

【Gagaku】

The word *gagaku* refers broadly to ancient court music and dance that has been performed since the eighth century and is Japan's oldest musical tradition. Originally introduced from China and the Korean Peninsula, *gagaku* was mostly performed at events in the imperial court and at temples and shrines. Over centuries of cultural exchange and the gradual evolution of the genre, it has retained the instruments and styles that most strongly resonated with Japanese tastes. *Gagaku* musicians and dancers of today follow the traditions of the court musicians of the Heian period (794–1185), and throughout history, the genre's popularity has largely coincided with the power and influence of the court.

The traditional *gagaku* ensemble includes three wind instruments, two stringed instruments, and three percussion instruments. In a *gagaku* composition, several instruments play interpretations of the melody at the same time. Adherence to ancient tradition is strong in the art, and contemporary compositions are rare.

Hikone Collection of *Gagaku* Instruments

The museum collection of *gagaku* instruments, many of which were gathered by the daimyo Ii Naoaki (1794–1850), can be considered one of the most extensive collections in Japan. It is not uncommon for especially well-crafted *gagaku* instruments to be given individual names, and the fine bags and boxes used for storing them are often works of art themselves.

Wind Instruments

The three main wind instruments in *gagaku* are the *hichiriki*, the *shō*, and the *ryūteki*. The *hichiriki*, a small, nine-holed pipe with a double reed, is one of the main melodic instruments in *gagaku*.

Originally from China, the *shō* is a Japanese free-reed musical instrument made up of seventeen slender bamboo pipes, each with its own reed, and is said to resemble a phoenix (*ho-o*) in both appearance and sound. Like a harmonica, the *shō* can be played by both inhaling and exhaling.

The seven-holed bamboo *ryūteki* (dragon flute) is used for playing Chinese-style songs in particular. The sound of the *ryūteki* is said to resemble the voice of a dragon.

Stringed Instruments

The primary stringed instrument of the *gagaku* ensemble is the *biwa*, a short-necked, four-stringed, fretted lute originally from West Asia. It is supported by the *sō* (or *koto*), a

long, thirteen-stringed zither. *Gagaku* musicians play both of these instruments using a paddle-shaped plectrum. Generally, the *biwa* plays an abstract melodic line within the song. The *sō* adds short, repeated melodic phrases.

Percussion Instruments

The three percussion instruments strengthen each phrase of the melody and anchor the rhythm. The large hanging drum (*taiko*) of the *gagaku* ensemble provides the main accents. The *kakko*, a small, braced drum, and the *shōko*, a small bronze gong, add to the rhythmic complexity. The *kakko* also signals tempo changes and announces the end of a piece.