

# JAPANESE TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF ITS USE IN MUSIC EDUCATION IN EUROPE

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## Abstract

This article analyzes of philosophical approaches and methods of teaching musical instruments at traditional Japanese schools. These approaches have a long history within the Japanese *lemoto* system. This study's author highlights several similarities between some conceptual settings of the Japanese tradition and Carl Orff's *Schulwerk* system. The article formulates a hypothesis about the possibility and expediency of mastering Japanese traditional music in Europe, also considering the pentatonic basis of Japanese modes. The article provides examples of the implementation of this idea (including the improvisational creativity of students on the instruments of Carl Orff in the style of Japanese traditional music) based on a generalization of the author's practical experience.

## Keywords

Japanese traditional music – improvisation – methods of teaching traditional instruments – *lemoto* system – traditional schools

For many centuries, the West and the East existed as parallel worlds. Their dichotomy based on the polarity of opinion paradigms was evident in all areas, especially concerning musical culture.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western European music was generally unapproachable to Eastern countries; therefore, their own traditional, not only folklore but also professional styles/schools/genres developed with no less intensity than classical music in Europe. Thus, an absolutely independent layer of non-European classical music culture emerged, and the unique tradition of its understanding and transmission of mastery from teacher to student was also established. This transfer is referred to, for example, as “Guru-Shishiya” (in other words, “Parampara”) in India or “*lemoto seido*” in Japan. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tendencies of European and Oriental fusion of values and techniques appeared. A dialectical development of musical language takes place, in which the rich timbre and microtonal spectrum of oriental instruments enrich the sound palette of modern classical music.<sup>1</sup> To provide some examples, the Japanese bamboo *shakuhachi* flute finds its “revival” within the composition for the symphony orchestra called “November’s Steps” by Takemitsu Toru,<sup>2</sup> jazz “Improvisations”

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, Flora. *Contemporary composition for shakuhachi and western instruments: timbral gesturalty in the analysis of cross-cultural music. Ph.D. Thesis*. University of London: SOAS, 2016. <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23680>

<sup>2</sup> For an example of a performance of this piece of music, see number 14 in the list of references.

by Yamamoto Hozan,<sup>3</sup> or chamber ensemble composition “Silence” and others by Marty Regano.<sup>4</sup> The above examples show the emergence of trends and styles looking for new techniques and methods of sound extractions related to traditional instruments are appearing. In this regard, the importance of research into oriental traditions and developing methods for mastering oriental music in Europe is increasing.

The axiom of the East is the unity of teaching methods aimed at various types of traditional arts, such as the development of musical instruments, national dances, or martial techniques, which have been carried over the centuries to the present day. They focus on transmitting recognized and even sacred knowledge and wisdom of the ancestors. In contrast to European teaching systems, didactic goals and the speed connected with the subject matter mastery are considered secondary. The primary strategy in education and training is associated with developing the ability “to listen” and “to hear”. Regarding the context of ancient Eastern philosophy, the teacher is the mediator between Heaven and Earth.<sup>5</sup>

According to Eastern metaphysics, the fundamental value is peace. One can reach truth via intuition, inner concentration – contemplation, and by erasing subjective-objective relationships. Regarding the Eastern traditional paradigm of thinking, which for centuries has rebelled against the verbal way of expressing the truth, it seems natural that the development of theoretical knowledge is set aside. Non-verbal teaching methods dominate. If we want to analyze the differences between Eastern and Western educational systems, we find that they contrast significantly. Europe lays much emphasis on examinations, for example, concerning school admissions depending on continuous assessment. Eastern countries emphasize such examinations by no means.

Nevertheless, most pupils of Eastern countries reach a high professional level. The student is typically involved in the overall co-creation process, co-existing with the teacher, becoming a team member, for example, in music ensembles, progressing at his/her own individual pace, and his/her artistic quality increases. Regarding this, several Eastern methods respect and involve the unique centuries-old experience of group music teaching.

The canon of the Japanese tradition was formed and developed at various traditional schools (Japanese call them “ryuuha”)<sup>6</sup> headed by the teacher – the Master. He transmits the secrets of intonation style, techniques of acting, and more, according to the system called “kuchiden” (translated into English as “transmission from mouth to mouth”). For Eastern musical culture, the Full Truth is the fundamental value. A student may obtain this truth only via direct communication with the teacher. It involves not only musical knowledge and skills but also the development of musical abilities as the prerequisites essential for various musical activities. However, the most important thing is the joint creation of music by the student accompanied by his/her teacher. It does not concern a mere iconic hieroglyphic record of traditional Japanese music and the knowledge related to it – the teacher’s personality and pedagogical mastery influence the product’s final quality.

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of a performance of this piece of music, see number 13 in the list of references.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of a performance of this piece of music, see numbers 3 and 15 in the list of references.

<sup>5</sup> These philosophical ideas on the role of the teacher have been considered within several scholarly works, especially in the monograph by H. E. Davey (2015), see literature number 1.

<sup>6</sup> “What is a ryu? The easy answer is that it roughly translates to “style,” or “school,” as in a certain way of doing something (...). Certainly “style” or “school” is a good shorthand definition of ryu. But upon further reflection, – ryu appended to a martial arts system encompasses much more than just a “style” or way of doing things.” MURMOTO, Wayne. *What is a 'Ryu'?* Koryu.com. 1997. <https://www.koryu.com/library/wmurotomoto3.html>.

In the ancient system of teaching traditional arts, especially music, the highest status of the teacher was established. Japan has still been respecting it to this day. In Japanese, the word teacher is pronounced as “sensei”. This term consists of two hieroglyphs, from which the first one represents “before”, and the second one “birth” and “life”. Thus, it reflects the Eastern learning wisdom as acquiring the ancestors’ wisdom. Concerning traditional Japanese music education, the rules of verbal and non-verbal etiquette are paramount. Society has preserved it for centuries, and it is manifested, for instance, in the hierarchy of bows, greetings, and miscellaneous situational clichés. This etiquette has extended not only into personal-courtesy relationships between the teacher and a student or members of the same team but also to the handling of musical instruments. Therefore, for instance, preceding the beginning of each lesson, the student provides a low bow towards the teacher and the instrument. Then, he/she expresses the phrase “yoroshiku onegai itashimasu” (translated into English as “be kind to me”). It is forbidden to cross over the musical instrument with own feet or to pass it to somebody with only one hand because it would be regarded as a sign of disrespect.

A similar approach appears in social behavior. For instance, it is impossible to accept gifts or to hand business cards and objects with one hand only. Etiquette elevated to the level of law helps maintain the social atmosphere in harmony. It relieves tension, removes conflicting situations, and encourages children to cooperate. It is worth noting that related to the Japanese educational system aimed at mastering the traditional arts, especially music, there are no competitions. The system called “Iemoto” (from which the first hieroglyph represents “house” and the second one “foundation”) is essentially analogous to the European sense of “family”.<sup>7</sup> Education is based on trust in the teacher and gratitude for continuing in the age-old tradition. Pupils often adopt their Master’s surname. An essential task of education and the development of artistic skills (e.g., in performing arts) is understanding those expressive details that can not be recorded in traditional scores, although they are of great importance. This understanding is transmitted via “kuchiden” (“word of mouth”).

Based on the analysis of the author’s own practical experience with mastering traditional Japanese instruments (shakuhachi, shamisen, koto), the following methods of the traditional Japanese system of teaching musical instruments will be introduced:

1. The “Inactivity” method is based on the individual, natural rhythm of each student’s intuitive acquisition of musical patterns in the process of making music together. Purposeful teacher guidance and evaluation are minimal.
2. The “Imitation of a teacher” method is based on imitating. It came to Japan from China. It does not represent merely imitating the teacher, but via this process, the pupil begins to understand the inner essence of the message – its depth. This method characterizes the precious values of the East. They lie in listening and capturing subtle nuances of artistic skills. The student discovers these secrets through intuition, which matures in co-creating an artistic product.
3. The “Shouga” method (which means “singing together” in English) is based on mastering music pieces using the intonation of syllabic rhythmic formulas of traditional music scores. This method involves the following algorithm for learning the piece:

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<sup>7</sup> An analysis of the Iemoto system in the Japanese tradition was published in the monograph by Nishiyama atsunosuke in 1982. See in the list of references (Literature) number 2.

- a teacher sings a particular phrase by syllables (e.g., when learning the composition “Rokudan no shirabe” for the Japanese traditional koto instrument, the first phrase is sung using the following syllables: ten, tone, shan, sha, sha, korolichi, ton, ten, tone, shan),<sup>8</sup> then the student sings it together with the teacher, and as soon as he/she masters it within the singing process, he/she may play the instrument.
4. The “Meditative concentration” method (the title of this method is provided by the author of this article) represents the process of gradual familiarization with new musical material via a long and deep immersion into individual elements of musical language while being in a state of inner repose. This kind of repose could metaphorically be called “calming the waves of emotional movements”. When conducting the lessons in specific traditional rooms, the typical training position is sitting in the “zazen position” (which means sitting with crossed legs and folded hands). Such a position is employed in the practice of Buddhist monasteries. It does not allow arbitrary chaotic movements. Learning the pieces on traditional musical instruments occurs through the repetition of individual elements of a musical composition. Each motif of the pieces is sung to certain syllables using the “Shoga” method, which allows one to turn on the vibration of the voice with microtones that reveal the intonational field of each sound. Subsequently, singing the syllables of each motif of the traditional composition comes, and finally, performing on the traditional musical instrument. Primarily, the emphasis is placed on the experience related to the acquired skill. The amount of time in which these skills are reached and manifested is of much less importance.

The study of traditional Japanese methodology makes it possible to conclude that the fundamental tasks of music education and the methods of their realization, preserved for many centuries in the East, are, to a large extent, identical to Carl Orff’s Schulwerk. Orff’s Schulwerk primarily emphasizes the joint creativity of children during collective music-making. This educational system is designed for all children regardless of the quality of their musical skills. From our point of view, this is a fundamental starting point that opens up space for the practical application of Japanese traditional music in Europe.

This idea was introduced within musical pedagogical work with students of the Faculty of Education of the University of West Bohemia. A cycle of lessons dedicated to Japanese traditional music was included. The author of this study realized it by practical music making on Orff musical instruments but using Japanese ways of playing (such as improvisation, performing Japanese folk song melodies, playing fragments of compositions for shakuhachi flute or koto zither). This teaching strategy continues, and we evaluate and generalize the professional outcomes. One of the basic principles applied is that it is necessary to get familiar with a foreign culture first in order to form auditory stereotypes. Listening and improvising are always associated with a particular modal basis. Concerning the fact that Japanese modes derive from the pentatonic scale, Orff instruments allow the students to engage in the improvisation of Japanese music of various genres, including folk songs and compositions for traditional musical instruments. The author of this study provides particular algorithms for student improvisational activities using the Orff instruments below. As an

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<sup>8</sup> For an example of this work using the shouga method, see number 4 in the list of references.

example can serve the composition titled “Haru no umi” (The Spring Sea) by Miyagi Michio written for koto (a thirteen-stringed zither) and shakuhachi (a bamboo flute) in a modal scale with a tetrachordic outline.<sup>9</sup>

1. Modal improvisation based on the piece’s melodic material requires the simultaneous performance of the entire group of students. The improvisational dialogue involves the solo by two performers on Orff instruments on the Japanese scale. The melodic basis for the improvisation is represented by the tetrachords: *H D E, F A H, D E G*.
2. Improvisation involving continuation of the music piece. An audio recording or video of a professional performance of some composition on Japanese instruments is presented; however, the teacher periodically stops this recording and invites students to continue the composition in their own creative compositional way respecting the Japanese style.
3. Improvising the accompaniment of the musical piece while watching the films with the performance of this piece on traditional Japanese instruments (koto and shakuhachi). The teacher uses a synthesizer that imitates the timbres of traditional instruments. Students musically accompany the teacher’s shakuhachi solo.
4. Performing a simplified version of the musical score for the traditional Japanese koto instrument involving elements of improvisation. Koto imitates the movement of sea waves. Furthermore, a sound recording of the performance of the musical piece on the shakuhachi flute leading the melodic line is played. Students of Orff instruments learn to improvise a musical accompaniment in a traditional Japanese style.
5. Free improvisation on the theme from “Haru no umi” (The Spring Sea) in harmony with the composition – an improvised concert by the students.

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ひとりで奏でる  
**春の海**  
(箏独奏)

作曲:宮城道雄  
編曲:高橋久美子

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**【表記上の注意】**  
この楽譜は五線譜のみで演奏できるように記していますが、参考まで糸名を記しました。  
(箏) 箏調絃 (B D E F A B D E G A B D E)

合: 全音押し、↑: 半押し (スラー付きは押し後または押し離した後に押し直さないこと、2つ同時に付いている場合は全音+半音分を押すこと) / +: 指で / 1.2.3: 親指、人差し指、中指 / ツ: ツキ / ◎: ハーモニクス (記された音の2オクターブ上の音を得る時は、柱から龍角までの糸の長さの1/4の所で) / ←: 散し爪 / √: スクイ

**【調絃表】**

●この楽譜の音は邦楽ジャーナルのホームページにアクセスしていただくことができます。また、この楽譜は2015年2月、邦楽ジャーナルよりタテ横として販売します。

Figure 1. The modal scale of the composition titled “Haru no umi” (The Spring Sea) by Miyagi Michio.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For an example of a performance of this piece of music, see number 9 in the list of references.

<sup>10</sup> This sample of musical notation has been taken from the Internet resource; see number 12 in the list of references.

# Haru no Umi

The Sea in Spring

MICHIO MIYAGI

This piece was inspired by the Japanese instruments the *shakuhachi* and *koto*. To hear how these wonderful instruments sound I would suggest you listen to a record of Japanese music. In the slow introduction try to capture the mood of stillness suggestive of dawn over a still sea – beautiful and expressive lines and a dark vibrant tone. In the second part look after your staccato and make it very lively, fresh and happy. Practise with the scale passages and try to get them to sound like playful little waves.



Figure 2. Score fragment of “Haru no umi” (The Spring Sea) by Miyagi Michio for koto and shakuhachi (arrangement for flute and piano).<sup>11</sup>

Following the algorithms mentioned above and involving performing arts of Japanese style, it is possible to teach students Japanese folk songs. Due to the simplicity of the melodies, these songs played on Orff instruments can be mastered even by children at public primary schools. Examples include three songs: “Hiraita Hiraita” (Flower Blooming), “Mushi no koe” (The Sound of Insects), and “Sakura” (with a variant arrangement for three kotos, which can be performed on Orff instruments).

<sup>11</sup> This sample of musical notation has been taken from the Internet resource; see number 7 in the list of references.

ひらいたひらいた

詞曲：わらべ歌

♩ = 64

ひ ら い た ひ ら い た な ん の は な が ひ ら い た  
 ひ ら い た ひ ら い た な ん の は な が ひ ら い た  
 れ ん げ の は な が ひ ら い た ひ ら い た と お も っ た ら  
 れ ん げ の は な が ひ ら い た ひ ら い た と お も っ た ら  
 い つ の ま ま に か つ ー ー ぼ ら ん だ  
 い つ の ま ま に か つ ー ー ぼ ら ん だ

サークルおけら

Figure 3. Sheet music with Japanese lyrics of the Japanese children’s folk song “Hiraita Hiraita” (Flower Blooming).<sup>12</sup>

Here are the lyrics of the song in Japanese (transliterated into the Latin script) and its translation:

|                            |                                                  |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Hiraita. Hiraita.          | Opened up, opened up                             |
| Nan no hana ga hiraita?    | What flower did open up                          |
| Renge no hana ga hiraita.  | A lotus flower opened up                         |
| Hiraita to omottara,       | When my thought just touched that, it opened up, |
| itsunomanika tsubonda.     | before I knew it, it closed up.                  |
|                            |                                                  |
| Tsubonda. Tsubonda.        | Closed up, closed up                             |
| Nan no hana ga tsubonda?   | What flower did close up                         |
| Renge no hana ga tsubonda. | A lotus flower closed up                         |
| Tsubonda to omottara,      | When my thought just touched that, it closed up, |
| itsunomanika hiraita.      | before I knew it, it opened up.                  |

<sup>12</sup> This example of musical notation has been taken from the Internet resource; see number 11 in the list of references.



Figure 4. Sheet music with Japanese lyrics of the Japanese children’s folk song “Mushi no koe” (The Sound of Insects).<sup>13</sup>

Here are the lyrics of the song in Japanese (transliterated into the Latin script) and their translation. The onomatopoeic elements of insect voices are left unchanged, i.e., in the original Japanese version:

|                                      |                                               |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Are matsu-mushi ga naite iru         | The pine cricket began to chirp               |
| Chin-chiro chin-chiro chin-chiro-rin | Chin-chiro chin-chiro chin-chiro-rin          |
| Are suzu-mushi mo naki dashita       | The bell-ring cricket also began              |
| Rin-rin rin-rin ri-in-rin            | Rin-rin rin-rin ri-in-rin                     |
| Aki no yonaga wo naki toosu          | They chirp throughout long autumn nights      |
| Ah ah omoshiroi mushi no koe         | Oh, such outstanding insects sounds           |
| Kiri-kiri kiri-kiri koorogi ya       | Kiri-kiri kiri-kiri, the autumn crickets sing |
| Gacha-gacha gacha-gacha              | Gacha-gacha gacha-gacha, the giant            |
| kutsuwa-mushi                        | katydids sing                                 |
| Ato kara umaoi oitsuite chi          | Finally, even the unicolor katydids chime     |
| Chon-chon chon-chon sui-chon         | Chon-chon chon-chon sui-chon                  |
| Aki no yonaga wo naki toosu          | They chirp throughout long autumn nights      |
| Ah ah omoshiroi mushi no koe.        | Oh, such outstanding insects sounds.          |

<sup>13</sup> This sample of musical notation is taken from the Internet resource; see number 5 in the list of references.



さくら さくら

The image shows a musical score for three kotos, labeled 等 I, 等 II, and 等 III. The score is written in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. The title 'さくら さくら' is centered at the top. The score is divided into three systems. The first system covers measures 1-5, the second system covers measures 11-14, and the third system covers measures 6-10. Each system has three staves. The top staff (等 I) contains the melody with numbered notes (1-5) and Japanese syllables below. The middle staff (等 II) contains a rhythmic accompaniment with Japanese syllables below. The bottom staff (等 III) contains a bass line with Japanese syllables below. A yellow dashed line is drawn through the first measure of the first system. A red box highlights the end of the second system. The syllables are: 七七八, 七七八, 七八九八, 七八七六, 五四五六 (System 1); 七七八, 七七八, 五六, 八七六五 (System 2); 五五四三, 七八九八, 七八七六, 五四五六, 五五四三 (System 3).

Figure 5. Arrangement for an ensemble of three kotos on the Japanese children’s folk song called Sakura.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This example of musical notation has been taken from the Internet resource; see number 10 in the list of references.

This article introduces the possibilities of practical study of traditional oriental art under the conditions of European education using the example of Japanese music. Each nation has its own traditions and values. If well preserved, they form the inner energy of these particular nations. Getting to know the music of different nations makes it possible to understand the values of cultures based on the rules which formed and developed them. Including improvisations related to oriental modal scales in the educational process enriches the students' musical thinking, promotes their creative skills and opens the prospects for creating new compositions synthesizing European and Oriental music styles.

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