

**Strings of Memory:
The Biwa and Narrative Song in Medieval Japan
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Merkin Hall, New York City
March 4, 2007**

I have been asked today to give some background on the marvelous instrumental and vocal art of Junko Tahara, the biwa master, and her ensemble that we will soon hear in concert this afternoon.

Now, since I am not a musician, I am sure it was because I am a medieval Japanese historian that I was honored by this invitation. But I have given this some thought, and I'm sorry to say, I don't think I want to be a medieval historian this afternoon. I just want to be a person who, for some years, has loved the extraordinary, out-of-this-world music of the biwa, and I would like to address myself to the task of how best we can prepare together to listen to the music of Junko Tahara, a star performer and interpreter of biwa vocal narrative music. Especially if you have never heard her, or the biwa, before.

True, the music you will hear today was born out of one of the world's oldest extant and most powerful instrumental and vocal traditions that goes back to the 7th century. And Ms. Tahara has mastered that powerful tradition. But she is not just about ancient and medieval traditional music. She also has pioneered the creation of a modern ensemble. Yes, it is based on that old tradition, but she has brilliantly succeeded in bringing her voice and the call of the biwa into dialogue with new young 21st-century audiences, living instrumentalists and composers, and modern librettists in Japan. In fact her effort is to bring the instrument itself forward in time, and to audiences abroad, and to remove the barrier of the Japanese language altogether.

So I am not here today as a scholar, but as a fan, and as an advocate, and also with a few reflections of my own to share.

Ms. Tahara is indisputably a star in Japan. But she has traveled the world, too, appearing here in New York, for example at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and other major venues. But in this narrow (and I repeat) narrow New York music world that overflows with stars, I regret to say that "music" still means "Western Music." All else tends to be viewed as "ethnic," "foreign," "exotic," "not the *real* thing," etc. Stars from those remote exotic planets may appear in New York in concert from time to time like Ms. Tahara. She appears like a meteor out of the sky—soon to vanish!—much to our sorrow and loss. In this world capital of music—New York City—there is no place to turn to permanently to nourish and enrich our encounters with instruments and voices like hers. We rarely have chances such as we have today to breathe in deeply, to imbibe, the dramatic and moving music of biwa song.

So I am here today as an advocate who hopes you in the audience and your friends will help make sure the biwa and instruments like it gain full citizenship among the instruments of our

Western world. If you don't quite know how, let's join hands with Music From Japan and let's get together later for serious talk.

But today, I would like to focus on the realities we have before us: three things. First, a magnificent instrument, the biwa. Second, a magnificent artist. Third, a specific biwa repertory that today stretches over 700 years from the 14th-century *The Tale of the Heike* to the 21st century.

Let's start with the first of the three, the magnificent instrument, the biwa. I am guessing, but surely less than 1% (if that) of the audience here today has ever touched or held or played a biwa. So let's see if we can disassemble some of the misconceptions about what kind of an instrument the biwa really is—and then perhaps open some windows on its potential, especially for those of you in the audience who may be instrumentalists or composers.

As an aside I should say that we have just started a new training program at Columbia University for our students to learn to play the great traditional classical Japanese instruments of the 1300-year-old *Gagaku* orchestra repertory—among which is included (Voila!) the oldest form of the Japanese biwa, the *gaku-biwa*.

This is not Ms. Tahara's biwa, but hear me out. I watch our young Columbia students (eyes shining) pick up this beautiful instrument as if it were a new born baby—not quite sure how to hold it, afraid to break it. Then, before any explanation can even be made, I see, too, in a matter of seconds they start to hold it like a guitar, as they have seen on MTV. And they then try to strum it or pick out on it some familiar tune.

This is the unfortunate fate of the biwa's shape. We have to immediately disenchant these new young players. "A biwa is not a guitar."

Certainly, humankind's proto-typical lute evolved into multitudinous manifestations as it spread from Persia, Arabia, Iran, Central Asia, China, Korean, Japan, and off to Greece, Africa, Europe, and yes, even eventually to Nashville!

But the lute, called a biwa, is not a guitar.

Our European-based education has conditioned us first to see the lute in an elegant lady-like context. Vermeer's famous 1664 painting "Woman with a Lute" gives it a soft fur-like feminine aura. Two centuries later Jane Austen's novels in the early 1800s make it clear that the instruments that were considered suitable for ladies in the drawing room were piano, harp, and guitar—to each of which were expected to be the accompaniment of those lovely ladies' decorous songs. Even the Spanish classical guitar, though much more masculine, is deeply romantic. Then, fast forward, to present-day America, we have the violent, phallic version of the guitar. But the biwa is not a guitar.

In the first place, the strings of the Asian biwa are strung over usually four (at the most five) high frets, which means that unlike, say, the guitar, or the shamisen, or even the violin (which have no

such high frets and therefore can easily produce unlimited melody), the biwa is an instrument not designed to play melodies.

A biwa's music comes from at least four sources. First, its silk strings (in most cases four strings) are tuned to different keys in a sound box with pegs.

Second, the way the strings rest (or do not rest) on the four frets alters their resonance, and music will differ whether each string rests in its own individual ridge in the bent-back neck, or whether in some cases more than one string, tuned to different keys, will share the same ridge in the neck, thereby forcing them to resonate against each other, deliberately clashing, as it were. There is a famous line from the 9th-century Chinese poet Bo Juyi that praises the biwa's sound. He writes, "All four strings resonate together, like the sound of silk tearing." Clearly he is not speaking of melody. It is almost an erotic sound to which he refers.

Third, then of course, there is the way the fingers of the left hand depress the strings just posterior to the frets with differing pressures in order to alter the pitch—allowing it to moan.

And fourth is the essential role of the plectrum in the right hand—the way it is stroked across one string or several strings at a time, whether lightly caressed, or alternatively, violently thrashed.

Then, too, the way the strings may be made deliberately to rub against each other or against the wooden instrument itself with a resonance called *sawari*, or "deliberate obstruction," is one of the instrument's great gifts to music.

All of these techniques give the biwa a sound and a creative potential no other instrument I know of has.

There are, roughly speaking, five types of biwa in Japan, all more or less pear shaped. The first is the *gaku-biwa*, the one I mentioned that Columbia students of the *Gagaku* ensemble are now learning. This oldest of the world's biwas is and was used in high court ritual and eventually for aristocratic salon musicales. Like all biwas it is a flat pear-shaped instrument. (Actually not "pear" but "biwa" shaped. A biwa too is a fruit, a small egg-sized fruit. A biwa is not a pear. But we will compromise, and say pear-shaped.) These high court biwas were made of expensive woods like rosewood, red sandalwood (*shitan*), quince, and maple (*kaede*). Like all biwas the *gaku-biwa* has two crescent-moon shaped sound holes on its face. It has four silk strings strung over four frets, with internal sound box, bent neck, and tuning pegs. This *gaku-biwa* came over the continental Silk Road and was imported to Japan from T'ang China in the 7th century. Although in China the biwa (or pipa, in Chinese) has changed radically since then, the *gaku-biwa* has been preserved precisely in its 7th-century form in *Gagaku* music in Japan today and is therefore a precious cultural heritage.

But Japan has four other types of biwa today, all of them Japanese native innovations.

After the first, the *gaku-biwa*, there is the second type, called the *Heike biwa*. It has five frets, not four, and was born around the 10th century among male priests who were known as *biwa-hōshi*, or biwa-priests. This biwa evolved specifically to punctuate and dramatize musically the vocal

narrative songs these priests created to recount local legends and anomalous events, battlefield stories, eulogies of heroes who died, and requiems for the dead. The *Heike biwa* ultimately became the instrument that embraced the singing of the great epic *The Tale of the Heike* and from which that biwa took its name.

The third type of biwa is the *mōsō-biwa*, literally, “blind-priest biwa,” used by huge numbers of mendicant, itinerant, lower-echelon priests who wandered the country and used the biwa as a musical drone to which they intoned the sutras. They were hired wherever they went to exorcize demonic forces that inhabited the hearth or home. The *mōsō-biwa* was a cheap instrument, some large, some small, some capable of being disassembled for easy portability.

Biwa priests of all kinds eventually evolved into local story tellers and news reporters as they traveled the length and breadth of medieval Japan. They formed guilds during the middle ages and granted rankings according to ability. In the 17th century the Tokugawa shogunate licensed and tightly controlled the biwa narrators, taxing and censoring them. But after the downfall of the shogunate in the 18th century there emerged two modern forms of biwa, both evolving from the Kyushu area *mōsō-biwa*. They are the fourth type and fifth type.

One was the *Satsuma biwa* from Satsuma, or Kagoshima, in Southern Kyushu—a bigger, higher instrument with four frets and a huge triangular plectrum ideal for telling rousing battle tales, especially those related to the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate in the early 19th century.

The other was the *Chikuzen biwa*—Ms. Tahara’s instrument—developed in the Fukuoka area of Kyushu, usually made of paulownia wood, which has a somewhat mellower tone, not to say any less powerful impact.

Both of these modern forms, the *Satsuma biwa* and the *Chikuzen biwa* have also developed simultaneously five-string versions, which are called *nishiki-biwa*, a name that comes from the Japanese word for brocade (*nishiki*).

The addition of this fifth string, nestled in with the fourth, makes possible an impossible-to-describe brocade of sound when they are employed together. Today you can look and listen for it.

At first glance, to the uninitiated eye, all five types of biwa may look pretty much the same, but all differ somewhat in size or thinness of body, or shape of resonating box, or height or number of frets, or plectrum size, or wood-material, and so forth. But each is especially well suited to the repertory of vocal narrative with which they are inextricably joined. I have no doubt that Ms. Tahara can play all of these five types of biwa, but her lifelong love has been the *Chikuzen biwa* with the added fifth string which you will soon see and hear.

And it is the instrument that has allowed her even to leave the vocal Japanese narratives behind and experiment in launching new vocal sounds and ensemble music surrounding her biwa.

I said earlier that the biwa is not an instrument designed to play melodies.

Well then, what *does* it play?

It plays the mood; it plays the tension; it plays the grief, the atmosphere; it detaches your stubborn mind from the present and lifts it into a totally different emotional atmospheric world. It plays the euphoria; it plays angst; it plays meditation. The *Heike biwa* sounds out the clash of weapons, the whirr of arrows, and even more, the tearing pain of souls. When the plectrum strikes the strings, it is as if directly on flesh and bone and nerve. Its soundwaves seem to penetrate the heart.

Exorcists once used the single string of an archer's bow to pluck a fearsome twang that could be heard, it was believed, well into the next world so as to keep away evil spirits that might penetrate us, possess us, or inflict us with mental or physical illnesses. The strings of the biwa will sometimes also be plucked with the corner of its plectrum so as to produce a loud 'twang,' not unlike that of the exorcists.

In the West, in vocal music, the singer is "accompanied" by an "accompanist." It is important that we not say that the sung narrative of biwa music is accompanied by the biwa. It is the biwa, in preludes, that sets the mood; in interludes it builds emotion between phrases of text; it exclaims; it punctuates with strokes of emphases; it weeps. So there is very little overlap (more of an interplay) between the human voice and the emotion of the biwa. In modern jargon, in the cinema genre, the biwa might almost be called the indispensable emotional "soundtrack" which can make or break a story. It has a huge shared importance to the power of the story.

So much for the biwa instrument and its integral role in the poetic and musical art of vocal narrative. We are about to hear a great master of both of these arts. So let me tell you the story of one such great master in whose tradition Junko Tahara lives and creates. His story may help put this instrument, this art, and its impact, into perspective.

In the year 1371, one of Japan's (the world's) greatest composer-performers in history died. He was a Buddhist priest who was a great master of the biwa and its vocal narratives. His name was Kakuichi of Akashi, a place on the Inland Sea coast, west of present-day Kobe. When he died he was the highest ranking *biwa-hōshi* in Japan, a *sōkengyō*. In his seventies, blind, and no doubt sensing that he had little time left, Kakuichi had sung and dictated for transcription to his chosen disciple, Teiichi, the mammoth libretto of the masterpiece that had been the life work of his mature years, and which he had spent his last decade perfecting.

We have to understand that this was by tradition (and still is) an orally taught and transmitted musical art. You listen, and you master. But Kakuichi's vocal libretto masterpiece was at last transcribed, master to disciple, on paper. The great epic in question was the *Heike Monogatari* or *The Tale of the Heike*. One canto of this, by the way, in somewhat modernized arrangement, is the last piece presented in this afternoon's program. It is *Nasu no Yōichi*, the story of Yōichi, the young boy from Nasu, that recounts the challenge on which his life and the honor of his clan rests, and his success that drew roars of praise from not only his colleagues but from his enemies as well who were watching.

Kakuichi had been trained as a monk at the great Tendai Buddhist scriptorium monastery in the mountains at Shōshazan, near Himeji, where he received a good liturgical and musical education. But in his thirties he was struck by blindness which brought an end to his duties as a monk at a scriptorium.

Fortunately, Shōshazan had long been a stop-off resting spot for itinerant biwa-priests—a melting pot for different strains of chanting and instrumentalization and for the exchanging of tales from widely separate areas of Japan.

Many who came had been blind battle singers who could perform old episodes about the Gempei Wars from 200 years earlier. When Kakuichi went blind he determined to become a biwa singer in order to earn a living. His talent was monumental and in about two decades he became the most outstanding and highest ranking biwa priest in the capital of Kyoto.

Kakuichi's final master work, the *Heike*, is an oratorio-like work made up of some 182 cantatas for solo male voice and biwa, each lasting for 30-40 minutes.

As you can imagine, the whole *Heike* was never performed in one sitting. Rather, individual patrons, or a given audience, would request to hear one or more of its cantos in accordance with the season, or their mood, or some other need.

The subject of the *Heike* is the events leading up to and following the cataclysmic Gempei Wars in the 12th century between the Genji and the Heike clans. It was the first armed civil war in the capital city of Kyoto since it was established in 794. After more than 300 years of peace, here was a civil war that set the stage for the institution of the first military shogunate in Japan.

I have to tell you it is an astonishing thing to reread Kakuichi's *Heike* today. It is as if it were written on the basis of our present newspaper reports—only in historic dress. It recounts political maneuvering; the burning ambition and subterfuges involved in the eventual rise to power of the Heike clan leader Taira no Kiyomori; his innocent young daughter's marriage to the reigning Emperor, and Kiyomori's elevation to grandfather of the crown prince and instantly to the highest political post in the land. Then it tells of Kiyomori's arrogance and obliviousness to criticism, and the subsequent bloody civil war that he and his allies engage in with those who challenge him—the Minamoto family, known as the Genji clan, who were the rough Eastern country warriors. In the end, it recounts the aftermath: the subsequent decline and horrific and pathetic eventual annihilation of the Taira family, the whole Heike clan.

Kakuichi's *Heike* is a tale of deep respect for military men, high and low, on both sides and for their codes of discipline and carefully honed skills. At the same time, it is an oratorio about the total folly of war.

It may be about war, but it does not belong only to soldiers. Like beads on a rosary he strings his cantatas together with pearl-like vignettes of the women whose bravery, exploitation, charisma, grief and wisdom all give stunning illumination and perspective to what is going on in this tragic tale.

Although he was separated in time from the Heike events by more than 150 years, he perceived the start of it all over again, in his own day, when events led to the downfall of, this time, the Genji clan. Kakuichi grasped the essential quality of that earlier civil war, those terrifying historic events, their generic nature, their universality, their metaphoric meaning, for all Japanese. He never even dreamed their meaning for us.

There remain more than 50 variant antiquarian versions of the Heike calamity still extant in archives around Japan that scholars study. But Kakuichi's telling of it overshadowed all other versions and other singers. His masterpiece also penetrated every conceivable performance and art genre of the time and since. But the episodes in Kakuichi's vocal narrative were so vivid and aesthetically potent that they were transformed into Noh plays, Kōwaka dances, and later, Kabuki plays and all manner of poetry and novels, television dramas, and films, down to the entire modern media. Indeed the great medieval Noh dramatist Zeami (only 8 years old when Kakuichi died) years later, long after Kakuichi's death, revealed the awe with which he held Kakuichi's masterpiece. He wrote "in Noh plays in which warriors appear we must without fail write the script in absolute faithfulness to Kakuichi's *Heike*." His characters define even today what heroes and heroines should be like; and the nature of pathos and victimhood; the foolishness of bravado; and the true humility of bravery.

Every Japanese, even today, knows the names and fates of scores of the individual people in Kakuichi's *Heike*, having met them now in all genre of the arts; they all know Yōichi of Nasu which you will soon hear.

Kakuichi's *Heike* succeeded in Japan where the writers of Western medieval epics such as *Beowulf*, or the *Song of Roland* did not. Even more so than the Greek epics. We somehow remember Helen of Troy or that Ulysses took an awfully long time to come home to Penelope or that Dido killed herself when Aeneas remembered his mission and left her to go off and found Rome. But we don't remember the main messages, the heavy tragic portrayal of ambition and of war or its effects, nor the ethical conduct that evolved into our culture out of these tragedies.

The new English translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* was just published and reviewed last week and has suddenly sparked recent editorials reminding us that we *should* have followed Thucydides' warning against military involvement in Sicily, which he said "does not concern us." And they point to the irony in Alcibiades saying, "Oh, the Sicilians will welcome the Athenians with flowers. We will be liberators not occupiers."

We in the West have forgotten so much from our epics. But Kakuichi's biwa masterpiece version of the *Heike* penetrated the cultural soul of Japan.

In the more than 600 years since Kakuichi's death, alterations in his libretto for performance have been small, not unlike the changes that conductors and soloists may make today in a composer's work.

In many ways, despite their differences, the musician Kakuichi of Akashi played a role in Japanese culture not unlike that played 400 years later in the European tradition by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Both men lived in an environment of sacred music. They began by

obeying those traditions but in the end went further to great creative choices. They also were exposed to the several secular and folk music traditions within traveling distance of their homes. Both were professional music makers for hire, who arranged and performed music for a living.

Although today the perspective of time permits us to view each of these men as the founder of the musical tradition that flowed from their genius, in their periods they were admired primarily as outstanding performers, Kakuichi as the virtuoso bard playing the biwa, Bach with choral and other music on the organ. Both were men of great conceptual talent, who were able to survey and bring together principal musical styles and regional manifestations of music and vocalized texts that had developed before them. They enriched all of these in a synthesis that set the future direction in each of their national traditions.

Kakuichi's "strings of memory," both the strings of his biwa, and the strings of tales and accounts and fleeting reminiscences that he gathered and wove together into a vocal narrative, became a priceless brocade of historic memory that created Japanese self-awareness and identity and a sense of belonging in an era when all else had seemed chaos. It is a sense of cultural belonging that can be felt even today.

Ironically in 1871, marking exactly the 500th anniversary of Kakuichi's death, the new Meiji government, having just overthrown the Tokugawa shogunate and being wholly enamored of everything Western, abolished all support for the biwa-playing bards and their national cultural traditions. They fell into poverty, and scattered, and had to find new alternative occupations. A huge chasm then open up in time, with only a few biwa singer musicians, truly living cultural treasures, keeping the art alive.

As we jump to the present, we all rejoice that the 20th century has brought a surge of new young singer-players and composers for the biwa, and now true pioneers such as Junko Tahara, who have not only rejuvenated the *Heike*, but are establishing new masterpieces for biwa artists and even new formats for ensemble performance.

You know, talking about what a certain music is like is a little bit like talking about what swimming is all about. If you have never experienced it, talk may inform, but it is hugely remote from the life-altering experience, even life-saving experience, that characterizes both learning how to swim and learning how to bathe in one of the greatest little-known musics of the world.

Which we are about to do now.

We are in for a deeply moving, wholly new musical immersion this afternoon. May these unfamiliar, extraordinary waves of sound and voice resonate through not just our ears, but through our bones, our flesh, and our souls, which is, after all, what any good instrument of exorcism should be able to do.

Thank you very much for coming.