



# Gagaku Music Keeps Unchanged 1000 Years in Japanese Culture and Mind

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## Abstract

Traditional Japanese music exists from Heian aristocracy period (794-1192 AD) as Gagaku. It keeps the same style for more than 1000 years, suggesting extremely rare worldwide. In Gagaku, Gakubiwa has been rather well-known musical instrument, which is similar to lute or guitar. Author has continued the activity of “Flower Feast” in Hoshinoya Karuizawa with ancient music, mood, space and time, providing mental healing to guests. The music is selected from the “flower feast” from the tale of Genji by the novelist Shikibu Murasaki 1000 years ago. Gagaku may have music and culture powers for feeling happiness psychologically.

**Keywords:** Gagaku; Gakubiwa; Flower feast; Hoshinoya karuizawa; The tale of Genji; Shikibu Murasaki

## Commentary Article

In Japan, we have traditional Japanese ancient music, which was born during Heian aristocracy period (794-1192 AD) [1]. It is called Gagaku, which means ga (decent, elegant) plus gaku (happy, music, relaxed). Gagaku has been highly evaluated for valuable cultural heritage. Its general music style has not been changed for more than 1000 years, suggesting extremely rare situation in the world [2].

For long years, the lute has been a portable stringed musical instrument. A similar instrument biwa (biwa, pipa in English) was invented in West Asia [3]. Its characteristic is the bent neck at a right angle, and it was introduced to Japan before the Nara period (710-794 AD) via China. It has been used on various occasions and has been always used in traditional Japanese music (Gagaku) [1]. The meaning of gagaku is from ga=elegance and gaku=music. The biwa used in gagaku has been called Gakubiwa. Since ancient times, the playing method is to sit on a cushion, hold the instrument horizontally, and scratch the string with a plectrum (similarly pick for guitar) to make a sound. When performing ensemble with several types of instruments in Gagaku, it plays a role of supporting rhythmical aspect while playing distributed chords [4].

Author and collaborators have been involved in the Gagaku for long. We have continued to play Gagaku, develop traditional Japanese culture, and teach music and dance in Tokyo University of the Arts [2,5]. Fortunately, Hoshino Resorts have supported and provided us various opportunities for presenting Gagaku, culture, history and liberal arts to people [6]. Furthermore, they have contributed social and human happiness for years. Due to their impressive concept and philosophy, creation of the novel charm of the enterprise and discovery of another aspect of Japan would be recent themes. From these perspectives, Hoshinoya Karuizawa was established in 2016 [6].

Karuizawa has been the most famous resorts in Japan which is situated in mountainous district, 60 min from Tokyo by Shinkansen [7]. It has wonderful nature through four seasons, associated with clear air and water, the sound of the wind and the buzz of trees. Characteristic landscape has rice terraces to enjoy the four seasons. They include spring with beautiful fresh green, summer with cool sunbeams between trees, autumn with colorful leaves, winter with deep blue sky and snowy landscape.

In the Japanese garden with water, stone, island, tree and flower, novel activity of Gagaku was conducted as current theme of “Flower Feast” [6] (Figure 1). Music performance was satisfactory for the fusion of music, nature, space and time. The silence was

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also pleasant because of the soundscape in ancient memory. In a sense, this may be the original scenery of Gagaku. In such fantastic landscape, hotel guests can sit any favorite islet accompanying champagne or Japanese sake. Some guests close their eyes and seem to feel comfortable fusion world with all five senses. Adequate music is selected from seasonal song or the “flower feast” from the tale of Genji 1000 years ago.



**Figure 1:** Gagaku activity of the Flower Feast in Hoshinoya Karuizawa (2022) Author sits down and plays ancient music “Genji flower feast” 1000 years ago.



**Figure 2:** Illustrated picture scroll books of the tales of Genji (12 century). The original figure is old and then it is restoration replication.

“The Tale of Genji” by Murasaki Shikibu is one of the significant Japanese novels that was written in the middle of Heian period (794-1182 AD) [8]. The literature was firstly found in 1008 AD, more than 1000 years ago. It is only narrative novel work in her all life [9]. The content was concerning the aristocratic society of Heian period. It included glory, downfall, power struggles, political desires and various romance among aristocratic people. After about 150 years of the first appearance of Genji, the illustrated picture scroll books was published [9]. They have become the national treasures, which are present in Tokugawa Art Museum and Gotoh Museum in Japan. One of the famous paintings is shown in Figure 2. It is a scene in which a man treats his lover with love and comforts her by playing music on Biwa.

Nowadays, the Novel “The Tale of Genji” has been read not only in Japan but also in other countries worldwide for more than 20 languages. From historical point of view, various translators have been in charge of the translation. At first, Kencho Suematsu (1855-1920) translated Genji Monogatari in 1882 [10]. He was significant person, who was statesman, bureaucrat, diplomat, journalist, poet and scholar [11]. After that, Arthur David Waley published Genji to English version (1925-1933) [12]. Successively, Edward George Seidensticker translated “the tale of Genji” (1976) [13]. Since the text of Seidensticker was excellent, Royall Tyler have further improved the translation for adequate manner (2001) [9]. The interpretation of biwa (pipa) was discussed by Tyler, Nelson, and specialists [14].

In summary, Heian period was present during 794-1192 AD in Japan. The word Heian means that Hei=stable, flat and an=safety, relaxed, and then Heian means happiness, relief and peace. The famous Heian shrine is situated in Kyoto where previous capital existed and the Emperor of Japan had lived for long before. Traditional Japanese music Gagaku is sure to contribute human happiness as the power of music and culture [15,16]. The research on music for psychology will be expected to develop in the future [17].

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