

Barbara Ruch Remarks
“Japanese Sacred Court Music and Ancient Soundscapes Reborn”
Concert II: Glories of the Japanese Traditional Music Heritage
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None of us ever dreamed as we planned last year our partnership with Carnegie Hall for the “JapanNYC Festival” that with the launch of the spring half of the festival would come Japan’s most devastating earthquake and tsunami in recorded history. For the past 18 days since March 11th, the images on TV and stories in the papers have been horrific and heartbreaking—so many thousands of precious people’s lives washed away! It is hard to get our minds around it and to process it all. To intensify the distress, has been the severe damage done by the tsunami to the nuclear electric-power-generating plant at Fukushima. At this moment of Japan’s suffering, celebration hardly seems in order.

But the truth is, I cannot think of any greater tribute to the resiliency of the Japanese people, or to the high levels of their social civilization or to their vibrant and enduring culture than for us to share together tonight Japan’s oldest and most sacred music—*Gagaku*—and to rejoice in these ancient soundscapes “reborn.”

Gagaku is a monument not only to the extremely high level of Japanese culture, but also to its endurance and to the resilience of Japan’s people, who have cared for and nourished and preserved this music continuously over thousands of years of turbulent past history.

We often emphasize that Japanese *Gagaku* is truly the world’s oldest continuous orchestral music. And that’s the truth. It is our mother earth’s longest living orchestral tradition—no matter where or how you may search. But like any orchestra, of course, its music has metamorphosed over time, and yet, in every subsequent century and place as it left the continent for Nara and then left Nara for Kyoto and then even abroad, it has seemed fresh and current.

Composer Henry Cowell, teaching here at Columbia in the New York of the early 20th Century, said *Gagaku* was for him, the most avant-garde music he had ever heard. It was avant-garde when 1,500 years ago it flowed into Japan from far off Persia, Tibet, up from Thailand, over from Korea and China and made itself at home in its final home in the cul-de-sac of Japan together with Japanese song and dance. The Japanese treasured it like an elixir from Heaven, even as over the centuries in countries of its origins, the wells dried up, and the instruments and traditions vanished. History rolled on; music pace slackened; court fashions in the 9th & 10th centuries cast languid gossamer secular veils over some of this music’s religious offertory themes. Prodigy instrumentalists in the Heian capital wrote avant-garde new pieces for the court repertory. Then medieval wars sent hereditary families of *Gagaku* musicians scattering. Shrine

and temple-sanctuaries gave asylum, and nurtured *Gagaku* ensembles to fit the needs of their local deities and their own communities. Ever new, yet ever elemental and enduring.

Then came the almost fatal shock, the opening of the Japanese islands to the West in the 19th century, when foreigners from Europe and America came in and made Japanese, the creators of one of the world's highest cultures and most exacting social civilizations, feel out of sync with the world. We Westerners made it clear that Japanese could not be treated as citizens of the world unless they changed their garb, changed their hair, changed their furniture, and changed their music. Only then would they be granted membership in world society. It was then, only 120 years or so ago, when those strange and emotion-rousing exotic instruments called the piano and violin were introduced to Japan as the “real music of civilization.”

Perhaps not astonishingly, the Japanese government caved. Its education policy makers, who by then were tonsured, had grown the requisite beard, and had suited up, looking for all the world exactly like the photographs of Tchaikovsky I just saw in a brochure as he appeared in 1891 at the inaugural concert of the then newly opened Carnegie Concert Hall... These Japanese bureaucrats decreed that the violin and piano were culturally superior to the *shō*, and *ryūteki*, and *koto* and so were to be taught in Japanese schools—banning their own instruments.

Yes, there was a rush by young Japanese to board the beautiful ark of Western music that had enticed Japan with no less a thundering influence than Admiral Perry's warships. Nonetheless, patronizing Western voices through amused smiles, pronounced their doubts. How could Japan, isolated out there on a tiny clutch of islands in the Pacific, ever truly understand the depths, or gain the skill, to play and interpret the subtleties of a Mozart, Brahms, or Bruckner? It would surely be just imitators going through the motions. Oh my! How I wish those 19th-century ancestors of ours could be here in New York now at the Carnegie Festival to get their come-uppance! We are dazzled by the Carnegie program which is full of proof that some of the most prodigious talents in Western music today were and can be born and raised in Japan—despite the fact that the tradition of teaching Western music there is only a little more than 100 years old.

Now, in this new age, as we here at Columbia struggle to raise funds for our students to study the magnificent instruments of the Japanese musical heritage, I now hear Japanese voices: “How can Americans, engulfed in the cacophony of the erotico-romantic, self-exhibitionistic, Western world of music—used to Western instruments that come already designed with levers and valves that produce pre-fabricated, perfectly-tuned designated keys—how—indeed how, can such Western students ever gain the skill to play masterpieces of Japanese music on virtually unmodified bamboo and silk instruments with Asian accents—where one must produce desired tones with nothing but rolled fingerprints and subtle inflections of the diaphragm, head, and lips? Why Westerners—they do not even know how to sit!”

I must believe that this too will pass!

Thank heavens there are now some in Japan who are free of all the above hang-ups and who come to *Gagaku* open and free, out of a pure love of music. Actually, this past decade or two, there are young people—middle school, high school, college, 20-year-olds, 30-year-olds—who are (if you will forgive me!) Gaga over *Gagaku* music and Hooked on *Hōgaku* music, with a proliferation of local ensembles and orchestras and even nationwide magazines; and the Japanese older generations, the “nay-sayers,” have barely caught on to this phenomena.

In Japan and in America we rejoice that the music scene in Japan is one of the most dynamic in the world today blessed with musical expertise in both great Eastern and great Western traditions.

Before the musicians appear on stage let me say just a word about the music we are about to hear tonight. We have prepared the explanations in the program (starting on page 16) with great care, hoping they will give you easier access to each piece. When it is your first trip, there is no such thing as EZ Pass in music, but road maps surely help.

One of the keys to understanding *Gagaku*, and one of the chief reasons why the classic repertory of *Gagaku* is a survivor is because it is not music humans use to entertain each other. As we all know we humans are fickle about our entertainments. Our music entertainments, certainly in the West, shift with the fashions all the time. We use our Western music entertainment as a magnificent drug to impact our emotional world, as a stimulant or as a pacifier.

But *Gagaku* is not like Western music which is all about human emotions. It does not exist to stir or to massage our feelings. It is not entertainment. And *Gagaku* musicians, when they play the classic repertory, are not entertainers. They are ceremonial supplicants. They are celebrants; communicants—whose music is intended to reach out to eternal worlds beyond us. In short it reaches out to the sacred forces of the cosmos to communicate through the music of their instruments—to have dialogue with our earth and worlds beyond and the deities that inhabit them.

As listeners to this music we are calmed and detoxified, and float away to another plane. Just the reverse of Western music which intensifies emotions, *Gagaku* slowly disengages the knots and ties of human emotion and detaches us from the human pressures of this world.

The Westerner’s first encounter with classical *Gagaku* music is often a challenge because we are conditioned by our Western upbringing to listen for the “sacred three elements” of Western music: “melody, rhythm, and harmony.” But classic *Gagaku* orchestras play in unison, avoiding Western artificialities like harmonies that do not exist in the natural world. Instead there are clusters of many sounds that often echo the “soundscapes” of the natural world. If you think of that unison, as the flow of a wide river, then each instrument is like a separate current or stream, undulating on its own within the main flow, yet inseparably a part of it, comprising the whole.

In closing, I want to explain just one special device used in *Gagaku*. *Gagaku* ensembles and orchestras never have a conductor. Instead, each piece of the sacred *Gagaku* repertory is preceded by a short “playing together” of what is called a *netori* or a “catching of the sound realm”. It is not the initial random tuning of the individual instruments with which we are familiar before the start of Western orchestras. No, a *netori* is a brief playing together in a given key and seasonal mode to catch each other’s breathing pace and vibrations, as it were, and to create a unified mood, an aura, and an ambience together around themselves that then extends to both the human and the cosmic listeners, drawing all together. And it is there, inside that tonal aura that the main piece to follow will then be offered.

I have emphasized this one aspect of the *netori* or mode because tonight there will be an alteration in the program. We planned to open with the classic *Gagaku* piece *Etenraku* (Music of the Divine Heavens) played in the celebratory Hyōjō mode, intended as a celebration of the JapanNYC Festival this spring. This will remain firmly in place. However, this quintessential classic *Gagaku* piece *Etenraku* (Music of the Divine Heavens), that reaches out to where the deities reside, has since time immemorial had an amazing flexibility within its formality. When in the celebratory Hyōjō mode it is played at weddings and school commencements. But when played with *Banshikichō no netori* mode it is offered to memorialize the beloved and honored dead—those lost—as a requiem.

Our three *Gagaku* artists who have come from Tokyo to be with us tonight and who are also the Mentors in our Columbia program will therefore, before all else, begin our program with a brief offering of the *Banshikichō no netori* and *Etenraku* in that mode in memory of all those close to 30,000 precious lives swept away on March 11th along the Tohoku coast, and in honor and recognition of the present suffering of the almost 250,000 surviving mourners, now homeless refugees in shelters who have lost everything in their known world.

They ask that for just this one three-person offertory there be no applause. We can all join their intent by allowing ourselves to float on the wings of this rendering near to the divine heavens that it is intended to reach. This does not mean, however, that you should not express your appreciation with applause after all the other remaining pieces in the program.

So let us bask now, in the music of these astonishing instruments, first, from the deepest antiquity of East Asia—and then—after intermission—in the creativity of their new vocal language all brought to us by its best musicians of Tokyo and New York today—a wonderful confirmation for all of us, and much needed demonstration of the unique endurance of the many voices of Japanese music and their ability always to be reborn.

It will be so for Japan as well!