

Rethinking Nature in Post-Fukushima Japan

Facing the Crisis

edited by Marcella Mariotti, M. Roberta Novielli, Bonaventura Ruperti
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‘Nature’ in Japanese Traditional ‘Music’ Reflections on *hōgaku* and Two Euro-American Concepts in Present-Day Japan

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Abstract In this essay, I want to address the question of whether there exists a relationship between ‘nature’ and today’s Japanese traditional ‘music’, *hōgaku*. A further point is what ‘nature’ means within the discourses of the *hōgaku* music-making world. In relation to the issue of nature-music, I will concentrate on two questions among the many possible ones: is ‘nature’ a central element in the material culture of *hōgaku*, and, is ‘nature’ expressed somehow in *hōgaku* languages? Holding the position that interviewing traditional music-makers is the most adequate way in which to deal with such questions, as ideas are not separable from the practice of music, my intent is to provide some tentative answers.

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Keywords Japanese Traditional Music. *Hōgaku*. Music and Nature. Ideas on music. The practice of music.

1 音取 *Netori* – Mode Setting Prelude

It is almost 30 years since James Clifford and George E. Marcus, by publishing their famous work called *Writing Cultures* (1986), launched severe critiques to North-american ethnography.

Paraphrasing those scholars’ words, I think we must admit that Japanese Studies too are still in the midst of an epistemological crisis: Western scholars can no longer portray non-Western peoples and cultures with unchallenged authority, as we are now all the more aware that the process of cultural representation is always contingent, historical, and contestable.

Yet, I would also like to remember that an Italian anthropologist, folklorist and historian of religions, Ernesto De Martino (1908-65),¹ predated somehow all this, with his methodological approach generally referred to as “critical ethnocentrism”.²

Indeed, De Martino’s “critical ethnocentrism” made the relationship between the ethnographer and his/her subject of study clear in as early as the 1960s.

According to him, the encounter with the Other can exclusively be experienced from our specific ethnocentric perspective. It is only both accepting the partiality of our point of view and remaining aware that the tools of analysis we use are cultural-specific ones, that we can try to understand different cultures (cf. De Martino 1977).

All this said, I am very glad to take part into this international conference, that engages Japanese and European scholarships in the increasingly multi-polar, globalising field of Japanese Studies. As a critical ethnocentric observer, here I can keep confronting with Japanese and Euro-american scholars alike. As a matter of fact, the Japanese insider ethnography and ‘our’ outsider ethnography have interactive roles in the process of understanding.

For similar reasons, trying to apply a dialogical methodology, I have taken advantage of personal communications from two Japanese musicians and a musicologist/musician in preparing this paper. I consider the bearers of the musical traditions I study as interlocutors, rather than ‘informants’.

I therefore wish to thank Suzuki Haruo 鈴木治夫 *sensei* (*gagaku* musician and *shō* mouth organ maker, Tokyo), Tanaka Denpachirō *sensei* (*Kabuki gezabayashi* musician, Tokyo) and professor Saitō Mitsuru 齋藤完 (Yamaguchi University), who is also a *shakuhachi* player. Without their contribution this paper wouldn’t have been possible.

1 The founder of Italian cultural anthropology, Ernesto De Martino left a legacy of extensive fieldwork research in Southern Italy, original works, and an impressive set of suggestions regarding theory and research methodologies. In his first fieldwork experience in Lucania, De Martino could be considered the first post colonial ethnographer, especially through his questioning of the role of subaltern people in making history and culture. Cf., in English, Saunders 1993.

2 Ethnocentrism, a notion coined by William Graham Sumner in the early twentieth century, assumes that one’s own ethnic *Weltanschauung* is the only one from which other customs, practices, and habits can be understood and judged. Ethnocentric attitude thus is conceived critically as involving overgeneralisations about other cultures, on the basis of limited if any evidence.

2 序 *Jo* – Introduction

2.1 Aim of This Paper

In this essay, I address the question of whether there is any relationship between ‘nature’ and today Japanese traditional ‘music’. Indeed, my guiding concern is what nature means within the discourses of the Hōgaku music-making world.

Nowadays, ‘nature’ and ‘music’ are commonsensical terms in everyday parlance and even in scholarly discourse in Europe and the USA. Yet, words are never neutral, as they relate to the historical, aesthetic, political, and, especially, ideological fields they inhabit.

2.2 ‘Nature’?

The idea of ‘nature’ is widely employed in Western discourse. Nevertheless, this is one of the most ill-defined concepts.

Among its meanings, ‘nature’ is used to refer to anything that exists as part of the physical world. Sometimes related to this, is the concept of ‘nature’ as opposed to nurture. The notion of culture becomes here central: ‘natural’ is opposed to that which is the outcome of a ‘cultural’ process.

2.3 Is There Such a Thing as ‘music’?

The last past one century and half have made Euro-american scholars aware of the great variety of the world’s musics and of the diversity of conceptions of music: different societies, cultures, historical periods and individuals have differing ideas on what constitutes music. Accordingly, providing a universally acceptable definition of the concept is impossible.

Even in Western modern culture, where the word ‘music’ seemingly has suggested a unitary concept, Carl Dahlhaus – a German musicologist unfortunately almost unknown to English-speaking readers – pointed out the ill-definedness of the concept: the very same art music scholarship had failed to provide a clear-cut, shared definition of it in its field of study (Dahlhaus-Eggebrecht 1998, 7-39).

What music is remains open to question, if we think transculturally.

3 破 *Ha* – Breaking Apart: ‘Music’ (and ‘Nature’) in Japan?

The situation is all the more complex if we think of ‘nature’ (*shizen* 自然 in modern Japanese) in relation to ‘music’ (*ongaku* 音楽) in Japan.

Most Western observers tend to take for granted that the labels they put to different aspects of their own cultures can be easily moved onto Japanese cultural facets. But terms as ‘nature’, and even ‘music’, became meaningful concepts only in the late eighteenth century Japan, when the Japanese language was powerfully affected by the translation of Western vocabulary and ideas.

The word *ongaku* is a compound of two sinographs which appeared in Chinese documents in as early as the Qin period (221-206 b.C.). Yet, it was only in the late eighteenth century that this compound came to be used in Japanese as an umbrella term referring to all the human expressions involving sound. The Japanese state proactively re-introduced the word, largely to facilitate the implementation of standardised music education programs in the newly centralised schools and military institutions. ‘*Ongaku*’ quickly emerged as an index of the new Japanese nation-state’s progress toward a Euro-American standard of would-be civilisation.

Before that, the compound had been used in Japan as early as the eighth century to refer to music of Chinese origin (the Tang derived repertory in *gagaku*). During the Edo period, it was picked up by Kabuki musicians to refer to *gagaku*-flavored sound patterns used in Buddhist temple scenes. *Shamisen* music and other urban musics, on the other hand, were referred to as *ongyoku* 音曲.

Accordingly, to talk or write about ‘Japanese music’, as if the term were transparent, would be to ignore the fact that “before contact with the West, Japan had no all-embracing term referring to any humanly organized sound [i.e. music], religious or secular, vocal or instrumental, aristocratic or plebeian” (Hosokawa 2012, 2)

It goes beyond my scope to analyze the emergence of the concept of ‘*shizen*’. It will suffice here to remember that the word has a story very similar to that of *ongaku*, as it translates a foreign abstract concept. Before the introduction of such a term, that occurred after the beginnings of the Meiji period, there was no general expression encompassing the whole physical world.

4 急 *Kyū* – Rushing to the Finish

4.1 Two Questions (among many)

Clearly, the issue music-nature is a multi-layered one, indeed a broad range of issues, even if one limits his/her research to a single culture. Accordingly, I decided to concentrate on two questions among the many possible ones.

These selected questions are:

1. Is *shizen* a central element in the material culture of music?
2. Is *shizen* expressed somehow in *hōgaku* languages?

I hold the position that interviewing music-makers is the most adequate way in which to answer such questions, as ideas are not separable from the practice of music. I am aware that this essay can't be an exhaustive one, but it is nevertheless my intent to provide some first, tentative answers.

First, I will shift my focus onto a sometime neglected aspect of that complex socio-cultural phenomenon we call 'music': its material culture.

4.1.1 Musical Instruments

The relationship between music and its objects is of paramount importance. Musicologies have always dealt with material culture: the study of manuscripts, print sources, instruments and other artefacts associated with the production and reception of music is central to its understanding.

We have to examine critically the materiality of music and its physical media as an explicit part of culture, rather than simply a means of music-making.

An interesting example related to contemporary Japan is offered by the construction of *gagaku*³ mouth organs, *shō*. I will refer to email exchange I had recently with Suzuki Haruo, *gagaku* musician and *shō* maker.

A *shō* is an aerophone consisting of a wind-chest penetrated by 17 bamboo pipes, each, except two, fitted with a free reed of bronze. A reed is an elastic lamina which, under the influence of an airstream from the player's lungs, vibrate.⁴

Suzuki Haruo *sensei* is one of the very few mouth organ makers in Japan. He is also a *gagaku* wind instruments player. After starting playing the *ryūteki* flute when 17, he took up the *shō* too at 26.

3 *Gagaku* 雅楽, the court music/dance of Japan, is a performing art on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list from 2008.

4 It is worth noting that the word 'reed' refers both to: the stalk of any of various tall grasses, especially of the genera Phragmites and Arundo, growing in marshy places; and a flexible piece of cane or metal that, attached to the mouth of any of various wind instruments, is set into vibration by a stream of air.

Based in the Tokyo area, from 2005 he has been the main editor of *Gagakudayori*, – the only newsletter devoted to Japanese court music and related topics. From 1993 to 2010 he served as deputy chairperson of the Nihon gagaku kai, a society which aim is the study and the performance of *gagaku*. Suzuki taught *shō* performance at the Tokyo University of Arts and Music from 2010 to 2013, when he retired.⁵

On the topic, Suzuki says:⁶

雅楽と自然とはとても関係がありますね。

まず楽器の材料は自然のもの竹やヨシ(葦)などを使います。

この自然の物でもどんな竹でも、どんなヨシでも良いというものではなく雅楽にとって一番良い音色を出す種類があります。

Gagaku and nature do have a tight relationship.

First of all, bamboo and yoshi, natural stuff, are used as material for instruments.

Albeit natural, not every bamboo or yoshi type is suitable, as there are types producing the best sound quality for gagaku.

Suzuki *sensei*'s words give us a clear-cut answer. Without natural, specific material there is no *gagaku*.

He continues:

雅楽の音色が変わってしまうと心配されています。

There is a concern that gagaku's sound quality could change.

This statement just confirms a general trend in construction of musical instruments for traditional music. Although is not correct to maintain that methods of construction are not changed through the centuries, is it true that used material are still the same for most instruments.

Using the same construction materials has to do with the sound quality or timbre, in Japanese *neiro* 音色.

This leads us to a material-culture related theme.

4.1.2 Timbre and Sound Ideal

The word timbre refers to the tonal quality of a sound: a guitar and a saxophone sounding the same note are said to produce different timbres.

5 For more information, see an interview with maestro Suzuki, Sestili 1997.

6 Suzuki Haruo 鈴木治夫 (January-February 2015). Personal email communications.

A vast palette of timbral nuances used by a single instrument is one of the most intriguing yet complex characteristics of *hōgaku*.

A self-evident case is that of classical shakuhachi music (*honkyoku* 本曲). This repertoire has certain performing techniques and stylistic features that predispose it to resist being considered, from most of the euroamerican listeners, as ‘music’. As a matter of fact, an array of playing techniques allows the music-maker to produce sounds more closely resembling ‘noise’ than ‘musical sound’ and, as a whole, the *shakuhachi* music features a huge timbral variety. These special effects includes, for example, “thrashing breath” (*muraiki* むら息), an explosive rush of air.

[At this point in the presentation, an excerpt from *Shika no Tōne* (taken from the CD attached to the book Daniele Sestili, 2010), was played as a musical example. Shakuhachi player: Kawasaki Kinobuhisa]

Other instruments showing ‘noisy’ trends are the *shamisen* and the *biwa*. In either cordophones, the lower string when plucked produces a sound called *sawari* さわり, whose buzzy timbre is of special value in their music.

[At this point in the presentation, an excerpt from the bunraku play *Yoshizune Senbonzakura* (taken from the CD attached to Tokita, Hughes, 2008) was played as a musical example. Gidayūbushi *shamisen* player: Nozawa Kin’ya]

Many Japanese musicologists have noted that *sawari* is an essential concept in Japanese musical aesthetics and plays a major role in the sound ideal, which values qualities of roughness and “dirt sounds”.

So far for the sub-issue of nature-material culture of music.

4.2 Expressing Nature?

Then, in answering the second question – Is *shizen* expressed somehow in *hōgaku* languages? – a few remarks will touch upon music of a specific traditional subgenre: the *gezabayashi* one.

Gezabayashi 下座囃子 is Kabuki music played by a offstage (*geza*) group.⁷ This ensemble is positioned in a room at the stage-right corner, from which its members can see, hidden, the stage. The *geza* ensemble use mainly, but not exclusively, drums, other percussions and transverse flutes. The *ōdaiko*, a large barrel drum, is a central feature of this group. It behoves us to remember that *kabuki* is one of Japan’s intangible cultural properties. *Kabuki* offstage music is very like film music: give sound effects, set the mood, support stage actions or imply unspoken thoughts.

⁷ Kabuki was inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO).

The question of whether nature is expressed in music can be dealt with citing some statements by Tanaka Denpachirō 田中傳八郎 *sensei*, a *narimono* (percussion) musician.

Not born into a *kabuki* musicians' family, Denpachirō undergone long training in *narimono* performance at the Kokuritsu gekijo (National Theatre) and graduated there. He is a member of the Tanaka Denzaemon *shachū*, one of the Kabuki-related schools linking musicians by apprenticeship. Belong to the Tanaka school percussions and flute players performing in the *geza* ensemble. Denpachirō is mainly an *ōdaiko* drum player.

Tanaka says:⁸

歌舞伎音楽で自然を表現するには、大太鼓を使用します。

[...]

たとえば、川の流れ 波の音 雨 雷 等です。

[...]

大太鼓は 独立していて 長唄 竹本 などが 演奏していても 違う ノリ (速さ) で演奏することが多いです。

それは、大太鼓のが音楽を演奏することより自然の風景を表現することが役割だからです。

In the kabuki music, the *ōdaiko* is used to express nature.

For example, the flow of a river, the sound of waves, rain, thunder and the like.

The drum is isolated, and even if *nagauta* or *takemoto* [i.e. different kinds of onstage music] are performed, often the *ōdaiko* plays at a different tempo. This is because the *ōdaiko*, rather than performing music, has the role of expressing the features of nature.

[Here an excerpt from the kabuki play *Honchō nijūshikō* and one from *Yoshitsune senbonzakura* were shown to the audience (private videorecording by Tanaka Denpachirō; musicians: unknown)].

This representation of nature - the flow of a river and the sound of sea waves, respectively, in the examples -, is more symbolic than realistic.

4.3 Music in Nature-The Naturalness in Music: a Conclusion?

A connectedness between music and nature is present in most cultures. At one extreme of a continuum we might conceive is the idea that music exists in nature, and that one culture simply bounds natural phenomena by naming them. At the other extreme music strives to emulate nature.

8 Tanaka Denpachirō 田中傳八郎 (January-February 2015). Personal email communications.

American ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlmann characterises these two extremes as “music in nature” and “naturalness in music” (Bohlmann 1999). In the former there is no real boundary between nature and its musical representation.

The Ainu people⁹ vocalists sing patterns that represent cranes or other birds. Music ‘sounds like’ nature in this representation of nature.

[At this point in the presentation, an excerpt from “Crane Dance” (taken from the CD 2 attached to the book by Chiba 2012), was played as a musical example]

When music strives toward nature, by contrast, there is an implicit admission of a boundary between music and nature.

Whereas some Japanese traditions, as *geza ongaku* quite clearly shows, belong to the latter trend, that is music strives to emulate nature, peculiar features of *shakuhachi* classical music we have just listen to, seem to tend towards the opposite extreme, i.e. music ‘sounds like’ nature.

Yet, in this case, confrontation with professor Saitō Mitsuru (Yamaguchi University) helped me to go further into the problem in relation to *hōgaku*. Differently from other interlocutors, Saitō brings both ‘insider’ perspectives, as a traditional musician, and a somehow ‘outsider’ methods for studying his native *hōgaku*, being an (ethno)musicologist. As a scholar, he is apt to make abstract reflections more than ‘normal’ music-makers do.

Asked of whether he has ever thought his performances have anything to do with nature, Saitō replied:¹⁰

尺八奏者としても音楽学者としても、自然のことは意識して考えたことはありません。

Neither as a *shakuhachi* player nor as a musicologist, I have ever thought consciously about nature [while playing]

As we have just seen, it not easy to give all-embracing answer in relation to *hōgaku*. Yet, we do have a first meaningful result, positively suggested by professor Saitō’s statement: even if some Japanese musics sounds ‘like’ nature to us, they are not necessarily conceived as nature by their performers.

Closing this section, a *caveat* is necessary.

Maintaining that some Japanese musical languages seek naturalness in its performance, is not holding that *hōgaku* is nature, as professor Saitō posited.

9 The Ainu are an aboriginal people who inhabit Hokkaidō. Their music and culture link them to other Siberian peoples rather than to the ethnic Japanese.

10 Saitō Mitsuru 齊藤完 (February 2015). Personal email communications.

Indeed, I am aware that researching about nature in Japanese music may, in any moment, slip down an ethnocentric slope, that of *Naturvolk* as opposed to *Kulturvolk*.

This opposition between *Kulturvölker* ('cultural' or civilised peoples) and *Naturvölker* ('natural' or primitive peoples), ubiquitous in German scholarly writing during the second half of the nineteenth century (cf. Vierckandt 1896), has been coming to the surface again from time to time, even in scholarly discourse.

5 止手 *Tomete* – Coda: Who Stands up for Environment in Japan?

In closing my presentation, I would like to inform briefly about a notable environment-concerned movement involving some Japanese musicians.

Hichiriki is the oboe-like wind instrument used in *gagaku*. Reeds – that is a thin blade of cane – for *hichiriki* have been made of stems of *yoshi*, the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) that are harvested from only a limited reed bed at Udono, on the banks of the Yodo River in Takatsuki, Osaka Prefecture. According to the Imperial Household Agency, reeds from Udono have been used for the *hichiriki* played at official ceremonies of the imperial court since the Heian Period, as they provide the best music performance.

Unfortunately a new expressway was set to be built in Udono some years ago, threatening fields of *yoshi* there. In 2003, authorities had decided to suspend the start of construction of a section of the Shin-Meishin Expressway planned to run through the district, due to questions of economic viability, but the construction got the go-ahead once again in 2012.

In response to the threat to the precious reed bed, a series of petitions have been seeking to force the government to reconsider the construction.

As we know, petitions have no legal effect, but signatures of Japanese and foreigners alike represent a moral force that may help the now international movement "Save the Udono yoshihara".

This movement has as its spokesmen virtually all the Imperial Household Agency *gagaku* musicians, who have denounced the huge danger for the Japanese culture if the expressway would be constructed on the Udono area.

Besides imperial palace court musicians, many other bearers of the *gagaku* tradition, as Maestro Kasagi Kan'ichi, head of the Nanto *gakuso*, the *gagaku* group based in Nara with a history of more than 1,000 years, and maestro Suzuki are promoting actions in order to raise consciousness in Japan and abroad.

A change in the reed would cause a change in the sound quality, i.e. the timbre of *gagaku*.

Those interested in supporting this movement, can sign the petition at the end of this session. The signature forms will be sent to the “Save the Udono yoshihara” committee. Thank you.¹¹

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11 For a short Japanese comment to the present Conference, with a special focus on the musicological panel, cf. Gagaku Kyōgikai 2015

