Pre-concert Remarks by Barbara Ruch

9th Season Concert

Glories of the Japanese Music Heritage
ANCIENT SOUNDSCAPES REBORN
Japanese Sacred Gagaku Court Music
And Secular Art Music

Sunday, March 30, 2014 at 4pm
Miller Theatre, Columbia University
New York City

Good afternoon, everyone! Welcome to you all on this Sunday afternoon venture into the "Soundscapes of Japanese Heritage Music." My name is Barbara Ruch, and I have the joyous job of being the point person here at Columbia University, bringing together so many wonderful musicians and composers from otherwise separated schools and departments of Columbia, faculty and students, administrators, the Music Performance Program, the Miller Theatre's staff, etc., as well as professional musicians from Australia and Japan. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart for coming together, united, in their creative professional ways to contribute to the renaissance of Japanese Heritage instruments.

Did you know that the musical instruments you came to hear tonight were banned from Japanese schools in the early 1870s by Japanese government education policy – a ban that, incredibly continued for the next 140 years, first by design, and then later by inertia until 2002?!

The result is that generations of Japanese missed ever hearing the kind of concert you will hear tonight. Another result, of course, is that educated exclusively in western music, Japanese now excel in Western music venues all over the world.

Curiously, although banned from the Japanese schools that educate its citizens, Japan did not exactly abandon this extraordinary 1300-year old heritage music. These magnificent instruments have been, and are still, deeply revered, and deliberately preserved for performance by professionals within the imperial court for ritual occasions, and it is also nurtured in major temples and shrines around the country as part of sacred Buddhist and Shinto rites by devoted talented amateur musicians. But how could a country ban its own musical roots in this way? And why!? Behind such outrageous and arbitrary events there is always a kind of logic hiding somewhere, no matter how flawed.

This extraordinary case was triggered by Japan's 19th-century encounter with Europe's Industrial Revolution. At the collapse of the Shogunate and the start of the Meiji Emperor's long reign into the 20th century, the new Japanese government, driven by a fear of being overpowered (even colonized) by technologically advanced European powers, which they saw already happening in China, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, etc., moved quickly to protect themselves by acquiring the technological fruits of the Industrial Revolution as soon as possible. In came all kinds of foreign technologies which defined so-called modernization: navy steamships, railroads, factories, all kinds of machinery.

But persuaded that the Industrial Revolution must have occurred, not because those European folk's brains were any smarter, but rather that it must be because of some Western cultural mind-set – some Western cultural DNA – it became essential to find the components, that DNA, and replicate the cultural universals found in Western society that must have made them "modern." In the huge turmoil that followed, Japanese culture itself was turned upside down. Robes and swords went out; uniforms and guns were in. Long-haired coiffeurs went out, and beards & frockcoats were in. Traditional pastimes like tea ceremony seemed passé; seemingly universal Western pastimes like ballroom dancing and smoking tobacco were embraced as symbols of cultural, civilized, modern life and spread quickly. Emperor Meiji himself took up both. Smoking especially had that "Modern Aura." He even strongly advocated it as a new modern European health practice, and in fact he insisted that all his ladies-in-waiting take it up—until they finally rebelled at the stench accumulating in their palace living quarters, and Empress Haruko had to intervene and ask him to please back off. But government and industry both could see there was big money to be made by importing machines for the manufacture of cigarettes.

So how in the world does music fit into this situation – into all this so-called civilized-modernized behavior and hi-tech?

The briefest tour of Europe and America revealed to the Japanese that machines were everywhere, even music was dominated by never-before-seen musical instruments that were machines. Just look at them. That huge, complexly-levered, sound-producing machine as big as a boat dressed up as living room furniture, called the piano. Those giant mind-blowing engines called pipe organs in places of worship. The military were marching in the streets playing brasses with slides and levers. In ballrooms and concert halls the wide array of woodwinds, every one, were strewn with keys and screws! To modernize a country, one's citizens must be required to master the machines of music as well.

How embarrassing that not a single Japanese musical instrument is a machine!

Japanese music was born out of a close identity with nature – the ryūteki, hichiriki, and shakuhachi flutes are pure and simple sections taken from living stalks of bamboo – each with its own special, individual reverberation. The body of each koto is a pure and simple solid piece of fine wood, each from a living tree which, as any botanist will tell you, has its own unique measurable living vibrating resonance. Every one of them is worlds away from pre-strung, pre-keyed Western music machines.

There is a cliché that music is a universal language. The trouble with clichés is that they often perpetuate misconceptions by masquerading as common sense. Music is indeed one of the two highly developed and treasured modes of communication unique to human beings; the other, of course, being the capacity to speak together in the complex language of words. We grow up effortlessly absorbing a spoken language, maybe even two, but there is nothing universal about that language. No. Each is completely culture bound. The same is true with the music we grow up with that surrounds us. An unfamiliar spoken language, an unfamiliar music is a challenge. We do not love what we do not understand. If our hearts and minds are sedentary, we stay forever stuck in a monolingual state, or in a mono-musical state all our lives. Had it not been for the recent renaissance, brought about by new young generations, both in Japan and abroad, who deliberately sought historic roots and who have fallen in love with the color and timber and power of these heritage instruments, we would not be here celebrating this music tonight.

So, before the music begins, let me give you some clues to help at least with the language and grammar of Gagaku's music. First, please note the significance of the space in which Gagaku is performed – the aura that surrounds it. The green carpet is the floor of nature's house. Gagaku was originally played outside under the blue sky to be heard by the "life-force spirits" that power our natural world. So the green carpet with its red lacquer railing is a sacred space separated from the mundane world. It is the space from which the celebrants speak musically with unseen forces.

The gagaku orchestra is unlike a western orchestra, which is led by a conductor who holds the reins and the whip to control the ensemble externally, and steer the music interpretively. A gagaku orchestra has no such conductor and is never controlled by an outside interpreter. The ensemble begins each work with a prefatory "netori" or "sound catching" which is not a random turning up, such as we hear in Western orchestras. It is a brief but specific learned exercise, where each plays individually, until all breathe together in unison and settle into the pace and the mood, and designated seasonal mode required by the main work that follows.

The three wind instruments are central to all works in the Gagaku repertory. The horizontal bamboo flute, the ryūteki or dragon flute, is the lead instrument. When it starts, then the main piece begins. The dragon flute is so named because it is believed to sound the way a dragon's call would sound descending to our earth from the other

world, its home, in the clouds. The shō, or 17-pipe bamboo mouth-organ, played by continuously inhaling and exhaling, is said to be shaped like a phoenix bird with its wings closed. It hums continuously in on-going clusters or in single notes of beautiful song like an angelic bird. The hichiriki, or short vertical double-reed bamboo flute, can make extraordinary portamento slides but also speak with assertive diction that can banish evil and bad vibes. Its voice is intended to carry with deep feeling, to the heights of heaven. The drums keep not the rhythm but the pace, and the Gagaku koto and biwa, unlike their more modern descendants, do not play melody but rather function in a percussive and punctuation mode.

The first time you hear Gagaku you may feel at a loss. You may not know how to listen or what to listen for. Oh Heavens! Whoops! Somebody suddenly sounded off-key! But let's think about it. Off-key from what? The musicians here have mastered these works. *They* are not off-key. That *is* the key of this intricate, fascinating sound art. It refuses to be frozen into the separate set of Western keys that are now so burned into our brains that we can no longer recognize interim or alternative tones. I used to imagine floating on Gagaku music as a relief as if breaking free and strolling barefoot across the cool grass of a green lawn deliberately not walking on pre-laid stepping stones designed for getting from point A to point B in Western music—the kind we always dutifully follow unthinkingly. The more times you hear this Gagaku music, the more familiar, indeed even the more essential its intonations, its accents, its special pronunciations feel.

How will we know when a piece has ended? Just as the wind might rise with the snap of branches and the ping of raindrops as weather gathers, so it concludes just as a rain shower tapers off – slowly, fewer and fewer rain drops, fewer and fewer notes. The musicians, one by one, lay down their instruments till only three then two then one are left. And then with the koto's final ping – it is concluded. Please listen for these details. It will give you a sense of participation to recognize them – a kind of joy – like recognizing words spoken in a language you are just learning.

During intermission you will have time to read the program about Part II where we will bring you Zen meditative music for the shakuhachi flute and then will come Salon Art Music for the modern koto.

In the final Part III, Professor Brad Garton, composer and Director of Columbia's eminent Computer Music Center will say a word or two about our new collaboration. We will experience then the musical embrace of 1300-year-old heritage instruments with 21st-century computer-generated music. Computers transcend the concept of machines and, as acoustical and digital music scales hand in hand in astral projection, I think in many ways the 8th-century Gagaku celebrants would rejoice to see and hear their music probe the cosmos this way as their earliest music had intended.

So now let the program begin. Relax – let you mind and hearts run barefoot over cool grass. And enjoy.

Thank you very much.