

Itsukushima Shrine: *Gagaku*

Gagaku (“elegant music”) is an ancient form of Japanese music associated mainly with the imperial court and religious institutions. Its origins date back to the sixth century, when indigenous music came to be influenced by banquet music introduced to Japan from China and the Korean peninsula. *Gagaku* was formalized and flourished at court in the Heian period (794–1185) when it won popularity among the aristocracy, often as an accompaniment to *bugaku* (court dancing). It arrived on Miyajima in the late Heian period, when prominent court figure Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181) introduced *gagaku*, *bugaku*, and other elements of Kyoto’s aristocratic culture to the island. *Gagaku* can now be experienced by the public at Itsukushima Shrine, where ritual performances take place regularly.

The instruments displayed here speak to the long and illustrious history of *gagaku*. Presented to the shrine by aristocrats and performers, some of them were actually played hundreds of years ago, while others are purely decorative. Among the latter is a seven-holed copper flute modeled on the bamboo flutes common in *gagaku*, whereas the *biwa* (short-necked lute) displayed nearby shows clear signs of use. Another item of interest is the *sho*, a mouth-blown free-reed instrument that consists of 17 bamboo pipes. The black-lacquer *sho* seen here is decorated with cherry blossom imagery and is thought to have been donated by Emperor Takakura (1161–1181) upon his visit to Miyajima in 1180.