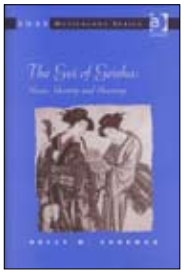

Kelly M. Foreman. ***The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity and Meaning***

Hamsphire, UK: Ashgate. SOAS Musicology Series, 2008. xiv + 143 pages, 7 b/w illustrations, 5 music examples, tables. Hardback (alk. paper), GBP £45.00; ISBN: 978-0-7546-5857-3.

THANKS in part to the popularity of Arthur Golden's best-selling pseudo-biographical potboiler *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) and its subsequent transformation into a financially successful motion picture, Western interest in geisha seems to have experienced yet another renaissance. As Kelly Foreman points out in the first chapter of this slender volume, the fascination of the West with geisha is nothing new. From the romantic literary oeuvres that led to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to album covers of rock bands today, the image of the geisha has been part and parcel of the West's conception of Japan. In most cases, however, geisha have served chiefly as a locus for male fantasies concerning passive, submissive, interchangeable women whose chief charm is their virtuosic performance in the bedroom rather than on the stage. Foreman seeks to put to rest this "geisha myth" by marshalling both her fieldwork experience and historical research into geisha performing arts. She places the emphasis where it belongs: on the artistic abilities and occupations of the women who contributed so much to the development of Japanese musical culture. This book thus serves as a welcome companion volume to Liza Dalby's *Geisha* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, originally published in 1983), which presents a more sociological analysis and relegates geisha performing arts to a secondary position.

After outlining the Western "geisha myth" Foreman moves to a discussion of the repertoire and training of today's geisha. She points out that with the exception of a *shamisen* piece called *sawagi*, nearly all genres learned and performed by geisha have been sung and played by other sectors of society. *Nagauta*, for example, and *jōruri* styles such as *tokiwazu* and *kiyomoto*, still maintain strong links to the theater world. Chamber music, from the "classical" *jiuta* to the more popular *hauta*, *kouta*, and *zokkyoku*, continue to fascinate amateur and professional connoisseurs of traditional music, young and old, male and female alike. Since many of these musical genres function as dance accompaniment, Foreman wisely includes information on the schools and styles of dance associated with each musical style.

Most women who opt for careers as geisha today are trained to dance, sing, play *hayashi* (a transverse flute and three types of drums), and perform *nagauta*-style *shamisen*. Teachers, usually from outside the immediate geisha community, normally provide lessons at a building known as the *kenban*, the center for the professional associations into which geisha have organized themselves. Some geisha may also choose to study the arts of tea, flower arranging, and calligraphy, and considerable latitude is granted for students to pursue their own tastes and talents. No matter what arts are mastered, however, the desired outcome for a geisha apprentice is to become sufficiently proficient at music and dance to be able to make a living through these arts. True success, however, is unlikely to result if skillful singing or

shamisen playing is not combined with a sense of elegance, tact, and grace that wins the respect and admiration of patrons.

Chapter 3 begins with a historical overview of female performing arts in Japan and continues with discussions of today's geisha performances, both on public stages and in more intimate settings. Although the *ozashiki* (a private "parlor" at a restaurant or elsewhere) remains the most common site for performances of music and dance by geisha, Foreman points out that much geisha culture is historically linked to public venues. Women had it hard after the 1629 ban on "women's Kabuki," and it took until the 1870s for geisha to present large-scale, highly visible public performances of traditional and newly created arts. The section of this book (51–62) dedicated to the history of the establishment of geisha associations and venues of public performances from the Meiji era until the present day is particularly welcome, for it sheds light on a still poorly understood phenomenon. Foreman elegantly combines her own fieldwork interviews, statements from concert programs, and other forms of historical documentation to provide a masterful overview of the developments of this era.

The succeeding pages offer much "insider" information regarding *ozashiki* performances at gatherings and banquets. This is an area of Japanese culture that those of us surviving on academic salaries will rarely experience "live." My own limited familiarity with such geisha entertainment, garnered mostly through an afternoon at a geisha establishment in Kanazawa—perhaps the only surviving one owned by geisha themselves, requiring customers to come to the geisha rather than vice versa—was paid for by a local publisher who evidently felt pity for a group of struggling historians. Foreman's ethnography of her experiences in Tokyo parallel my encounter in Kanazawa nearly perfectly: light beer and conversation in a tatami room, performances of several short songs gauged to the season, discussion (with the predictable comments regarding my height and ability to speak Japanese), a period of interaction where geisha perform a local song with the customers (I was summoned to bang out a simple drum pattern), more drinking and talk, and finally the bill, in my case thankfully presented to someone else. Foreman effectively unites personal experiences and interview material with written sources to present an absorbing account of the context in which geisha performances are usually enjoyed. She also reveals that much heterogeneity exists, for geisha of various associations in Tokyo and Kyoto maintain their own habits, theme songs, and musical repertories. Readers with sufficiently deep pockets may wish to savor these worlds "live," but the rest of us must be grateful to Foreman for initiating us to the inner world of the *ozashiki* at a fraction of the cost.

Chapter 4 places geisha within the larger context of today's traditional Japanese performing arts and analyzes the reasons that women choose to become geisha in the first place. This theme is extended in the fifth chapter, detailing, among other things, the financial burdens that geisha incur. The exorbitant cost of lessons, instruments, and props, the fees for licenses and compulsory recitals, and the never-ending pressure to purchase gifts all serve as formidable hurdles to anyone, male or female, wishing to learn a traditional Japanese art or skill. For geisha, who normally study several different arts simultaneously, the wages of proficiency are

multiplied proportionately and financial assistance remains limited. While kabuki is backed by the entertainment industry and Nō and the puppet theaters by the government, geisha receive no institutional support and are even excluded from obtaining the honor of becoming "living national treasures." Unless they are independently wealthy, they must depend on their *okiya* (the houses with which each woman is affiliated, often run by ex-geisha), geisha associations (*kumiai*), and of course their patrons.

On pages 97–100 the author sensitively explores the delicate issue of casual sexual relations between geisha and patrons, the vortex of the "geisha myth." She astutely notes that geisha are not particularly in demand for this function since sex is easily available from many other simpler and less costly sources. If a romantic relationship springs up between a geisha and a patron, this usually takes time, and the lover then becomes the woman's "boyfriend." To be sure physical attractiveness can add much to a geisha's reputation, just as it does for pop music stars or even classical musicians. If it has never been true, pace Edo-period lawmakers, that any woman who played the *shamisen* was likely to sell sexual favors as well, a look at *ukiyo-e* and other sources indicates that sex workers commonly advertised their appeal (and perhaps wiled away their boredom) by playing an instrument. Cultural skills, and music and dance perhaps more than any other, have evidently long been considered sexy.

Foreman navigates these treacherous straits with skill and aplomb, and this volume will be read with interest by anyone who wishes to know more about the inner workings of what must be the least understood world of Japanese performing arts. Even if Foreman's treatment of Edo-period music and theater suffers from too much reliance on Japanese music dictionaries and on less than entirely accurate English-language sources, she brings to her study invaluable ethnomusicological fieldwork experience and a good amount of first-hand knowledge of the geisha world. At the same time, this volume indicates how much remains to be explored. Who were the famous geisha in history? What did they do, musically and professionally, and why did they, and not others, succeed? Why did male geisha disappear during the mid-eighteenth century, or did they really do so? How were the changes in sexual morality from the Edo period to the present day reflected in the role and image of geisha? Foreman's book provides a helpful introduction into a long neglected side of Japanese musical cultural development, but plenty of room remains for more research on this important subject.

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