Global Perspectives 5

Musical Drama Worldwide

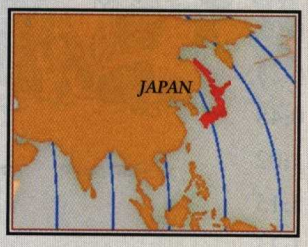
We saw earlier (page 62) that most religious traditions make substantial use of singing of one sort or another. Likewise, most traditions of drama worldwide do not consist of plain speech and little else, but instead incorporate chanting, singing, instrumental music, and dance. In this way they resemble the European opera we have studied and other kinds of Western drama, from ancient Greek tragedy and comedy to today's mega-musicals on Broadway.

Perhaps, in fact, this connection of music and drama is related at a very deep level to the connection of singing and religion. Just as the heightening of prayer in song seems to give readier access to invisible divinity, so music seems somehow compatible with the illusory, real-and-yet-unreal enactment of actions and events onstage.

Whatever the reason, from the ancient beginnings of drama down to the present day, music has been joined with acting more often than not.

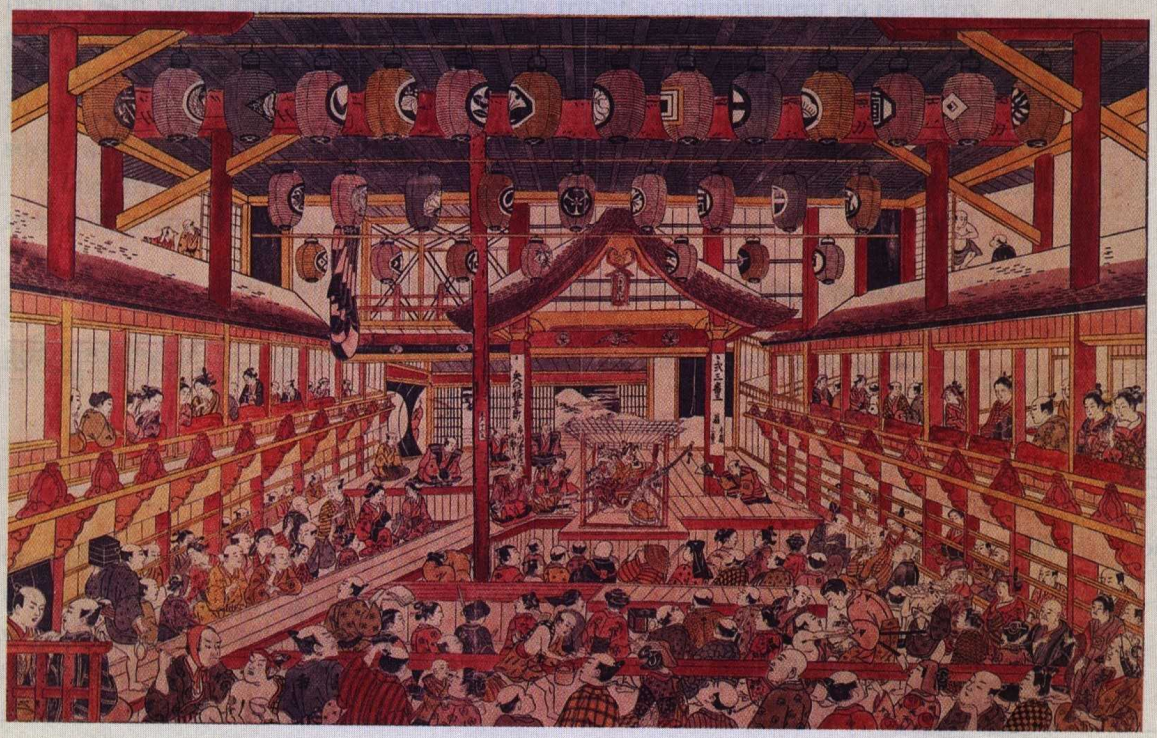
Japanese Drama

Asia has developed particularly rich traditions of musical drama. These include the shadow plays of Indonesia, accompanied by gamelan music and relating stories from lengthy epic poems by means of the shadows of puppets cast on a screen (see page 204). In India, religious dance-dramas reach back hundreds of years. Today the main form of musical drama is on screen: Movie musicals are the staple of the huge and lucrative Indian film industry. China, meanwhile, offers hundreds of regional styles of music theater, the most famous of which, Beijing (or Peking) opera, we will study on page 302.



In Japan, the main traditions of musical drama are these:

- **Noh** dramas emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were particularly prized in the elite shogun and samurai culture of the time. Noh dramas are steeped in Zen Buddhist philosophy. Their stage action consists of highly restrained, stylized, and symbolic gestures and movements. They involve singing (both by the actors and a chorus), dance, and complex, carefully predetermined instrumental accompaniment by a strictly limited ensemble: three percussion players and a flutist.



Inside a kabuki theater, c. 1745

Bunraku (bóon-ráh-koo) is a puppet theater, like the Indonesian shadow plays, but instead of casting shadows on a screen, large puppets are skillfully manipulated onstage, each by three puppeteers. Meanwhile one singer provides narration and the different voices for each of the puppets. He is accompanied by a single three-stringed Japanese lute called *shamisen* (sháh-mee-sen).

Kabuki (kah-bóo-kee) theater arose in the seventeenth century and adopted features from both noh and bunraku. Kabuki played to an audience different from the samurai class that prized noh. It used more modern stories and appealed to a new public made up of members of the urban merchant class that was emerging in Japan at this time. In a strikingly similar way, Baroque opera in Europe evolved from its aristocratic origins to become a cherished entertainment of new, upper-middle-class audiences (see page 88).

Performing Kabuki Theater Kabuki was first performed by women and young boys, but before long both of these types of performance were banned because of their associations with prostitution. From then until recently, only men sang kabuki. Female roles were played by special female impersonators.

The musical forces in kabuki are particularly complex. In addition to the singing actors, they can involve three other musical groups. Onstage, the main group sits behind the actors and accompanies their dialogue and dances. This group consists of a chorus, a number of shamisen players, and the three percussionists and flute player of the noh orchestra.

A second orchestra is hidden in a room to the left of the stage. Its makeup is variable, and it performs many functions. It can create musical sound effects, provide appropriate mood music and musical interludes, accompany certain onstage actions, and even suggest unspoken thoughts of the actors onstage.

Finally, the singer-narrator and shamisen player of bunraku may also be present. They sit to the right of the stage.

Kabuki. Behind the elaborately costumed actors are the stage musicians: the four noh players (lower row) and the chorus and shamisen players (upper row).

Nagauta Music from Dojoji

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The most famous genre of music involved in kabuki is the **nagauta** (náh-gah-óo-ta), or "long song," which usually accompanies dance. It is an extended piece for a singer (or singers in unison) and the onstage orchestra of shamisens, percussion, and flute. Sometimes the offstage orchestra takes part too.

We hear part of a nagauta from the kabuki play *Dojoji*. The singer and shamisens carry the main melody in a free and complex heterophony (see page 202)—you will hear the voice lagging behind or running ahead of the same pitches played by the shamisens. The flute contributes either its own version of the main melody or, in the most striking fashion, an independent melody in the style of noh music that is often not even in the same tonality as the main melody.

Meanwhile the drummers play either rhythmic patterns synchronized with the shamisens and voice or independent, out-of-sync patterns, derived from noh music.

LISTEN **Nagauta Music from the Kabuki Play *Dojoji***

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0:00	Part 1	Instrumental: shamisens play the main melody, accompanied by drums and a bell-like gong. Flute plays an independent melody. Exclamations by percussionists can also be heard.
0:55	Part 2	Main melody in heterophony (singer, shamisens, flute), supported by percussion
1:56	Part 3	Singer pauses; main melody in shamisens and flute
2:12	Part 4	Main melody (singer, shamisens); flute plays independent melody.
3:07	Part 5	Free heterophony for singer and shamisen alone

Chinese Opera

What we know as Beijing opera, the most famous variety of Chinese musical drama, is in China called **jingju** (chéeng-chu), meaning "theater of the capital." It is a rich amalgam of song, spoken dialogue, instrumental music, dance, elaborate costume, and martial arts.

Beijing opera is a relatively recent product of a long, complex history. Some of its stylistic features were introduced to the capital by provincial theater troupes at the end of the eighteenth century, while others developed through much of the nineteenth. Only by the late 1800s did Beijing opera assume the form we know today, and even that form has more recently undergone striking changes, especially during the Communist period of the last sixty years.

Voice Types in Beijing Opera In European opera, different voice types have been habitually associated with specific character types. In Romantic opera, tenors usually play young, vital, and amorous characters (for example, the Duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto*), and sopranos play their female counterparts (Gilda). Low male voices, baritone and bass, can variously have comic, evil, or fatherly associations (Rigoletto).

Such conventional connections of voice and character type are highly developed in Beijing opera, too—but the voice types are different. Young men of romantic, dreamy inclination sing in a high register and usually in falsetto. Older, bearded men, trusted and loyal advisors of one sort or another, sing in the high baritone range. Warriors sing with a forced, throaty voice; in addition they must be skilled acrobats in order to enact lively, athletic battle scenes.

Beijing opera: a female character and a *jing*

Two other special male roles are the male comic, who speaks more than he sings, and the *jing* or face-painted role, who may be a warrior, a dashing bandit, or even a god. His face is painted more elaborately than those of the other actors, with patterns whose colors symbolically reveal much about his character. The *jing* sings in a loud, hoarse manner that takes years to master.

The female roles in Beijing opera were, until the Communist era, almost always sung by male impersonators. They include a mature, virtuous woman, sung in a refined, delicate falsetto (when women sing these roles today, they imitate that male falsetto). A younger woman, lively and flirtatious, is sung in a suggestive, innuendo-laden falsetto. There is also an acrobatic female warrior.

The Orchestra The small orchestra of Beijing opera consists of a group of drums, gongs, and cymbals, a few wind instruments, and a group of bowed and plucked stringed instruments. These are all played by a handful of versatile musicians who switch from one instrument to another during the performance.

The percussion group is associated especially with martial music, accompanying battle scenes. But it also fulfills many other roles: It can introduce scenes, provide special sound effects, use conventional drum patterns to announce the entrances and social status of different characters, and play along with the frequent songs. The most important function of the stringed instruments is to introduce and accompany the songs.

Beijing Opera Songs In a way that is somewhat akin to the Western contrast of recitative and aria, Beijing opera shows a wide range of vocal styles, from full-fledged song through more declamatory song to stylized speech and even, for comic and minor characters, everyday speech. In general, the songs of Beijing opera are, like the arias of Italian opera, the musical heart of the drama, marked off from the other singing around them by their lyrical style. The songs suggest the feelings and internal psychological states of their singers.

The Prince Who Changed into a Cat

Our recording presents the beginning of a scene from *The Prince Who Changed into a Cat,* one of the most famous of Beijing operas. The story concerns an Empress who is banished from Beijing through the machinations of one of the Emperor's other wives. (Her newborn son,

A Beijing opera orchestra: The player in front holds the banjo-like *yueqin;* behind him are an *erhu* player and, standing, percussion players.

the prince of the title, is stolen from his cradle and replaced by a cat.) The present scene takes place many years later, when a wise and just Prime Minister meets the Empress and determines to restore her to her rightful position.

First the percussion plays, and then stringed instruments, along with a wooden clapper, introduce an aria sung by the Prime Minister (0:25). There are only three stringed instruments: a high-pitched, two-string fiddle played with a bow called a *jinghu* (chéeng-hoo), a similar but lower-pitched fiddle called *erhu* (ár-hoo), and a plucked lute called *yueqin* (yuéh-chin). All three play the same melody, the erhu doubling the jinghu an octave below while the yueqin adds characteristic repeated notes created by the quick, banjo-like strumming of a string.

Finally, the singer enters (0:41). He sings the same melody as the stringed instruments, though he pauses frequently while they continue uninterrupted. This heterophonic texture is typical of Beijing opera arias. The Prime Minister is a bearded old-man role and sings in the appropriate high baritone range.