

Barbara Ruch  
Remarks  
Ono *Gagaku* Society Performance  
Celebration of 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture  
The Riverside Theatre  
November 30, 2006

Chills go down my spine every time I realize that some of the music that we will hear tonight was performed 1250 years ago in the city of Nara, then the capital of Japan, in ceremonies not unlike this one tonight.

Here we are 1250 years later, in the year 2006, in the city of New York the cultural (if not the political) capital of America, about to have celebrants bring to us these same magnificent sounds and choreography across this vast time and space.

And this hall where we have gathered tonight, “The Riverside Theatre,” sheltered as it is inside the sacred walls of this famous very interdenominational and multi-spiritual Riverside Church is not unlike the sacred precincts in holy temples and shrine enclosures, and in the royal court in Nara where *Gagaku* celebrants were then called upon to perform their music and dance to evoke the spirits that move human destinies.

Tonight, for the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies’ celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture, there were a thousand ways we could have devised to celebrate and honor the Center. But I think in the end, the choice of *Gagaku* was the perfect choice for many reasons, but, in my mind, really for three essential reasons.

First, *Gagaku* is the oldest extant Japanese performance genre, while at the same time it is still a vibrant living tradition. And while it enjoys the highest level of professional masters (as we will see represented here tonight), at the same time it is being practiced by all manner of Japanese people today from primary school children throughout the country to retirees all over Japan. It is a music and performance mode that has become almost an unconscious part of Japanese people’s psyche.

Second, *Gagaku* is the music and dance movement turned to for commemoration of life’s most importance milestones: the weddings of royalty (and commoners alike now too), the funerals of emperors, the dedication of great religious temples and shrines, and the welcoming of heads of state. Why not, then, the anniversary of the Keene Center?!

And as we mentioned in the program that you have in your hands, it is not an accident that Dag Hammerskjold, former eminent Secretary General of the United Nations, brought *Gagaku* musicians to the United Nations in 1959 to perform before the General Assembly as a prayer for world peace.

So *Gagaku*, then, is the perfect choice to commemorate the work of the Keene Center, and to call on the spirits to guide its future years of working toward harmony and understanding between Japan and America, and the rest of the world.

But the third reason we chose *Gagaku* and probably the reason, I think, that Professor Keene himself would most appreciate, is the fact that *Gagaku* now represents Columbia's newest and most daring initiative in the schooling of young college students in Japanese culture. Music was just about the *only* area of classical Japanese Cultural Studies that Columbia University has not pioneered. And now she has. It is the only Japanese Cultural Treasure missing in all Western academic institutions.

Anniversaries tend to look back, but here we are looking forward. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Donald Keene Center is the first year of our new "Classical Japanese *Gagaku-Hōgaku* Music Curriculum and Ensemble Formation Initiative" here at Columbia University in New York. Professor Naoko Terauchi, our special envoy of the Japanese Ministry of Culture is here this year helping us cut our way through the thicket of New York's hermetically sealed off music world, where the word "music" has come to mean solely music in the Western tradition. We hope to break that seal. And our students are now tasting the winds and strings of a whole new liberating definition of creating music.

So tonight we bring you both great masters of *Gagaku* music and dance with the Ono *Gagaku* Society Orchestra, but also as a surprise, at a moment at the conclusion of Part I, before the stage change for dance (p. 12 in your program), the Ono *Gagaku* Society has invited some of our young pioneers to come on stage and join with them to play excerpts in their first public performance of *Etenraku*.

You will become witnesses to these first baby steps taken by our pioneers—who one day in the future will form the basis of New York's first home grown and internationally active *Gagaku* ensemble. I hope you will be personally moved to become their supporters and loyal backers. These are the early historic moments when it most counts.

We have prepared the printed program with great care to help you gain insight into how to listen to this magnificent music that you may never have heard before and even come to love it for its cleansing reverberations, and come to need it in your life. So let it carry you wherever it leads, on unfamiliar, extraordinary waves of sound.

Our program now begins.