

Chapter 7: East Asia – Japan

Site: *Sankyoku* Instrumental Chamber Music

First Impressions. A small group of instruments--two plucked and sounding percussive, one blown and sounding sustained--begins in a deliberate tempo which expresses a calmness in contrast to modern urban lives, particularly those of crowded and bustling Tokyo, where the underground trains can become so overwhelmed as to require "pushers" to get all the people inside and allow the doors to close. This music has an even temperament and restraint that seems almost without emotion. While the instruments are clearly together, their relationships are anything but simple, one of them sometimes seeming to wander off the main path for brief periods.

Aural Analysis. *Sankyoku*, which means "three instruments," elegantly embodies everything that Japanese musicians value in their music. Each instrument is primary in Japanese culture: *koto* (zither), *shamisen* (lute), and *shakuhachi* (vertical flute). The *shakuhachi*, whose name expresses its length in a Japanese measurement system, is a vertically held bamboo flute of varying length--21 inches or 54 centimeters being average. Traditional models have four upper fingerholes and one rear thumbhole, but some models have seven or nine holes now. The upper end is cut at an angle, creating a sharp edge over which the player splits the air and set the air column in vibration. Players can produce vibrato by moving their head. The *koto* is a board zither of paulonia wood 70 inches/178 centimeters long with ivory or plastic moveable bridges supporting thirteen strings, formerly of twisted silk but now usually of nylon. Players pluck the strings using large ivory or plastic picks attached to the right hand's thumb and first and second fingers with a leather band and use the left hand to press strings to create pitches in addition to the pentatonic scale to which the strings are tuned. The *shamisen* is a plucked lute with a relatively long neck of varying length and a square wooden body covered with white catskin. A broad plastic or ivory bridge supports three strings of silk or nylon. The player holds the instrument at an angle (similar to a guitar) and plucks the strings with a large plastic or ivory plectrum resembling an ice scraper called a *bachi*. When these three instruments play together as an ensemble, with or without singing provided by either the *koto* or *shamisen* player, the result is *sankyoku*. During the earlier period of *sankyoku* history, the 17th and 18th centuries, the ensemble used a four-stringed bowed lute called *kokyū* that resembles a *shamisen* played with a bow, but during the 19th century the *shakuhachi* replaced the now-rare *kokyū*.

Although *sankyoku* music may sound somewhat free, there is virtually no improvisation in Japanese music, and most music is fully notated in various systems peculiar to each instrument. All three players (and voice when present--which it is not

in this example) perform the same basic melody, but each instrument's idiomatic version is distinct, based on the characteristics of the instrument's style. While the *koto* and *shamisen* are plucked and their sounds decay quickly, requiring many reiterations in order to sustain a pitch, the *shakuhachi*'s style is continuous and flowing. Although the two plucked instruments have similar timbres, you can hear the differences clearly in the "call and response" passages.

The track's title is *Keshi no Hana* meaning "The Poppy Flower," a song originally composed in the early nineteenth century for *koto* by Yaezaki Kengyo, recomposed for *shamisen* around 1830 by Kikuoka Kengyo, with poetry by Kikuoka Kengyo. Only later was the song arranged into *sankyoku* form by Matsuzaki Kengyo. The title alludes to the poetry associated with this instrumental version, which describes a poppy flower but as a simile for a beautiful courtesan: "How pretty is the poppy flower here in my hand. When plucked its fragrance is unworldly. But how pitiful once the petals have fallen."

Cultural Considerations. China's "silk and bamboo" chamber ensembles are notable for their casual but "busy" sounding melodic decoration, but the obvious differences between, for example, Jiangnan "silk and bamboo" music (Site 2) and this example of Japanese *sankyoku* chamber music demonstrates most of the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Japanese aesthetics. In contrast to dense number of notes in Chinese music, Japanese music minimizes the notes, but making each one count, an example of William Malm's maxim quoted above. Where most Chinese ensemble music presents the melody in lock-step among the instruments, here the relationships are much less obvious, made complex by both differences in idiom and timing; it would be much more difficult here than in China to extract a "generic" form of the melody. Instead, it is better to think of each instrument's part as a distinct manifestation of the same melody.

Japanese chamber music is an art celebrated and enjoyed by small groups of connoisseurs in small spaces rather than by crowds in a large hall. *Sankyoku* could perhaps be compared to other well-known Japanese arts such as calligraphy, *bonsai* (creating tree-like shapes from small plants), *kirigami* (paper cutting and folding), and the wearing of the *kimono* (formal dress). Where Chinese chamber music is played casually by amateurs in a club-like setting, with friends sitting around smoking, drinking tea, and talking, Japanese chamber music performance is highly formal, even ritualistic in behavior, and the audience is equally formal. Where Chinese instruments are relatively inexpensive and handled casually, Japanese instruments are highly refined in form and finish, expensive, and handled as revered art objects.

One of the non-musical influences on *sankyoku*, as well as most Japanese music, is *Zen* Buddhism, a form of Buddhism derived from the Chinese *Chan* and brought to Japan in the 12th century. Where some Buddhist sects emphasized the study of the scriptures, resulting in much intellectualizing, Chan/Zen emphasized clearing one's mind through meditation in order to reach enlightenment. Thus, in the Zen aesthetic, emptiness is valued over busyness, plain white space over decorated space, and in music, silence over continuous sound. Zen Buddhism and the music influenced by it

were the inspirations for the so-called "Minimalist" movement in Western art, which rose to prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that time many European and American artists had a fascination for Japanese art and music, one aspect of a period filled with a broad range of interests in the non-Western world.