

Sacred Instruments

Half of the 52 bodhisattvas that float above the Amida (Sk. Amitabha) Buddha on the walls of the Phoenix Hall play musical instruments. The instruments are varied.

Bodhisattva South 21 plays a mouth organ made of bamboo. North 24 is beating a two-sided hide-covered drum. North 12 strikes a gong. North 2 and North 16 pluck *biwa*, a type of lute with precedents on the Eurasian continent.

Like the *biwa*, many of the instruments in the Amida Hall did not originate in Japan but arrived during the Nara period (710–794) along with other Buddhist traditions from the continent. The style of performance of these instruments evolved thereafter in distinctly Japanese ways during the following Heian period (794–1185). By the time the aristocrat Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992–1074) commissioned these statues in the late Heian period, each instrument had been thoroughly integrated into Japan's musical tradition. These instruments are still used in ritual practices, as well as in performances of Heian-period court music.