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## Asian American Music

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Sakata, Hiromi Lorraine メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00002096">https://doi.org/10.15021/00002096</a>

## **Asian American Music**

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The term “American music” is an all-inclusive category, which includes numerous classical, popular and folk genres. For academic institutions of learning, American music includes those composers such as Copland, Ives and Gershwin who were influenced by American folksongs, popular genres and jazz. For the general population, American music denotes popular styles such as rock and roll, musical theater or country and western music. Whatever the distinctions, most American music is based on genres that developed in the United States by American musicians out of musical traditions associated with specific immigrant populations or ethnic groups living in the United States.

Currently, an important topic in music education is the music of the multicultural populations of the United States. What can we, as music educators, say about the music of Asian Americans that can distinguish it from the contributions of African American, Hispanic American, Native American and Anglo American music cultures? There is no shared language or moment of shared history for the Asian Americans that have worked to shape an Asian American musical style or identity.

Although there are records of earlier arrivals of Asians to North America, large-scale Asian immigration began in the late 19th century. The early immigrants came to the New World mainly for economic reasons. They initially worked on the railroads or were employed as agricultural laborers. Mainly Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and Indians, they initially settled on the West Coast (and Hawaii, then an independent kingdom, later a U.S. territory and state). The bulk of the Korean immigration to the U.S. took place after the 1960s and today, they, along with Americans of Filipino and Vietnamese heritage, form one of the largest Asian American populations in Los Angeles. The bulk of the recent Asian Indian

immigrants, however, have settled in and around New York City. The most publicized recent groups of immigrants are the various Southeast Asians who came as a result of the war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Strictly speaking, many of the early immigrants were contract laborers who expected to return to their homes after completing their work agreements. But others stayed on, raising families and forming communities, which welcomed new arrivals from their homeland.

If the first Asian immigrants came mainly for economic reasons, subsequent Asian immigration is closely tied to the history of world and U.S. economy and politics. World War II, the Korean conflict, the Vietnam war, the normalization of trade between the U.S. and China, and the rise of the economic power of the countries of the Pacific Rim; all these events, many tumultuous and all far-reaching, have contributed to the multiethnic makeup of the American population. Family reunification is another reason for Asian immigration to the United States and Asian Americans are now involved in a wide range of economic activities including the professions, skilled workers and small business.

My own family shares a history with the other Asian immigrants who came to the United States at the turn of the century. My grandfather on my mother's side came to California in the late 1800s from Kumamoto, Japan. My grandmother later joined him and my mother was one of the early Japanese Americans born in California. Being the oldest of three girls, it was expected that my mother would be educated as a pharmacist to take over my grandfather's business. I also was born in California, in the very same town where my mother was born, and following tradition, both my sister and I went to the same university as my mother.<sup>1</sup> My grandparents on my father's side came to California from Aichi Prefecture, Japan, to work in the fields in the early 1900s. When my father was seventeen, they called him to California in order to join them in the fields. Four years later, they returned to Japan, leaving my father in California to continue his education. He entered high school at the age of 22, graduating three and a half years later. A few years later, he entered university, graduating with a degree in pharmacy at the age of 31.<sup>2</sup> Asian Americans represent a great range of cultural diversity, including music traditions. A vast number of peoples are identified as Asian even though they cannot be identified as a particular ethnic group, nor do they originate from a single racial

stock, nor do they, as a group, belong to one language family. Yet, if we look to the history of Asia, we see that there was an active exchange of material goods, information and populations from ancient times. Asia has had a long tradition of transcending boundaries. The ancient civilizations of the Near East, Persia, India and China spread their religions, philosophies, and knowledge far beyond their political and geographic boundaries. The spread of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam went hand in hand with the spread of kingships and dynasties as well as a way of life that penetrated much of the cultural life of Asia. Shamanism and localized nature worship of various types were incorporated into the major religious beliefs. Some examples of these exchanges took place through economic trade, religious missions and pilgrimages, and the spread of political influences and wars.

Asian religions and philosophies spread common attitudes involving the importance of family and ancestors (filial piety and ancestor worship), the importance of nature (in ruling as well as in philosophical thought), the importance of education and the transmission of knowledge (both literary and oral tradition), and the observance of hierarchies (strict codes of social conduct). Ceremonial music in Asia entertains gods, and signals correct procedures for humans. Buddhist monks, Islamic mystics, and pastoral nomads symbolize their close connection to nature through their music. Hindu mythology and epics form the basis for much of the dance and theatrical traditions of South and Southeast Asia.

A famous trade route (a caravan track of 4,000 miles) known as the Silk Road or Silk Route connected West Asia and East Asia as well as China and the West, carrying goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and China. During the famous Tang Dynasty of China (AD 618-907), many international musicians from Persia, Central Asia, India, and Southeast Asia lived and performed in the capital, Ch'ang-an (now Xi'an) (Schafer 1963: 50-57). They influenced the musical tastes of the ruling classes. They introduced new instruments into China, most notably the Persian *barbat* which developed into the *pipa* of China, the *biwa* of Japan and the *ty-ba* of Vietnam (Kishibe 1940). Some of the musical instruments from this period are preserved in the Shosoin Repository in Nara, Japan. The influence of power of the Hindu kingships, the great Mongol invasions, and the spread of Buddhism and Islam all played an

important part in contributing to the cultural life of Asia as well as to the religious and political aspects of their dominion.

Because of this long history of sharing of ideas, there are a number of prevailing themes that are prominent and consistent across all the regions of Asia. There is a close relationship between music and religion and the spirit. Therefore, one finds devotional music at the core of religious ritual, or as part of activities originally conceived for the entertainment of gods and spirits. Music is often associated with state and power, used as a symbol to acknowledge the presence or activity of authority. Music, often of a participatory nature, commemorates life cycle and seasonal events. Although literature has a high place among many of the Asian cultures, music is normally treated as an oral tradition. Repertoire, performance practice and music theory are passed on orally from teacher to student, or, on a more informal basis, one learns from listening to musicians. Oral tradition places heavy emphasis on memorization (both mental and tactile) and conceptualization, and is responsible for the continuity of musical traditions through the ages, from one area of the world to another. Continuity in itself does not imply preservation or petrification, but rather, innovation and change, for in order for a music tradition to remain vital, it must adapt, absorb, and change according to new influences and circumstances. These new influences often came about as a result of exchanges of information, material goods, and populations, which took place among the peoples of Asia, as well as with peoples outside Asia.

Although Asian Americans faced prejudice, hostilities, segregation, and were the target of restrictive exclusionary acts and laws during the first century of their lives in the United States (1850-1950), they nevertheless managed to maintain cultural ties with their original homelands. Asian Americans traveled to Asia to visit relatives; some went to Asia for an education, while movies as well as performing troupes from Asia toured Asian communities, principally on the West Coast. Since that time, modern technology has enhanced the exchange of information and the movement of peoples. "World Beat" is a category of popular music that incorporates western and traditional music from different parts of the world. Asian music is often sampled for use in film music. Asian performing musicians still tour the United States, but now play in large urban centers such as New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles to a general American audience.

Although many American students travel to Asia to study traditional performing arts, there are more and more opportunities for learning from dedicated artists who teach and perform in the U.S. Community-based organizations sponsor classes, workshops and performances. Many university programs have faculties of Asian performing arts and encourage student participation. These individuals and institutions of learning have developed a multicultural awareness and regard that enriches the general musical life of the United States.

In speaking about Asian American music, I speak about traditions that are based on the traditional music of Asia, which have undergone change to adapt to contemporary American culture. Individual Asian American communities have worked to keep their traditional modes of artistic expressions alive in their own American communities.

Religious activities often provided the core of social life for many Asian immigrants in America as they did in Asia. Ceremonial or ritual music that accompanied social and religious activities were adopted by Asian American communities as symbols of their cultural heritage.

In many Chinese communities, Chinese New Year is celebrated with the Lion dance, usually manned by members of a martial arts group and accompanied by gongs and firecrackers. Many Southeast Asian American communities sponsor religious ceremonies and music performances to commemorate their important dates including New Year celebrations.

*Ch'u sok* is a harvest thanksgiving holiday that is celebrated by many Korean Americans on August 15. This celebration of thanksgiving is also the occasion where Koreans pay respect to their ancestors. A percussion ensemble known as *samulnori* consisting of *puk* (barrel drum), *changgo* (hour-glass drum), *ching* (large hanging gong) and *kkaeng'ari* (small hanging gong) often perform for these celebrations.

*O-bon* dances, commemorating a Buddhist celebration honoring dead ancestors, are held in Japanese communities in late summer. The first *O-bon* dance is attributed to Mokuren, a disciple of Buddha, who helped his dead mother out of hell by preparing a feast for monks completing their spiritual retreat. Upon seeing his mother saved, Mokuren is said to have danced with joy (Yano 1985:152). The traditional music to accompany *O-bon* dances consist

of special songs, many of them identified by regional styles, accompanied by *taiko* (large double-headed drum played with thick drum sticks) and flute, or at least, a *taiko* played along with tape recordings.

Besides these seasonal celebrations, arts organizations have been formed to foster traditional art genres by facilitating the presentation of traveling Asian music concerts and performances while others are formed specifically with the intent of disseminating practical musical knowledge through lessons and workshops. One such organization is SPICMACAY: Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Among Youth. Since 1989, thirty-five chapters have been founded at universities throughout North America.

Chinese dramatic forms, mainly Cantonese and Beijing opera, are performed by amateur musicians who have formed music clubs in urban centers with a high concentration of Chinese-Americans. Individual teachers representing Japanese traditional schools continue to teach Japanese *koto* and solo dance in many of the large urban centers of the United States. These teachers represent a direct link to the schools in Japan where they received their certificates of learning and licenses to teach. Dance teachers of Indian *bharatanatyam* and *kathak* can be found in most Indian American communities throughout the United States and Canada. They also periodically return to their teachers (mainly in India) to refresh their training and knowledge.

A number of Southeast Asian ensembles have been formed to participate not only in the rituals and ceremonies of their own communities, but also those of other communities that are not as fortunate to have their own ensembles. A Cambodian musician and scholar, Sam-Ang Sam, has noted a number of changes in the traditional arts taking place in the United States. In the traditional court dances of Cambodia, females performed male and super-human, supernatural roles as well as female roles. Because there is a lack of female dancers in the United States, male dancers are now dancing male and supernatural roles. Instruments belonging to specific ensembles are now being combined into the same ensembles or Western instruments such as flutes are being incorporated into traditional ensembles. Even the traditional repertoire is changing due to repertoire substitutions and abbreviations. Sam-Ang Sam sees

these new developments as necessary in meeting the challenges facing traditional performances outside of Cambodia (Sam 1987:3-4).

Another Southeast Asian ensemble, the gamelan, has inspired the formation and development of a number of American gamelan performing groups that perform traditional repertoire as well as new compositions by both Indonesian and American contemporary composers.

Some Asian American musicians have organized ensembles to perform at local community events, and also to tour the United States to perform for American audiences. In each case, the bearers and teachers of a musical tradition learned their art in America or Asia and continue to keep contact with that musical culture in Asia. Of the hundreds and thousands of such dedicated teachers and bearers of traditional Asian music and dance, only a few have been nationally recognized by organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the MacArthur Foundation.

Since 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts has “honored some of the nation’s most accomplished and influential artists who have worked to preserve, shape, and share the traditions of their heritage.”<sup>3</sup> The Asian American musicians and dancers who received National Heritage Fellowships represent the music cultures of Japan, China, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.

Bua Xou Mua, Hmong musician from  
Portland, Oregon, 1984

Peou Khatna, Cambodian court  
dancer/choreographer from Silver  
Spring, Maryland, 1986

Kansuma Fujima, Japanese dancer from  
Los Angeles, California, 1987

Khamvong Insixiengmai, Laotian singer  
from Fresno, California, 1991

Seisho “Harry” Nakasone, Okinawan  
musician from Honolulu, Hawaii, 1991



Ng Sheung-Chi, *Toissan muk'yu* folk singer from New York, New York, 1992

T. Viswanathan, South Indian flute master from Middletown, Connecticut, 1992

Liang-xing Tang, Chinese *pipa* player from Bayside, New York, 1993

Bao Mo-Li, Chinese *jing erhu* player from Flushing, New York, 1995

Danongan Kalanduyan, Filipino *kulintang* musician from San Francisco, California, 1995

Phong Nguyen, Vietnamese musician from Kent, Ohio, 1997

Two Asian American musicians who were recently honored by the MacArthur Foundation with generous fellowships popularly known as “the genius prize” are:

Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, virtuoso Indian *sarod* master and founder of the Ali Akbar college in Marin county, California

Sam-Ang Sam, Cambodian musician and ethnomusicologist working in Washington, DC and Cambodia

The Asian American artists mentioned above have all been involved in furthering the development of a traditional art form that represents a particular Asian culture. There have been examples of Western musical compositions that incorporate the use of Asian instruments. But these examples do not represent particularly American music. However, a number of young Asian American artists have consciously drawn on their experience as American musicians with a sense and knowledge of their Asian cultural

background. Two such artists, jazz musician Jon Jang and *taiko* musician Kenny Endo, recently performed in New York for the Asia Society's Crossover series which explored "interactions between Asian and American forms."<sup>4</sup> Endo now lives and works in the United States and Japan where he tours extensively.

There are forms of music that have a wider appeal to Asian American youth than just those who identify with a particular music culture. Reaching out to wider audiences seems to be a step in the process of adapting or creating traditional music for people in a changing world. Asian Americans have not yet, and perhaps may never come to adopt a single voice to express their American musical experiences but I look to three Asian ensembles that seem to be taking steps to identify with Asian Americans.

The first such group is *taiko*-drumming ensembles, originally associated with festival drumming in Japan. The first teacher of *taiko* drumming in the United States, Seiichi Tanaka, combined the principles of martial arts training and music ensemble playing, both emphasizing the discipline of mind and body, of movement and sound. He established the first *taiko* group in San Francisco in 1968 and was instrumental in teaching and establishing *taiko* groups in other North American cities. Many of the participants are young Americans of East Asian or Southeast Asian descent. Perhaps *taiko*'s popularity can be partly attributed to the sense of belonging to a performing ensemble founded on spiritual discipline and aesthetics contained in Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies as well as its association with important community ritual and festive events.<sup>5</sup>

Another ensemble tradition that has found a popular following among Asian Americans is the Southern Philippine gong ensemble known as *kulintang*. Its popularity in the United States is perhaps due to two musicians/ethnomusicologists who teach and perform *kulintang* to scores of young Asian Americans: Usopay Cadar of the Maranao tradition and Danongan Kalanduyan of the Maguindanao tradition. They have formed the Mindanao Kulintang Ensemble, which tours and presents workshops. *Kulintang* music represents an indigenous Philippine tradition that has close ties to other Asian gong ensembles. The wide appeal of *taiko* and *kulintang* ensembles lies in the participatory aspect of performance.

The third ensemble that I identify as reaching out to wider audiences is American *gamelan* ensembles. Unlike the *taiko* and *kulintang* ensembles mentioned above, *gamelan* ensembles grew out

of and are associated with academic institutions rather than communities. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s, the University of California at Los Angeles Ethnomusicology Program inspired the formation and development of a number of other American *gamelan* groups that perform traditional repertoire as well as new compositions by both Indonesian and American contemporary composers.

All three ensembles are firmly based in their traditional Asian forms. But what is American about them? The membership of these ensembles reflects a democratic principle of inclusiveness: they are not restricted to persons of Asian descent nor to one gender or another, or to music specialists. The performance context has expanded from community-based ritual or ceremonial performances to the concert stage. And finally, their repertoire is growing to include influences of other American music traditions. These three musical traditions have the capacity to explore and incorporate the vast resource of musical ideas and expression from around the world that abound in the United States. This expansive quality, matching America's land and population, seems to be the key ingredient in keeping Asian music in America, viable, accessible, and meaningful.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My mother is Mitsu Noyoshi Kato, born in 1907, Walnut Grove, California. She is a graduate of the University of California, San Francisco. Her parents are Niichi and Miwa Noyoshi, from Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan.

<sup>2</sup> My father is Shigeo Kato, born in 1902, Ichinomiya, Aichi Prefecture. He is a graduate of the University of Southern California. His parents are Umesaburo and Kana Kato from Ichinomiya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Alexander, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, quoted from *The National Heritage Fellowships 1994* program.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Kozinn jazz review, "Mixing Asian Music and Jazz," *New York Times*, June 12, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> According to Susan Asai, this type of drumming is referred to as “Buddhist taiko” and was a part of the tradition of Buddhist performing arts introduced to the United States by the first generation of Japanese immigrants (Asai 1985).

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