

Global Perspectives 4

Musical Form: Two Case Studies from Asia

As we have seen, musical forms in the Classical style become quite elaborate. It is certainly no accident that these intricate designs emerged across the eighteenth century, just when independent instrumental music was gaining unprecedented prestige in the European tradition. Instrumental music often seems to require such complexities. It is as if the removal of other determinants of form—a poem set to music, a specific religious ritual, or a pattern of dance steps—calls for a different, more abstract musical organization.

Taking the broadest view of these complex forms, however, we can see that they work changes through a simple process. Composers state a tune and then repeat it throughout a movement, joining with it contrasting elements either complex (sonata form, first-movement concerto form) or simple (minuet and trio, most rondos and slow movements). Such a basic concept of repetition and change may be realized in many ways, according to the imagination and inclination of the composer, and result in an unlimited array of individual styles.

Other traditions of instrumental music around the world also start from this concept and elaborate it, building intricate forms. In this segment we offer a historical snapshot of two Asian instrumental traditions, from Japan and Indonesia, and we examine music from each.

1. Japan

The symphony orchestra as we know it emerged in the seventeenth century as a reflection of the power and splendor of European courts (see page 105). In Japan, a court orchestra had been established a thousand years earlier. This was the period in Japanese history, from the sixth century C.E. to the eighth, when the first centralized control of the islands emerged. The new Japanese central government, many of its institutions, and even its newly constructed capital city of Nara were modeled on the greatest empire in Asia, China. In the process, many elements of Chinese culture were imported to Japan—most importantly Buddhism, which had in turn come to China from India centuries before.

The new Japanese court also imported various musical styles from continental Asia. These were altered and developed into an independent Japanese tradition, which came to play an important role in the court's ceremony and ritual. Altogether, these styles are known as gagaku (gáh-gáh-koo), from Chinese characters



The togaku orchestra:
kakko, *biwa*, *sho*, and
bichiriki (back left)

meaning “elegant music,” though their sources are more than just Chinese.

The gagaku repertory is divided into two parts. One, known as *togaku* (tóh-gáh-koo), consists of music derived from Chinese styles (with ingredients from India and Southeast Asia as well). The other, *komagaku* (ko-máh-gáh-koo), is made up of works of Korean and Manchurian origin. Further distinctions are made when gagaku accompanies dance, which is often the case, just as with European Baroque orchestral music.

The Japanese Togaku Orchestra The togaku orchestra is so distinctive, and so different from any European orchestra, that we should spend a moment getting to know the various instruments. While European orchestras are dominated by strings, all gagaku orchestras feature wind instruments. The instruments all have specific functions:

- 7 The sliding, wailing double-reed *hichiriki* (hée-chee-ree-kée) carries the main melody. Several are heard on our recording, playing together.
- 7 The side-blown flute called *ryuteki* (ree-óo-tay-kée) is the first instrument heard. It plays the melody along with the hichirikis, though in a slightly different version. This is called a *heterophonic* texture; heterophony is an important feature in many non-Western musics.



Sho

- 7 The *sho*, a mouth reed-organ with seventeen pipes, plays chordal clusters of tones derived from the main melody. This unusual instrument contributes a haunting background of harmonic haze to the texture.



The togaku orchestra: *tsuridaiko* suspended on the large stand, back right, and, in the foreground, *gakuso*, *ryuteki*, and a small suspended gong not heard on our recording, called *shoko*.

7 The *kakko*, a two-headed barrel drum played with sticks, is used for single strokes or short rolls. It is the first drum heard.

7 A deep, larger barrel drum *tsuridaiko* (tzóo-ree-díe-koh; its first beat is heard at 0:13) marks off long phrases of the melody with two successive strokes, the first soft and the second louder.

7 A *biwa*, or four-stringed lute (bée-wah, first plucked at 1:11), strums across several strings quickly, punctuating the melody.

7 A *gakuso*, a zither with thirteen strings (gáh-kóo-so, first heard at 1:31), plays short motives, mainly of three notes related, again, to the melody. Both the *biwa* and the *gakuso* take a more active role as this performance proceeds, finally even playing some of the main melody.

Etenraku *Etenraku* is the most famous piece for the togaku orchestra. Its name means “music of divinity,” and it emanates a deep, powerful calm associated with Buddhist contemplation. This is probably the oldest music on our recordings; in some form it reaches back almost to the origins of gagaku itself.

The musical form of this piece exhibits three characteristics of gagaku music. *First*, the piece as a whole is constructed from a single melody, according to a predetermined plan and without improvisation. In *Etenraku* the melody consists of three phrases, labeled a, b, and c in the musical example and Listen box on this page. Each phrase is 32 beats long. (The beats move by slowly at first, so slowly that the phrases can be hard to discern until you get used to the melody.)

Second, the instruments of the orchestra are introduced gradually and in a predetermined order as they fulfill their various functions. The melody is played through by some of the instruments and punctuated by others, as described above.

Third, the beat quickens, the meter is more clearly marked, and the general musical activity increases as the performance proceeds. At first, while the flute alone carries the melody, the beats are very slow and



LISTEN

Etenraku



0:00	a	Ryuteki, kakko, tsuridaiko only
0:51		Sho and hichirikis enter.
1:11	a	Biwa enters.
1:31		Gakuso enters, completing the orchestra.
2:18	b	
3:15	b	
4:04	c	Paired beats of tsuridaiko every 8 beats
4:46	c	Gakuso and biwa gradually play more and more fragments of main melody, joining in heterophony of hichirikis and ryuteki.
5:25	a	
6:02	a	
6:37	b	
7:11	b	After the phrase is completed (at 7:55), biwa and gakuso end the piece with a brief coda.

flexible—the music seems almost to have no meter at all. (Each pair of beats on the *tsuridaiko* drum, however, coming 16 very slow beats after the last, provides a certain sense of regularity and meter.) When the double-reed hichirikis enter, they play the melody along with the flute to a more prominent beat. Then, at the c phrases of the melody, the *tsuridaiko* doubles its pace, beating twice every 8 beats instead of every 16.

Meanwhile the tempo gradually quickens: At the outset the beats come every 2–3 seconds (*very slow!*), while at the close they move by at about one per second.

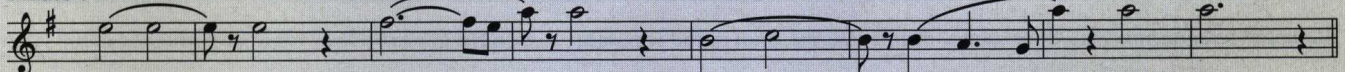
Phrase a



Phrase b



Phrase c



Even at this relatively quick tempo, the music never loses its sense of restraint. Virtuoso playing is strictly avoided. *Etenraku*'s aura of quiet, inward-looking Buddhist contemplation characterizes the gagaku repertory as a whole.

2. Indonesia

The Southeast Asian Republic of Indonesia consists of some six thousand islands in all, half of them inhabited. The central island is Java. Across Indonesia, ensembles playing traditional musics thrive—alongside, these days, many kinds of pop, rock, and world beat ensembles, especially in large urban centers such as Jakarta. A traditional musical ensemble in Indonesia is called a gamelan.



The Indonesian Orchestra: Gamelan Gamelans assume a wide, even bewildering variety of shapes and sizes, as we might expect of musical traditions that extend back many centuries and that have served an array of religious, political, and social functions. Gamelans may involve three or four musicians or they may involve dozens. They sometimes include singers.

They frequently accompany drama or dance: sacred temple dances, danced dramas, or the famous Indonesian shadow-puppet plays enacting stories from Hindu epics. The music gamelans play may have been passed down over hundreds of years or it may be recently composed.

At the heart of gamelan music stands a great variety of gongs and metallophones (instruments like a xylophone, with metal keys). Indeed the word *gong* itself comes to us from Java, where it names (and also evokes the sound of) the largest gamelan instrument.

Balinese Gamelans Nowhere in Indonesia are gamelans more prevalent than on Bali, a good-sized island to the east of Java. In 1980 it was estimated that there was a gamelan for every 350 inhabitants of the island—a staggering number, in a population of around 2 million!

Gamelans seem to have come to Bali in the sixteenth century, brought from Java by aristocratic refugees when their Hindu kingdom fell to Islamic invaders from the Asian mainland. Balinese gamelans, at least the elaborate ones with many instruments, were associated especially with temples and princely courts. When Bali came under colonial control of the Netherlands in 1906, the courts declined, but their traditions of gamelan music did not simply disappear.



Gamelan pelegongan, with floor gongs, drum, gangsas, and, in the rear, large suspended gongs

Instead they were taken over more and more by village gamelan clubs, and these are the main venue in which Balinese gamelan music continues today.

Gamelan Pelegongan *Gamelan pelegongan*, heard on our recording, is a type of Balinese orchestra used primarily to accompany elaborate dance-dramas. It takes its name from this dance, called *legong*. The primary instruments in gamelan pelegongan are:

- 7 Two hand-beaten drums. (The drummers direct the ensemble.)
- 7 Several gongs of varying sizes.
- 7 A large group of metallophones, some low-pitched, some high. Most of these have five metal keys each, with a range of a single octave, while some have thirteen keys and a wider range. The sounds, construction, and names of these metallophones vary, but all of them can be called by the umbrella term *gangsa*, “bronze.”
- 7 One or two bamboo flutes. What Western ears might hear as “out of tune-ness” in their playing is a quality cultivated and prized by Balinese musicians.

Form in Gamelan Music A traditional piece for gamelan is usually organized around the repetition of a long, symmetrical melody. This melody is made up

of smaller, equal phrases, generally 8 or 16 beats long, so that the whole melody will last a multiple of these numbers, especially 64 or 128 beats. A central group of instruments in the gamelan presents this melody. At the same time it may be played by other instruments in a simpler version, mainly in even note values, creating a heterophonic presentation.

At the end of each statement of the melody, the largest, deepest gong in the orchestra sounds. The unit between one gongstroke and the next, known as a *gongan*, is considered the basic structural unit for the piece. The *gongan* is divided into smaller units by other instruments in the gamelan: first into two units by a higher-sounding gong, then into four by other gongs, then into eight, and so forth. A 64-beat melody, for example, breaks down audibly into units of 32 beats, 16 beats, 8 beats, 4 beats, and so on.

This process of division continues right through the rhythmic level of the main melody, so that certain instruments elaborate upon its pitches twice as fast, four times as fast, perhaps even eight times as fast.

The whole texture, then, is an elaborately *stratified* polyphony, with rhythmic layers ranging from the *gongan* itself all the way down to subdivisions of individual beats. Each instrument or each instrumental group plays a single role, occupying one of these rhythmic strata. In the midst of it all is the melody of



A *legong* dancer and part of the gamelan pelegongan: a drum, a small floor gong, and a thirteen-key gangsa are prominent.



A gamelan at a Balinese funeral. The large array of gongs in the foreground is not found in gamelan pelegongan.

the piece at hand, presented in one version or simultaneously in distinct versions.

Bopong The piece on our recording, *Bopong*, is not a full dance piece but instead a sort of brief overture, played before the dancing begins. It was composed by I Lotring, a famous Balinese master musician born about 1900 and involved in many stylistic innovations of the 1920s and 1930s.

The main melody is played through three times; this is the heart of the piece. Before it we hear introductory material, partly based on the main melody. After it comes a lengthy, separate section with an ostinato (see page 124), and then a new concluding melody played by the whole gamelan.

The beats of the melody move slightly faster than one beat per second. The melody is 64 beats long and composed of four phrases of 16 beats each. The large gong sounds at the end of the 64-beat cycle.

The core melody, the most prominent melody you hear, is played by some of the gangsas and by two flutes, one high-pitched and one lower and less easy to hear. At the same time other gangsas play a simpler, unadorned version of this melody in slow notes. They are omitted from the beginning of the melody; listen for them starting at 0:42.

Around this melody is woven faster figuration, dividing each beat you count into four, played by

brittle-sounding gangsas. They fall silent at the start of each statement of the melody. Then they enter, softly at first, finally asserting themselves with a clamorous outburst (the first instance occurs at 0:58). Such outbursts are a famous hallmark of the newer, postcourt styles of Balinese gamelan music.

The third statement of the melody speeds up toward the end but does not quite finish. An entirely new melodic phrase breaks in to start a different section of



LISTEN

I Lotring,
Bopong



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- 0:00 Introduction: a few gangsas alone
- 0:04 Gong; introduction continues with fast gangsa figuration
- 0:30 Gong; *first* statement of melody begins
- 1:19 Gong; *second* statement of melody
- 2:06 Gong; *third* statement of melody
- 2:38 Melody truncated
- 2:41 Ostinato begins (fourteen times through); gong every eight beats
- 4:04 Syncopated, unison closing melody
- 4:21 Final gongstroke

The musical score consists of five staves, each representing a different musical phrase or section. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings.

- Phrase a:** The first staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of three flats. It begins with a half note, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes.
- Phrase b:** The second staff, continuing the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns.
- Phrase c:** The third staff, featuring a bracketed section labeled "Loud outburst of GANGSAS" which includes a series of rapid sixteenth notes.
- Phrase d:** The fourth staff, showing a continuation of the melodic development.
- Ostinato:** The fifth staff, labeled "Ostinato", showing a repeating rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

the piece. Beginning at 2:41, some of the gangsas play a single, eight-beat ostinato, repeated many times; other gangsas and the flutes play along with a slightly elaborated version. Meanwhile the brittle-sounding gangsas contribute spectacular figuration, moving eight times as fast as the main beat. The large gong, sounding

at the end of every ostinato—hence every eight beats, now, instead of every sixty-four—adds to the feeling of rhythmic climax.

Finally, all this energy is channeled into a single closing melody with striking syncopations (see page 9), played in unison by most of the gamelan.