

GAGAKU AND BUGAKU

Fernau Hall

Bugaku is probably the oldest style of highly developed classical dance in Japan to survive in its pure form. So it was a great privilege to see the Imperial Japanese court dancers and musicians performing at the Royal Albert Hall in London in May, 1970 in the midst of a long tour of European music festivals. One intriguing aspect of this tour was that it gave the privilege of seeing the court artistes to large numbers of Europeans, who simply purchase tickets in the ordinary way — whereas in Tokyo the performances by these artistes are given within the imperial palace to invited audiences only, and invitations are a rare honour.

Japan is unique among the countries of the East in preserving each of its ancient classical performing arts in pure form, with the new forms taking their place alongside the old instead of replacing them. This is true, for example, of the *Noh* dance-drama, which took shape in the 14th century; ever since then it has been preserved intact in its own theatres, performing the same dance-dramas, even though the aristocratic audience for which it was created has long ceased to exist. Far more popular forms such as *Kabuki* and *Bunraku* (the highly developed puppet theatre) later took their place alongside *Noh*, and they too survive in all their authenticity of technique, style of dancing and so on. Even in architecture the Japanese show this extraordinary and invaluable trait: much of the ancient architecture of both China and Japan was of wood and though such architecture does not survive in China, it does in Japan — for there the great shrines are rebuilt with punctilious attention to detail, before the wood rots. In fact to study this aspect of ancient Chinese architecture one must go to Japan; and Japan too offers a fascinating glimpse of aspects of ancient Indian styles of dance — for some major aspects of *Bugaku* originated in India.

Not that the links with Indian dance are at all obvious when one looks at *Bugaku* today, any more than they are obvious in the associated music (though this too has elements which the Japanese trace back to India). The whole style of movement looks completely Chinese, and Japanese, being very slow, and lacking the *mudras* and complex foot-beats so characteristic of Indian classical dancing as we know it today, as represented in sculpture and described in ancient texts such as Bharata's *Natyasastra*.

Variations on Original Styles

What seems to have happened is that Indian classical dances and music, the product of centuries (if not millenia) of development in the great civilisa-

tions of India, retained all their major features when they were taken (along with Hinduism and Buddhism) to various countries along the two great routes of cultural dispersion from India: one route leading through South-East Asia, via Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Java and Bali, the other going North via Tibet. In all these countries the Indian classical dance absorbed influences from local dance-styles, and was developed by local reformers in ways which harmonised with their physique, styles of life and cultural traditions, but retained its Indian themes (mainly) taken from the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, its use of *mudras*, and the fundamentals of Indian technique, with turned-out knees, angularity of line and the use of foot-beats (the feet striking the ground in complex rhythms).

But things were very different when this aspect of Indian culture reached China in the 7th century during the great T'ang dynasty. Here it met a civilisation comparable in antiquity and complexity with Indian civilisation and one which had its own long established classical traditions of music and dance. The Imperial court under the T'ang emperors was very open to the importation of things from abroad, and retained them in all their variety, but the Chinese dancers and teachers tended to change these a good deal to harmonise with the tastes and interests of the emperors and nobles, and so the dance traditions which had originated in India became much more formal and abstract, to a large extent losing their meaning in the process. In fact they became extremely sophisticated, with a stress on elegance of movement and gorgeous costumes and a very slow and peaceful tempo.

Gagaku is a Chinese word used in T'ang times in China to describe all ceremonial music and dances, whether imported from abroad or indigenous — as distinct from *Suyue* (old folk dance and music) and *Yensingle* (new music from Western China). At this time the cosmopolitan spirit of T'ang China became prevalent also in Japan, and many different types of T'ang dance and music were imported into Japan. In the reign of the Japanese Emperor Mommu (683-707) an Imperial Music Bureau, *Gagaku-ryo*, was set up at the Imperial Japanese court to take charge of the teaching and performance of court music and dance — this bureau being imitated from the Chinese imperial bureau which had the same function.

The variety of music and dance handled by this bureau was enormous. The bulk of it was imported from T'ang China (*Togaku*, as it was called — including much modified music and dances of diverse origins), but there were also many indigenous Japanese forms, and forms imported direct from a variety of countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Korea and Pohai (a country covering parts of North Korea and Manchuria).

The word *gagaku* was used in Japan to cover all court styles of music and dance. One branch of *gagaku*, instrumental music without dance, was called *Kangen*, while the other branch of *Gagaku*, court dancing together with the special types of music used to accompany the dances, was called *Bugaku*. Those forms of music and dance originating from India, Tibet, China and South-East Asia, were classified as *samai* (left), while those originating in the folk-dances of Korea and Pohai were classified as *umai* (right), the terms "right" and "left" referring to the right and left sides of the emperor at court.

One fascinating record in the *Shoku Nihongi* (Second History Book of Ancient Japan) gives some idea of the very complex ways in which Indian



Komaboko of Korean origin—Bugaku Style.





Manzairaku — Based on a legend of the T'ang Dynasty.

religious, musical and dance traditions reached Japan. This book states that in the 8th year of Tempyo (736 AD) the Indian Brahmin priest Bodai Senna came to Japan along with a musician of Lin'yu (Vietnam).

In 894 the rich current of cultural importation into Japan was broken off by Imperial decree, and then followed a period of codification and of creation of Japanese musical composition and dances in imitation of the importance forms. It was at this time that the classification into *samai* and *umai* branches of *Gagaku* was instituted. Since then *Gagaku* has been preserved in Japan without much change. In the Heian period (794-1192) it was very popular, and the pieces of music and the dances were performed by nobles and court officials as well as by professional dancers. There were great nobles and even rulers who went in for musical composition and choreography: the emperor Nimmyo (who reigned 833-850) composed music. Here we find an interesting parallel with trends in India, where creative work in the arts also was considered a suitable occupation for rulers, nobles and gentlemen of leisure.

After the Heian period social and political changes caused *Gagaku* to lose much of its popularity, and it fell into obscurity with the rise of *Noh*, *Kabuki*, *Bunraku* and so on. But it survived in seclusion at the courts of emperors and *shoguns*, and a rich heritage of *Gagaku* dances and instrumental compositions has survived to the present day, together with highly developed techniques of teaching and performance. In typical Japanese fashion, the performers tend to belong to families which specialise in this field: those performing in the imperial palace can trace their ancestry back through centuries, with generation upon generation of imperial performers of the same name. Apart from the imperial performers, there are *Gagaku* musicians and dancers who perform at a number of the larger Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Today, *Gagaku* still plays an essential ritual role in a number of important annual ceremonies, at the shrines and temples and in the Imperial palace; the performances laid on for the entertainment of invited audiences at the Imperial palace (or for that matter at the Royal Albert Hall) come into a different category, but at these the ritual forms are still preserved in a way which is typically Japanese.

The division of *Gagaku* into *samai* (left) and *umai* (right) is still meticulously preserved today, and in the dances performed at the Royal Albert Hall one could see suitable traces of Indian influences in the *samai* dances, whereas in the *umai* dance (*Komaboko*, derived from a folk-dance of Korean boatmen) no such influence was apparent.

Music Introduction

The programme given at the Royal Albert Hall showed a number of contrasting aspects of the rich art of *Gagaku*. A square stage of the correct dimensions, surrounded by a low wooden rail, and with steps leading up to it at the back, was constructed within the oval amphitheatre of the Albert Hall, and at the beginning of the programme the musicians solemnly filed on to the stage and knelt down in straight rows. In fact the programme began with three purely instrumental pieces (*Kangen*), in a style which is related to that used, for accompanying *Bugaku* dance but which is even more slow and mysterious. A special flavour is given to *Kangen* music by the long-held droning notes of the *sho*, a curious kind of mouth-organ consisting of a spherical wind-box to which 17 short narrow bamboo pipes are fitted.

There are also a kind of oboe or *shahnai*, *kotos* (a very long kind of plucked zither, making a harp-like sound) and a wide variety of drums; in fact the stress on drums seems rather Indian, though the drums are beaten in a slow, measured way, with long gaps between the notes, which is very un-Indian.

The second *Kangen* piece performed at the Royal Albert Hall, *Karyobin-no-kyu*, has a tradition which links it to Indian music and Indian mythology. According to tradition, it was composed by Myoonten (Saraswati) to represent the miraculous birds called *karyobin* (*Kalavinka*) which flew about and sang at the time of the service at the Gionshona temples (Jetavana Vihara) in ancient India: tradition also states that it was introduced into T'ang China by a musician called Anan, and then to Japan by a Brahmin monk. But there was no obvious suggestion of the flight of birds in the music, which was very slow and solemn, full of long-held notes. In the same way the third *Kangen* item, *Ko'nju*, representing a drunken man of the *Ko trobe* of Mongolia, gave no apparent suggestion of drunkenness, being almost as slow and solemn as the other two items. But one might perhaps detect some slight suggestion of levity in the orchestration, with its stress on the *hichiriki* (oboe), *koto*, and *kakko* (small, sharp-toned drum struck with the right hand).

After the three *Kangen* items the musicians retired to a small dais behind the stage, taking their small instruments with them, and the large instruments (notably a big bass drum hung from in the centre down stage) were removed, leaving the stage clear for the dancers.

Invocational Dance

Part 11 of the programme took the form of a *Ninjomai* (invocational dance), *Sonokoma* in a *Bugaku* version of a *Kagura* dance: in fact a dance movement from a very long Shinto ceremony which lasts from twilight to dawn (like a *Kathakali* dance-drama), a ceremony of which until recently has only been performed in the inner shrine of the imperial household and in the largest Shinto shrines and of which no part was ever shown to the public. The dancer wore a simple white robe (that of the Imperial Guards of the 9th century) and held in one hand a branch of the sacred Sakaki tree to which was attached a simulation of the sacred Shinto mirror. The text associated with *Sonokoma* is very cryptic, illustrating the remote antiquity and baffling quality of much Shinto ritual as it has come down to us,

That pony
 it asks me for grass
 it asks me for water
I will give it grass
 I will give it water.

But there was no suggestion in the dance of any exposition of the words, as one might expect to find in an equivalent Indian dance of invocation. The dancer (Shintaro Togi) moved very slowly and solemnly about the stage, blessing it with slow waves of the branch. *Kagura* in fact taken us back to the most remote origins of Japanese religion, mythology and culture, long before Chinese influence made itself felt. The name literally means "god-music" and may refer to a dance before the sun-goddess Amaterasu a dance, which is part of the Japanese myth of creation. The

normal form of *Kagura*, as performed at Shinto shrines and in the streets on festival days, has a clear link with folk-dance; the *Bugaku* version is very formal indeed, with no apparent link with folk-dance.



Main Performance

Part 111 of the programme took the form of a suite of three sharply contrasted *Bugaku* dances, two being *samai* and one *umai*. Here the dancers wore gorgeously coloured and ornate costumes. For the first dance, *Manzairaku*, four dancers moved solemnly up the steps and took position on stage, each wearing a robe with one sleeve missing, showing a sleeve in a contrasting colour underneath. This dance represented in a very abstract way a legend about an event during the reign of a wise Chinese emperor of the T'ang Dynasty: a Phoenix flew over and gave loud cheers for a long life for the emperor. The music represented its voice; the dance its shape and movements. All four dancers moved in strict unison, in formal geometric patterns, facing each side of the stage in turn. Their

movements were slow and stately, and they used a smooth gliding step in which one could see very clearly the origin of the giding step used in *Noh* (though their footwear was much more solid and Chinese than the *tabi* socks used by *Noh* dancers, and the steps somewhat less complex). Their way of holding out their arms in a straight stiff line, horizontally to the side, gave a faint suggestion of the wings of a bird, and here one could see a tenuous link with the magical birds of Indian mythology and Indian classical dancing, as well as with the large number of magical birds which one encounters in the classical dances of Hindu Bali (notably the *Legong* dances). But the arms did not move with any of the fluttering wing-beats one sees in *Legong* or in the magical birds of *Kathakali*, nor were the foot-movements in any way bird-like: they might have belonged to any *Bugaku* dance.



The next dance, *Ryo-O*, was very different in style. This is said to represent Prince Chang-kung, a mighty Chinese warrior who lived at the time of the Pei-chi dynasty (550-577). This handsome and brave prince

always wore a menacing mask when he went to war; when he defeated a large force of the enemy, a musician composed *Ryo-O* in his honour. The dance in fact took the form of a solo, splendidly performed by Shintaro Togi. He wore a beautiful golden helmet and mask, ornamented with jewels, which had the figure of a ferocious bird (hawk or eagle) stretching forward from the piece covering the forehead. His movements were slow and powerful but also elegant in a properly princely way, one foot moving out to the side and touching the ground with the toes turned up, then moving back to join the knee of the other leg. In one hand he held a slim wand (presumably representing a sword), while the other hand had two fingers stiffly outstretched at the end of a straight arm in a way very typical of *Bugaku*.

Certain aspects of traditional Japanese architecture (with its refined use of space) and texture are amazingly close to major trends in the contemporary architecture of the West; and exactly the same fascinating link between the very old and the very new was to be seen when four dancers came on to perform the final item, *Komaboko*. They were supposed to be Korean boatmen and the dance can be traced back to remote origins in Korean folk dance; but the dancing was in fact to the highest degree stylised and classical, its main point being the tracing of elegant symmetrical patterns by the long thin poles carried by the dancers. I have never seen the whole space of a stage brought to life in such vivid and magical fashion: here was something transmitted from remote antiquity which was completely in line with the work being done by some great pioneers of abstract modern dance, and in particular with the work of Alwin Nikolais.

Komaboko literally means "Korean halberd", and so the poles carried by the dancers were presumably intended to represent halberds. Yet these poles were not in the least like halberds, being much more like slim versions of the poles originally used by the Korean boatmen to punt their boats into harbour. In this complicated bundle of symbolism, verbal allusion and ancient traditions, allied with an extremely formal dance which carried tenuous links with both punting and halberd-play yet was extremely abstract in its pattern-making, can be seen an example of Japanese art at its most subtle and refined, uniting simplicity and complexity, indirection and bold clarity, in a way which is inimitably Japanese.

Fernau Hall, well-known British dance critic and writer; see Sangeet Natak 2; sketches by Eileen Pearcey (3) and Milein Cosman (3).