rapid disintegration. Enough of the tradition is still intact and especially with the resources and memory of the older musicians the art can well be restored to its former glory. However, there are at least two reasons why this may not happen. First, the largest number of the musicians have no objective viewpoint about their present condition. They are not too concerned about their rapidly decreasing numbers, about the shrinking of the repertoire, about the fact that there is in some cases only one maker for their specialized instruments and no one to carry on this tradition either. The second and perhaps most important reason is that there is little real interest in this music in Japan. Since the Meiji era music education in Japan has meant Western music with the result that most Japanese will feel more comfortable listening to Western music than to traditional Japanese music. The still rather large number whose interest lies in the traditional Japanese music prefer the Noh, Kabuki and such later art forms. With no popular interest in their art, the musicians feel isolated fulfilling only those functions required of them as Imperial Musicians and, as one of their members ironically remarked, "continuing to play in their own coffins."

It is improbable that Gagaku will ever completely die out as it still serves too important a function in the ritual and ceremonial life of Japan.

At each important occasion the musicians compose new music in the Gagaku style, as in the case of the new pieces that were composed in honor of the recent wedding of the Crown Prince. The Gagaku style is gradually changing, generation by generation, day by day. These changes are inevitable. What is regrettable is the rapid shrinking of the base tradition on which these changes are superimposed. It is very possible that the recent successful tour of the United States by these musicians may stimulate more interest in Gagaku in Japan. There have already been a few indications of this. However, the degree of this interest seems slight indeed. It will be very difficult to gain a wide audience for an art form in which the refinements of its theory and practice are so subtle as to go by unnoticed except by the performers themselves.

Some of the musicians have returned from their American tour with a genuine concern for the future of their tradition. Some of the forgotten practices are being re-examined and the near-forgotten pieces revived. Questions concerning the authenticity of the Chinese origin of Gagaku do not detract from the fact that it is the oldest continuing music and dance tradition in the world. Regardless of its antiquity, it is an art of great refinement and complexity which deserves wider appreciation.

TECHNIQUES AND DEVICES - PITCH CONTROL

T. Gerald Dyar

Equipment can affect the pitch of recordings in two ways: If the speed of the machine is not the same each time it is turned on there will be a fixed change in pitch up or down every time a recording is made. If the speed of the machine is not constant the result is a steady wavering of pitch, called flutter or wow. This rhythmic rise and fall of pitch may range from a few milliseconds to several seconds. As far as the writer knows there are no machines made for the non-professional that are capable of running at exact speed even under the comparatively stable power conditions that exist in metropolitan areas of the United States. The majority of these machines will, however, maintain steady speed during any given recording.

Professional equipment, in the strict sense of the word, is capable of maintaining both pitch accuracy and stability under most conditions encountered in the United States. However, such equipment is expensive, ranging in cost from six hundred to several thousand dollars, as opposed to otherwise satisfactory equipment that can be obtained for as little as \$150.

When used by the field recordist, the performance of all machines depends on public and private power companies the world over. Typical variations include line potentials ranging from 100 to 250 volts, and frequencies of 0 (direct current), 25, 40, 50 and 60 cycles. Often commercial power is unavailable. Current practice is to depend on accessory hardware to make the recording itself as nearly exact as possible. Such devices fall into two broad categories:

I) Portable power supplies: A) batteries, B) spring drives, C) portable generators, D) automobile electrical systems.

II) Power control equipment: A) voltage regulators: 1) manual, 2) automatic, B) Frequency regulators: 1) manual (mechanical changes in equipment) 2) automatic: a) tuning fork amplifiers, b) motor generator sets, c) inverters.

To cope with all this the musicologist has to be also an electrical engineer. It would not be so bad if all of these devices really solved the problem, but the plain truth is that they do not. At best a probable pitch error is reduced by perhaps a fourth. Further improvement can be achieved only by increasing cost, complexity and weight of equipment.

Since the "hardware" approach does not completely solve the problem another method seems indicated. What can we do when we know that a pitch error exists in almost all field recordings and that rarely if ever is the exact degree of error known?

What is needed is a means of positively identifying on the tape itself any pitch error present. Since variation in tape speed is directly proportional to pitch error, such pitch labeling would make playback corrections straightforward.