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# GAGAKU

The Imperial Court Music of Japan



The Kyoto Imperial Court Music Orchestra

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## THE IMPERIAL COURT MUSIC OF JAPAN

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**Gagaku**, in Japanese, means elegant, refined or correct music. Brought from India, China and Korea as long as 1500 years ago, it eventually became the court music of Japan and has been preserved under the patronage of the court since the Sixth Century. The result of this long and carefully-nurtured tradition is that today a visitor to Japan may hear possible the oldest existing form of orchestral music in the world, played very much as it was played nearly a thousand years ago.

Three types of Gagaku were originally practiced by the selected families of dancers and musicians who served the Imperial Household in Kyoto. Today these forms are maintained by the descendants of those Imperial Household families to Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, Ise, and at several shrines and a few temples. These musicians have undergone rigid training since childhood in the art of both Gagaku and Western classical music. Since 1956, public performances of court music have made it possible for the general public to become more familiar with Gagaku. New compositions are created by the musicians to add to the traditional repertoire when an important occasion, such as a wedding of (then) Crown Prince Akahito, warrants it. Therefore, it is to be considered a completed art rather than a dying or defunct one. Not easily grasped at first, it rewards the listener richly with each subsequent hearing.

In the traditional repertoire there are a hundred pieces of music and fifty-six dances. Included in this recording are examples covering almost all major features of Gagaku except vocal pieces (*Seigakū*). Concert music in the instrumental division is called *Kangen* for which the orchestra consists of wind, string, and percussion instruments. In another group, the dances play the important role. The dances are called *Bugaku*. They are meticulously performed by dancers wearing brilliantly beautiful costumes, their symmetrical movements accompanied by wind and percussion instruments.

### THE INSTRUMENTS

The wind instruments used in the selections of *Kangen* are unique of design and sound, but are also the mainstay of the ensemble carrying the main melodic line for the most part. By far the most dramatic of these is the *shō*, a set of seventeen bamboo pipes placed in a cup shaped wind chest. The wind chest is blown into through a mouthpiece and as holes in the pipes are closed, a series of eleven ethereal-sounding chords can be produced. The *hichiriki* is a short, nine-holed bamboo pipe with a double reed. It has a strong strident tone and is the center of the orchestra in all types of Gagaku. String instruments for *Kangen* are the *biwa*, a four-stringed lute, and the *sa* or *koto*, a thirteen-stringed long zither. Percussion instruments used in this type are the *kakko*, a small drum on a stand beaten with two sticks, and *taiko* a drum of four feet in diameter hanging in a wooden frame.

Wind and percussion instruments accompany Bukagu also. These include the sho, hichiriki, fue, kakko, taiko and the *shokq* a metal bell struck with two sticks.

There is no conductor for the orchestra in the Western sense. All palyers follow the beat of the hand drum. The dances are traditionally performed on an outdoor stage during daylight. The stage decorations are simple, even stark, compared to other forms of entertainment. Drums are placed on either side of the stage. A green carpet covers the floor. The left-side musicians and dancers are clad in reddish costumes, the right-side counterparts are clad in blueish hues. Combinations of red, blue and green were favored by the ancient Japanese. Present day Bugaku is performed by an all-male dancing troupe, the female roles being taken by men.

The following references are recommended:

JAPANESE MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS by William P. Malm. Turtle. GAGAKU by Robert Garfias. Theatre Arts Books. THE SOCIETY FOR ASIAN MUSIC, c/o WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE, 49 West 27th Street, Suite 810, New York, NY 10001 also provides opportunities for Western listeners to hear and learn about this and other Asian music.

Examples of *Bugaku* dance music on this record are the selections called Hassen and Nasori. Music for wind, strings and percussion, i.e., examples of *Kangen*, are *Etenraku*, *Mansairaku*, *Goshoraku* and *Karyobin*. Each of the compositions has its basic tone of the twelve-tone scale. These are *ichikotsu*, corresponding to the key of d, Hyojo (e), Sojo (g), Oshiki (a), Banshiki (b flat), Oshiki (a). *Idhikotsu* and *Hyojo* are most frequently used. The beat in *Gagaku* is commonly quadruple, but when the music reaches its finale, it may change to the combination of duple and quadruple.

1. **IRITE (prelude)** This brief drum-bell and flute composition is a prelude to *Bugaku* dances. The beat of the drum marks the steps of the dancers, and the same music is played as an epilogue for dancers to withdraw from the stage.

2. **ETENRAKU** The best-known of all the *Gagaku* repertoire, its music was frequently used as an accompaniment to the popular songs (*imay*) of the Heian Period (794-1185). The composition consists of three melodic phrases, thirty-two slow beats each. The title means "music of divinity" and is played by wind, string, and percussions instruments in the basic tone of e.

3. **MANZAIRAKU** A masterpiece of *Gagaku*, it is classified as heavy music (*taikyoku*) and as such is performed exclusively for the formal ceremonies of the Court. It is danced majestically by four dancers attired in bird costumes. The music is said to simulate the voice of a bird called ho which once flew to an Emperor saluting him with the cry of "banzai"

4. **EMBU** A sword dance performed at the beginning of a program for the purpose of purification. The music and dance is based on the legend of a Chinese Emperor who tried to conquer his enemy and dedicated to performance to God.

5. **HASSEN** Known as the music of the crane dances, it is based on a legend of Central China. Eight hermits (*hassen*) came down from the mountains to the capital during the Han Dynasty. The hermits were transformed into four cranes. The four dancers wear masks that represent the faces of cranes. A small bell hangs from each mask and its sound symbolizes the voice of the crane. At one point the four dancers form a circle holding each other's sleeves, representing the flight of the birds. The music is in quadruple form and the basic tone is e.

**6. NASORI** Nasori is a dragon dance, dedicated to the victors in sports and games. Classified as light music (*shokyoku*), it describes a male and a female dragon dancing blissfully together. The second movement (*Nasorikyō*) combines a duple and quadruple beat. The basic tone is d-sharp.

**7. GOSHORAKU** The title refers to the five principles of Confucianism. Composed in the early Seventh Century, it became a highly venerated composition. In contrast to the basic construction of Gagaku pieces, this composition is in four movements. The first movement, called *Jo* (introduction), is the prelude. In the second movement, *Ei* (chant) the music becomes more melodic and the tempo faster. The third movement, *Ha*, meaning "breaking," is comparable to the *scherzo* movement in Western symphonic works. The last movement, *kur* (quick) is the rapid progression to the denouement in the finale of the piece. Large pieces in the gagaku repertoire usually follow the three-movement *jo-ha-kyū* form. Smaller compositions tend to have only a *ha* and *kyō* formation. The tones based on the Five Confucian principles are similar to e, f sharp, a, b, and c sharp and are called *kyū*, *shō*, *kaku chi*, and *u*. The last movement is often performed as an independent piece in concerts.

**8. KARYOBIN** Heard not only in courts but also in temples, the music was brought from India by priests. The *karyobin* is a bird which was native to India. The basic tone is d.

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The music was performed by the Kyoto Imperial Court Music Orchestra;  
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