

*The Ancient Asian Harp Reborn*

*"The Kugo"*

February 15, 2007

Remarks by Barbara Ruch

Tonight's program is an example of how miracles can indeed occur when there is a collaboration between science and art.

Through the scientific research of the extraordinary physicist cum music archaeology Prof. Bo Lowergren joined with the pioneering artistry of the harpist Tomoko Sugawara, you will hear live with your own ears the resurrection of music from the ancient kugo harp, a musical instrument widely loved over thousands of years from the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean throughout the Near East and Central Asia, to China, the Korean peninsula and ultimately captured in the cul-de-sac of Japan over a period of thousands of years.

You will see vividly with your own eyes how this instrument was lovingly portrayed in paintings and sculptures across the Euro-Asian continent for centuries until it was then somehow lost from sight in the cultural storm clouds of human history. And behind the scenes tonight, supporting this scientist and this artist, there is a remarkable cluster of ancient music specialists: instrument reconstruction-craftsmen who have brought this kugo and other instruments back to life.

Prof. Lowergren himself puts his theories and scientific data to use by applying them to the reconstruction of various ancient musical instruments uncovered archaeologically and recreating them in the basement workshop of his home. And the composer Stephen Dydo, too, has crafted various types of ancient Chinese musical instruments. Mr. Hong-Jun Liu, a long-time Chinese resident of Japan, is the master craftsman who reconstructed the kugo harp that Ms. Sugawara plays tonight, based on the eighth-century kugo preserved only in the Shōsōin imperial repository in Nara, Japan.

Then too, there are the musician-scholars of ancient music tablature such as Lawrence Picken, Rembrandt Wolpert, and Stephen Dydo who have decoded and trans-notated to lift sound from ancient Chinese and Japanese musical scores and make them understandable by musicians today.

As many of you know, Columbia last year launched the first permanent university-based classic Japanese music Gagaku-Hōgaku curriculum and performance ensemble initiated outside Japan.

Last March, at our very first open Gagaku instrumental workshop for Columbia students and New York musicians who were eager to learn to play this wonderful array of instruments, there appeared a tall, elegant, white-haired gentleman who quietly showed up unannounced and stepped into a workshop seat as a beginning student on the double-reed hichiriki. I am at a loss to describe our total surprise and delight when we discovered we had among us an intellectual prodigy, a fountain of knowledge about

Asian music and certainly one of the Western world's preeminent specialists of many aspects of Asian music archaeology.

The icing on the cake is that that gentleman, Bo Lowergren, is also such a kind, generous, and wholly enjoyable person who, to our delight, has become a treasured advisor to our long-range plans here at Columbia. Less than a month later Bo introduced us to the pioneering kugo harpist Tomoko Sugawara – and the seeds for tonight's program a year later were planted.

Although the kugo harp vanished from the Gagaku orchestra during the Heian period in Japan – perhaps around the 9th to 10th century – it remains eulogized in the lyrics of medieval Japanese literary works such as in the Noh play *Hagoromo* where its name is sung in the libretto, along with the shō, the koto and fue flutes. It is hard to say what led to its eventual abandonment in Japan. I can't help but wonder, as an amateur, whether it did not have at least something to do with the architectural lifestyle increasingly adopted by the Japanese elite that evolved in a chair-less manner on the floors of their residences. All the instruments that survived can most easily be held and played by someone seated in elegant polite posture low on the floor. And that's not the case with the kugo.

In the 21st century young Japanese are now more and more used to living with Western style chairs rather than with cushions on tatami floors. It may therefore be the right time for a kugo comeback. Ms. Sugawara plays a reconstructed one-and-only kugo, but she

is hoping that one day soon she will be able to recruit instrument makers who will manufacture kugo for student use and that she may take on students and allow the instrument to re-emerge in modern as well as classical music venues.

In any case, tonight we will learn about the kugo harp from a master scholar, and we will hear its thousand-year-old melodies and sounds played by a master musician.

The collaboration will now begin.