

The Japanese and Music

By David Capel

WHEN it comes to music and Japan, people tend to think of the hardware nation. The world's biggest musical-instrument manufacturer is Hamamatsu (Shizuoka Prefecture)-based Yamaha Corp., which cranked out 6 million pianos over the past century. Ever since a brash, young company by the name of Sony started fitting transistors into pocket-sized radios back in the 1950s, Japan's electronics manufacturers have built a solid reputation for quality listening devices. But beyond this familiar side to the musical picture, the Japanese also possess a remarkably appreciative ear for the great diversity of sounds that all this hardware can produce.

Music here goes back a long way. The earliest historical record about Japan and its people occurs in a third-century chronicle of China's Wei dynasty, where one passage mentions the music, singing and dancing that accompanied a Japanese wake. Today, you don't

event has drawn musicians from countries as far apart as Bulgaria and Burundi, Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For those who picture Japanese artistic expression as quiet and graceful, the ebullient sound of Kodo effectively redresses that balance.

On a more placid level, the rich traditional music of this country is – fortunately – encountered a good deal. Festivals are usually held in connection with a Shinto shrine, and at other times of the year the music of flutes and the ethereal *sho*, an organ-like wind instrument, provides the haunting acoustic backdrop to the experience of entering one of the larger shrines. Equally atmospheric, though in a non-religious context, are the tones of the zither-like *koto*, played to create the agreeable sense of calm and tranquillity while sipping green tea in some tea-house or garden.

Although there were earlier influences with the arrival



encounter too much singing and dancing at a funeral in this country, but music continues to play a big part at the folk level. Anyone who has ever attended a Japanese festival knows that music is an essential element in these happily boisterous events. From the distinctive, exuberant sound of the drums and flutes, it is not hard to tell when some festival is in progress nearby.

At some festivals, those drums can take on gigantic proportions. One festival in the northern town of Takanosu (Akita Prefecture) has led to the making of an instrument that is 3.71 meters in diameter and is the largest drum in the world. Outside of festivals, Japanese drums enjoy great popularity – and not just in this country. Since its debut at the Berlin Festival in 1981, the drum ensemble called Kodo has taken its dynamic music around the world. And it has also brought the music of the world to Japan with the annual festival known as the Earth Celebration. In its 15 years, this

of the Portuguese in the 1500s, Western music did not gain a major foothold in Japan until the latter half of the 19th century, when the culture and technology of Europe and America exerted an enormous influence. Western music did not in fact make quite the same initial impact in Japan as other arts, but things gradually changed. The Japanese are not slow to recognize the merits of a good piece of technology, and they certainly picked up on the gramophone. By 1937, Japan was the world's biggest market for classical music records.

That appetite for classical music still exists. Before the rise of the gramophone and radio, pianos were popular in Western homes, but today one's chances of finding a piano in an ordinary home are probably greater in Tokyo than in London or New York. The conductor Claudio Abbado has commented on the remarkable knowledge of the audiences he has played to in Japan, and Tokyo and other cities host a varied agenda of high-caliber concerts. One of the great

highlights in the concert year comes around Christmas, when the thunderously joyful sounds of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony are heard – a work that has become popularly identified in Japan with that festive season.

Beyond its own shores, Japan has done quite a job in bringing classical music to wider audiences. Currently music director of the Vienna State Opera, Ozawa Seiji served for almost three decades as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and is regarded as one of the most accomplished conductors anywhere. At the opposite end of the virtuoso scale, the Suzuki method, developed by Suzuki Shinichi, has won considerable success in Japan and overseas in getting young children to play the violin and other instruments using their natural learning abilities.

Just as the Japan of the 1930s was a powerful market for recorded music, so today it is the world's second-largest music market. As elsewhere these days, the classical-music portion is rather slight. Similarly, jazz accounts for a modest piece of the market, though its aficionados are certainly passionate about their music. The jazz clubs that are scattered around Japanese cities offer the chance to hear good live music, and, as with classical concerts, the audience are no musical slouches. A number of Japanese artists have taken their music overseas, and some jazz musicians, such as Akiyoshi

success in the 1990s. Their cool, ironic take on pop-kitsch helped three of their albums chalk up sales of over 300,000 copies in America.

This trend for Japanese pop to do well overseas has increased of late. In 1963, the late Sakamoto Kyu had a number one hit in America with the schmaltzy *Ue o Muite Aruko*, better known in English by the meatier, though irrelevant, title *Sukiyaki*. But after that, apart from the moderate success of the Yellow Magic Orchestra techno band of the late 1970s, Japanese pop did not fare so well outside its own country. These days, however, with Japanese pop culture at all levels, from fashion to comics and animation films, gaining fans overseas, particularly in other Asian countries, so too has the music. Dreams Come True is one group that has sold well in places like Taiwan, and its singer, Yoshida Miwa, has graced the cover of *Time* magazine. Likewise no stranger to the cover of *Time* is the current queen of Japanese pop, Hamasaki Ayumi, who, despite the cutesy Barbie-doll looks, exerts an impressively strong control over the direction of her career, and she too has built up a considerable following in other parts of Asia.

But it is at the casual level that one clearly sees how music in this country has its enduring appeal and is pursued with such dedication. Stroll around Shibuya



Toshiko, Yamashita Yosuke and Onishi Junko, are as well known in New York as in Tokyo.

It is in Tokyo that Japan's music industry finds its center, and for the record buyer the center within that center is the district known as Shibuya. This trendy area of stores and eateries is closely identified with youth culture, and it has been called the best record-buying spot on the planet. Whatever obscure musical style strikes your fancy, you are sure to find at least one shop in some back street or up a back staircase in Shibuya that is either dedicated entirely to that genre or will amply cater to your needs. And the person serving behind the counter usually displays a knowledge of the subject that teeters on the encyclopedic.

Shibuya is, however, more than just a place to buy records. This is also where music is made, and it even spawned the "Shibuya Style" of pop music. One of the classic exponents of this was the group known as Pizzicato Five, who achieved a good deal of critical acclaim and

Station in the early evening and you often have a choice of rock groups to listen to, playing there on the street for anyone who cares to listen. In the alleys of the bohemian Shimokitazawa area of Tokyo, you may find yourself being treated to a virtuoso performance of classical guitar or bossa nova. A walk through Inokashira Park near Kichijoji in western Tokyo on a Sunday afternoon can offer performances of everything from rhythm and blues (R&B) and Japanese folk songs played on the banjo-like *shamisen* to a cappella groups, washboard bands and a group of musicians hooting down didgeridoos. For the most part, the music you hear is played with gusto, with fair finesse and, above all, as in all the best live performances, with a rather infectious sense of fun. **JS**

David Capel is a journalist from Yorkshire, England, who has lived in Tokyo for 18 years.