



Henry Johnson, *The Shamisen: Tradition and Diversity*

Leiden: Brill, 2010. xix + 145 pages. Photographs, illustrations, music transcriptions and notation, endnotes, select character list, bibliography, index. Hardback, US\$115; ISBN 978-9004181373.

PERHAPS the most ubiquitous instrument in traditional Japanese music, the *shamisen*—a three-stringed, skin-covered, plucked lute—provides the perfect subject for how a musical instrument can embody the most conservative notions of Japanese tradition while also reflecting the diversity of Japanese culture. As is evident by the

sheer volume of information in Henry Johnson's attractive and deceptively slender book, the diversity of *shamisen* music in Japan is so immense that even the most devoted enthusiasts are unlikely to be familiar with all that exists outside of their own musical genre of choice. For this reason, the extensive research and detailed information about virtually every aspect of the *shamisen* in historical and present-day Japan makes this extremely valuable as a reference book for *shamisen* enthusiasts such as myself, as well as serving as an introduction to the layperson.

The real strength of this book is that Johnson combines a thorough academic study of the organology, sociology, and ethnography of this instrument with the more practical approach of a handbook for performers, with detailed information on the instrument's component parts and accessories, playing techniques, tuning, and notation systems. The only section missing is any direct instruction on how to play the instrument or examples of the musical repertoire, both of which are beyond the scope of this book. It would have been nice to include an appendix of notable works in the repertoire of all of the classic styles, but the select character list with romanized names and their corresponding Japanese characters is extremely valuable. Overall, the depth of information included here about the life of this instrument makes this an enormous contribution to the literature on Japanese music in English.

The history and cultural flow of the *shamisen* described in Chapter 1 shows how this instrument, originally imported from China around the fifteenth century, has worked its way into virtually every musical tradition of Japan to become an icon of Japanese traditional culture. Indeed, this thoroughly illustrated book is a pleasure to browse through because of the beautiful reproductions of Japanese paintings in which the *shamisen* is prominently featured, and the author utilizes these images as well as literary references to trace its evolution as a Japanese instrument. As reader-friendly as this book is, Johnson does not spare the reader even the minutest details about instrument types—the subject of Chapter 2—and manufacturing and component parts—the subject of Chapter 3. General readers might find themselves flipping quickly through these pages of minutia, but any *shamisen otaku* (nerd) will devour this stuff. An avid *shamisen* player for about seventeen years now, I learned a lot from this book about technical aspects of the instrument that were previously unknown to me.

The same holds true for much of the historical information contained in Chapter 4 (“Performers”) and Chapter 5 (“Performance Traditions and Music Genres”). Johnson brings together a wealth of sources in Japanese and English to provide a clear picture of the *shamisen* in Japanese society and history. Chapter 4 contains extensive yet concise sections on blind performers, gender associations, and performing organizations, all of which are vital to understanding the sociology of the *shamisen*. In Chapter 5 Johnson makes eloquent sense of the tangled web of established styles that confounds any student of Japanese music history by employing a simple flow chart followed by detailed descriptions of the plethora of lyric and narrative styles that constitute Japanese music from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. Johnson brings this history up to date with the newer genres of *shamisen* music such as the recently commercially successful *tsugaru shamisen*. The

tension between tradition and diversity is particularly evident in comments by the founder of the tradition, Takahashi Chikuzan, who severely criticized the excessively flashy playing style that has come to dominate *tsugaru shamisen*. It is this very same style though that has made it so attractive to contemporary audiences.

As a veteran *shamisen* player, Johnson is well aware that learning to play the instrument from books is not just impractical, but inferior to learning directly from a teacher in the traditional manner of one-on-one music lessons. For this reason there are no pedagogical exercises in this book, but Chapter 6 on performance is perhaps the next best thing for beginning *shamisen* players who are currently studying with a teacher. Johnson lists various scales and tunings to help students—and scholars as well—understand how to conceptualize music played on the *shamisen*. Especially valuable for the player are descriptions of the numerous playing techniques for the left hand and the right hand plectrum along with close up photos that illustrate the most important techniques. Johnson also includes an exhaustive survey of the many different kinds of *shamisen* notation that have developed in the modern era. He is careful to note that all notations indicate only skeletal melodies as they are essentially prescriptive aids to the performance of music typically learned orally from a teacher. One wonders though to what extent the future of *shamisen* music may hinge upon publications such as this book for helping a global community of musicians carry on traditional musical practices in the absence of readily available teachers.

The future of the *shamisen* is dealt with in the concluding chapter that summarizes the development of the instrument by exploring the tension between tradition and diversity that emerges over the course of this book. As with any premodern Japanese musical style, a sense of authenticity is propagated by musicians adhering to conservative playing styles that can give the impression that *shamisen* music is static and monolithic, when in fact there have been constant stylistic changes and borrowings between schools resulting in a diversity of interrelated traditions. In spite of the changes it has undergone, the distinctive form of the instrument itself, as established during the Edo period, has essentially frozen the *shamisen* in time so that it maintains its power today as a symbol of national identity. Even if the instrument is amplified and played in a rock context, the *shamisen* remains a distinctly Japanese instrument and its power to connote a sense of Japaneseness is immutable. Johnson rightly concludes that the *shamisen* is both traditional and modern, describing it as an object of “immense meaning regarding the contemporary perception of Japanese culture.”

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