

From: Japanese Heritage Music Ensemble Director and Mentors
To: Ensemble Students
Re: The Nature of our Encounter and
the Rules of our Mutual Commitment

This course is a training course in instrumental music on magnificent Japanese instruments. They have the longest orchestral history on our earth and are now enjoying a renaissance globally in the 21st century among European, American, Australian, and Asian composers and instrumentalists. The opportunity offered to you here is not meant as a taste-testing dip into the exotic. Your mentors, masters of these treasured instruments, will introduce various aspects of their construction, demonstrate their various timbres, and let you hear their voices. One of the instruments will speak to you personally, and you will commit to be roommates for the year. It will change your life.

Through this experience you will discover things about yourself you never realized. You may be blessed to end up after a year as a protégé going to Japan, or even as a permanent member of this cutting-edge Columbia Instrumental Ensemble of New York.

THE ENSEMBLE CLASS AND ITS CLASSROOM

Entering the ensemble classroom means you are entering a Japanese music environment - - a total immersion experience. As in Zen meditation you will retire Euro-American behavior patterns and absorb the body language and mental reverence and respect inherent to the sacred, meditative and even the art music of Japan. Obviously all cellphones will be shut off during class hours, rehearsal hours, and concerts. There will be no exception to this rule, since infringement affects fellow students and mentors as well.

You will become as a disciple to a master. Your mentor is not here to serve you, but to serve a greater universal - - a magnificent Japanese musical tradition that goes back more than 1,000 years of human history and is the sole preserver of early Chinese, Korean and Near Eastern prototypes. Your job will be to help your mentors do that.

The renaissance of Japanese cultural heritage music today among 21st-century performers and composers attests to the fundamental power of this music to survive centuries, transcend the mundane and reach musical destinations that you will be amazed to experience. You will be among the first generation of Americans to pioneer the formation of these new ensembles outside Japan.

ATTENDANCE IS SACRED

There is no doubt that playing an instrument is a physical, mental, and spiritual undertaking. It is a life-changing experience. Just as you cannot learn chess without fully engaging your mental focus, so, with a musical instrument, it is essential to be fully engaged with your fingers, your breath, your posture, your inner mental focus, and achieve a oneness with the voice of the instrument. If you cut swim lessons, it is fatal; one day you drown. Thus attendance in class training sessions is absolutely essential. Treating these sessions lightly, dropping in late, skipping sessions will leave you in the end never feeling the beautiful freedom of self-confidence.

Our goals are that each week you and your instrument will bond more and more fully, and you and your ensemble partners will gradually achieve the skill to hear, breathe, and perform as one.

At semester end you will be able to share your achievement with New York music lovers at the ensemble's semester-end recital, surprising no one more than yourself at what you have mastered in only thirteen weeks.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Respect and care for your instruments (and its parts, and its wardrobe, if any) will have the same priority, the same concern, that you have for your very own body. Music itself depends on the health and happiness of your instrument. Your instrument is a living thing. It can die of heat stroke if not protected from temperature and humidity changes. It can suffer permanent disability if allowed to roll off a bed or be dropped. Love it as you would a live baby person or living animal companion. Unlike western instruments which are "machines," every section of bamboo has a subtly different natural voice; every koto is made from the body of a tree with its own resonance.

In class session you will be responsible to husband classroom instruments, learning how to take them out, set them up, and put them away. If your home-practice instrument is damaged, you will of course pay for its repair or replacement. But we are here to help you learn how to avoid these injuries.

Please understand that ultimately Columbia's rules are such that graduation credit is withheld if borrowed instruments or their parts are not returned.

REHEARSALS, RECITALS AND CONCERTS

As members of this course you will be afforded the privilege of appearing in New York public performances, the dream of musicians everywhere. Needless to say, therefore, attendance at all rehearsals, recitals, and concerts is of course mandatory. Stage and instrument set-up and take-down are part of this commitment.

When performing music, it is essential that the audience not have their attention distracted by you yourself, your body parts, or your “style” of body adornment. Thus your mentors will explain that in concert all performers uniformly are to wear the following:

- Black long-sleeve tops (shirts or tees that cover the collarbone; décolletage is out)
- Black slacks (not leggings or tights)
- Black knee-high socks (so that leg flesh does not show when you sit cross-legged on the floor)
- No jewelry at all (with the exception of wedding bands)

A FINAL TIP

1/3 of your learning will be the routine of how to play the basic classic techniques that elicit the unique natural voice of your instrument

1/3 of your effort will then be to internalize these techniques into your muscles and breathing so that they become instinctive second nature, no longer requiring prodding by the brain. As on the gymnastics bar or the diving board, if you have to think, you’ll fall and hurt yourself. On the basketball court you can’t sink a basket based on reasoning. Grace comes only when it is instinctual.

1/3 of your experience will be the relationship of respect and reverence you nurture with your instrument. It is an inanimate object which you alone make animate, and which will love you back.