

Japanese Kokyu

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Thank you for inviting me to the Pan Pacific Gamba Gathering. My name is Mari KANO, a participant from Japan, the Musashino Academia Musicae lecturer. My specialty is the research of Japanese traditional music. I would like to speak today about the “Japanese Kokyu” considered to be the most closely related instrument with the Gamba among Japanese musical instruments.

1: Origin and History

1.1 [From Literature](#) :

It was in the 16th century that the Gamba flowed into Japan. It is considered to be based on a visit to Japan by Christianity missionaries. At that time, it is said that they have brought to Japan many musical instruments besides the Gamba. According to many scholars today, at the same time, it just came to be admitted that the prototype of the Shamisen was also introduced from China via Okinawa to Japan.

The Japanese Kokyu [Figure 1] is the only instrument among the Japanese traditional musical instruments for which a bow is used. However, the origin of the Kokyu is not clear. In the 17th century, it was written about in the literature and there were some iconographic images of its proving its existence.

Then, it has been discussed for a long time whether there are certain relationships with the Shamisen, or there is a relationship between the musical instrument using a bow, for example, the Gamba and the Rabeika which Christianity missionaries brought.

According to the latest study, the first Japanese literature about the Shamisen was written in 1572. Since it is around 1561 that the Shamisen was introduced to Japan, it shows that the Shamisen had already become popular within only ten years. In the research paper of Mr. Gamo’s titled “old name of the Shamisen”, it turned out that many people already had made reference to the Shamisen at the end of the 16th century. Furthermore, although there was an item of the Shamisen in dictionaries published in 1603, there was no item of the “Kokyu”. In this dictionary it seems that there was a musical instrument using a bow, but it has not checked out yet whether it is the Kokyu.

The first description of the Kokyu is seen in 1609. The Chinese character “the small bow (the Kokyu)” can be seen with the Shamisen in the diary of a poet, whose name is Saijoin Tokiyoshi. In this dairy, a visually handicapped musician carrying the Shamisen and the small bow (the Kokyu) visited Tokiyoshi’s home and also sang one phrase of the Heike story. It probably was considered that the same musician

performed the Shamisen, the Kokyu and the Heike Biwa. At that time it already turned out that a Heike Biwa player was performing the Shamisen and the Kokyu.

While some relations between the Kokyu and the Shamisen is not definitely known, in the beginning of the 17th century the Kokyu suddenly appeared with the Shamisen. There is nothing that shows how the Kokyu was played in those days. Even some literatures in 1670s describe it as “small bows.” It seems that then, the expression “Kokyu” using the Chinese character, whose meaning is a hard drum was used through the Edo period. Later on they used the same Chinese character of “Kokyu” as we use now.

Till then, since there were no musical instruments using a bow in Japan, it is said people saw and copied something as models or obtained the idea of using a bow. It possibly was musical instruments in Europe and Asia; for example, a Chinese Erhu, the Saw Sam Sai in Thailand, the Rhubarb in Indonesia, etc.

1.2 □ From Iconographic data :

It is very interesting in research of musical instruments that many iconographic image data came to be used by the latest music studies. But, we have to carefully consider those iconographic images, because they are not necessarily realistic drawings by the painters. For example, in Ukiyo-e art of the Edo period, many musical instruments used in the people's life, are depicted. Sometimes the position of the bridge on the Shamisen, the Kokyu, and the Koto are differing from the present in these pictures. About the bridge of the Kokyu or the Shamisen, there is no corroboration that those positions which differ from today's usage are not right. It may be because the bridge was placed there at that time.

While caring about such a point, I want to speak you the iconographic image data about the Kokyu in many Ukiyo-e, many paintings on folding screens, many illustrations in books of the Edo period.

There is a painting on a folding screen in 1624-47 that the iconographic image of the Kokyu is first seen [Figure 2]. This is “the painting on a folding screen of the Kan-ei/ Shoho era by an unknown artist”. This Kokyu had a round body with a short bow. And the next oldest illustration was in a 1660 published book in Kyoto. There were two players sitting on a bench (the Kokyu & the Shamisen), and two players standing (Tsuzumi & old Shakuhachi) [Figure 3].

In the 1680s, the Kokyu was drawn in paintings by Moronobu Hishikawa who was the famous Ukiyo-e artist who excelled in the beautiful-woman picture [Figure 4]. Moreover, the Kokyu is seen in other paintings at the same period [Figure 5]. It probably turned out that the Kokyu was performed in the second half of 17th or the first half of the 18th century in Edo.

All being drawn here are the three-stringed Kokyu and in almost

cases the Kokyu is stood on the floor, and the bow is positioned right-angled to it. That is a completely different performance style from the Biwa and the Shamisen, and also different from that of the present Kokyu. Today, the Kokyu is sandwiched between the knees. Such a performing style of the Kokyu looks like the Gamba or the Cello, the Saw Sam Sai or the Rhubarb. Although the Kokyu player in those paintings was one male or one woman, in fact they almost always played in ensemble, not solo ; since they were performing together with the Shamisen, the Koto, the Shakuhachi (old type), the Tsuzumi (hand drum), and the Taiko (drum) .

Now, there is a figure of one person playing the Kokyu put between the knees just like the Gamba in the illustration of the book about the Kabuki actor's popularity, published in a.1666 [Figure 6]. Of course they wore a Kimono, but three players were sitting on the stage, not on their heels, playing the Kokyu, the Shamisen and the Sasara (a percussion instrument). Such a performance style is rare in Japan it seems to have been the imitation of the European playing style.

Other performance style might be a relic of the folk song "Ainoyama-bushi" which is strolling musician art. Strolling musicians received living expenses while they performed standing in front of a house or while strolling around using three kinds of musical instruments; the Shamisen, the Kokyu and the Sasara. In a book published in 1688-1703, there is a picture of three musicians who are playing the Kokyu with the Shamisen and the Sasara, while strolling together outdoors [Figure 7]. In Ukiyo-e there are also some depictions of two people playing the Kokyu and the Shamisen outside.

When the Kokyu was performed indoors in those days, it was performed together with the Shamisen or the Koto. It was thought that the performance by three instruments was probably begun first by the visually handicapped musicians. It is considered to have been performed in such a style, when young women performed indoors and were already looked at by Moronobu in the second half in the 17th century in Ukiyo-e [Figure 8]. There is also a describing that the women play four kinds of musical instruments; the Kokyu, the Shamisen, the Koto and the Shakuhachi indoors about the middle of the 18th century.

Until middle of the 18th century, for the Kokyu, three strings were stretched. However, in the 19th century, the four-stringed Kokyu was made [Figure 9]. This is because a blind musician, Fuji-e Kengyo (Kengyo is the highest rank of blind musicians) reformed the Kokyu about the middle of the 18th century in Edo.

Since the 3rd and the 4th strings which make a high sound are tuned in the same pitch, even if it called four strings, the range of the instrument is the same as real 3 strings, but the sonority changes considerably. For the four-stringed Kokyu a loosely stretched long bow is used. The four-stringed Kokyu came to play in concert with Koto in the Yamada School which Yamada Kengyo began in the second half of

the 18th century in Edo. Then, from the end of the Edo Period to the Meiji era the four-stringed Kokyu is drawn in Ukiyo-e [Figure 10-12].

2: Outline of the Kokyu

2.1 Form , Materials and Size

The Japanese Kokyu has the same shape as the Shamisen but it is a little smaller. The Kokyu has a long wooden pole which fixed to a body so as to pierce to it like a drum. And the cat (or dog) skin is stuck on both sides of the wooden frames of four sheets. While differing from the Shamisen, the pin of the Kokyu is as long as the Cello. It is because a player puts the Shamisen on his knees; however one performs the Kokyu by placing it between the knees. This performance style and holding the underhand bow resemble the Gamba. By the way, the pole and the bow of the Kokyu are separated into two (or three) parts to carry it easily.

The bow is wooden and the bridge is made of wood or bamboo. Although the shape of the bridge varies, compared with the bridge of the Shamisen, it is thinner and higher. In order to rub 3 or 4 strings as the Violin, height is required to some extent.

The hair of a Kokyu's bow is also called "Su". It is made of horsehair and is the same as that of the Violin and the Gamba. But since the Kokyu player rubs strings with a bow loosened, it is difficult to play the Kokyu. There are many hairs in a bow, so the Kokyu makes much harmonics, and it is also the feature of the Kokyu sound.

Silk threads are used for the Kokyu like most other stringed instruments in Japan (the Koto, the Biwa, and the Shamisen). Since many thin silk threads are twisted, if the strings are rubbed by a bow, a peculiar sound will come out. The Kokyu uses the same thin strings as the Shamisen does, or the thinner strings, therefore it introduces only small sounds.

It is characteristic of the Japanese Kokyu that the bow is much longer than the instrument itself. The instrument is around 65cm and the bow is 80-100cm and the hair is 60cm. The bow was considered to be small originally, judging from early description by Chinese character "small bow" and the fact that Yatsushashi Kengyo, known as a composer of the Koto music, was said to have improved the bow greatly about the middle of the 17th century.

2.2 Performing style:

In playing the Japanese Kokyu, the angle of the main part of a musical instrument is changed to play different strings, not like the Gamba or the Violin. In case of the Saw Sam Sai in Thailand, the Rhubarb in Indonesia and the Kucho in Okinawa, the player also turns the musical instrument itself.

And it is most important point that the Kokyu is played by underhand

and a bow using is pulling the horsehair by the right third finger like the Gamba. Therefore, I think that the same performing style of these instruments also presents us the relationships about the origin.

3: Present Kokyu Music

3.1 Kokyu Honkyoku

Music for the Kokyu that blind musicians wrote and performed is called “Kokyu Honkyoku”. From the middle of the 18th century, the musicians who did specially for the Kokyu in both the Kamigata and Edo appeared. The typical works of Masajima Kengyo and Fujie Kengyo were solo music for the Kokyu and vocal music accompaniment of the Kokyu.

Ex.) “Tsuru no Sugomori”
“Chidori no Kyoku”

3.2 Sankyoku

The ensemble music which visually handicapped musicians composed and performed for the Kokyu, the Koto and the Shamisen is called “Sankyoku Ensemble”, for this is the music for the three musical instruments (San in Japanese means three). This name is also applied to ensemble for the Koto, the Shamisen, and the Shakuhachi. Now almost the Shakuhachi is used instead of the Kokyu.

Ex.) “Rokudan no Shirabe”
“Yachiyo Jishi”

3.3 Bunraku (Ningyo Joruri)

On the other hand, the Shamisen came to be used also for accompaniment of a puppet play (Ningyo Joruri). Although only the Shamisen is mainly performed in the Ningyo Joruri, there is also a new work with which the Kokyu, the Koto, etc. were taken in. One scene in “Akoya” (1st performance□1732)□is the typical thing. In this work, the doll imitates the Koto, the Shamisen, and the Kokyu. Actually, Shamisen players perform three musical instruments.

Ex.) “Akoya” (in “Dannoura Kabuto Gunki”)
“Numazu” (in “Igagoe Dochusugoroku”)

3.4 Kabuki Music

In Kabuki version of “Akoya”□which is originally a Ningyo Joruri, the actor actually plays all three instruments instead of the doll. But, because it is difficult to play three musical instruments for the actor, it is restricted that the actor can play “Akoya”.

Moreover, in Kabuki, many musical instruments are performed not only on the stage, but in the “Kuromisu” (left-hand of the stage) which is not seen from spectator. Here the Kokyu plays the role that shows off the dramatic contents further. In this case, Shamisen player who is

performing background music in the “Kuromisu” plays the Kokyu.

Ex.) “Akoya” (The Kokyu is played on the stage.)

“Kokyu-iri Aikata” (The Kokyu is played in the Kuromisu.)

3.5 Folk Songs

In “Ettyu Ohara-bushi” and “Mugiya-bushi”, the Kokyu is used with the Shamisen at “Kaze no Bon” (September 1st) in Toyama Prefecture. This is the festival which marks the end of summer, and people keep on dancing all night on the street of the town. The Shamisen players and the Kokyu players at this time hang a musical instrument from a head with a string like a guitar, and perform with a walk.

Ex.) “Ettyu Ohara-bushi”

“Mugiya-bushi”

3.6 Contemporary Music

After the Meiji period, nobody looked back at the Kokyu, but the charm was rediscovered from the second half of the 20th century, and some composers made new works for the Kokyu; Shibata Minao, Makino Yutaka and Azechi Keiji etc.

Ex.) “Time for Kokyu and Violin” by Azechi Keiji (1987)

Then, I finish my talk about the Japanese Kokyu. For the “PPGG (Pan-Pacific Gamba Gathering)” I learned this instrument, but I’m still a beginner. Since I brought my Kokyu from Japan, I’d like to play it. Music is a typical Japanese song “Sakura Sakura”.

Thank you very much.

*Postscript: This paper is based on my presentation in PPGG 2007 in Hawaii and I revised it. Illustrations of the end obtain permission of printing from each possession organization. I thank them here. Therefore, unapproved reproduction and printing are prohibition.

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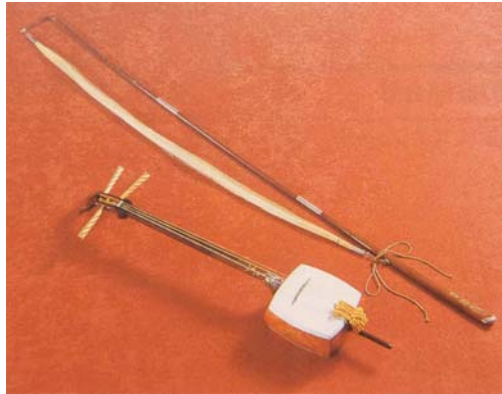


Figure 1: Japanese Koto (Collections of Musashino Academia Musicae Museum)



Figure 2: "Kotto Shu" (Yoshikawa Kobunkan Inc.: Collections of Japanese Essays)



Figure 3: "Manzai Odori" (Rinsen Book co.: New Collections of Rare Books in Reproduction)



Figure 4: "Genre Scenes" by Moronobu Hishkawa (Collections of Idemitsu Museum)



Figure 5: "Folding Screen" by Morohei Hishikawa (Collections of Idemitsu Museum)



Figure 6: "Nanyaro Furudatami" (Rinsen Book co.: New Collections of Rare Books in Reproduction)



Figure 7: "Jinrin Kunmo Zui" (Gendaishicho co.: Collections of Classics)



Figure 8: "Uchiwa-e Zukushi" by Moronobu Hishikawa (Books-Yagi co.: Collections of Tenri University Library)



Figure 9: "Kakyoku Sarae Ko" (Collections of Miyagi Michio Museum)



Figure 10/12: "Woman plays the Kokyu" in Ukiyo-e (Collections of Musashino Academia Musicae Museum)

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