

Linguistic-Syllabic Cognitive Mapping of Sound in Japanese Culture, Interpreted through Japanese Gagaku Music

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Am I he, as you are he, as he is it, and we are all together? For this paper, I will explore the linguistic-syllabic mapping of sound in Japanese culture, focusing in particular on its presence in the ancient Japanese gagaku tradition and how it resonates with cultural customs and conceptions of the ontology of nature and sound still present in modern Japan. I use the term “linguistic-syllabic” to distinguish the sonic mapping systems I will be discussing from onomatopoeias, as they are not quite of the same linguistic status.¹ In order to do this, I will first give a brief explication of gagaku music as understood in its continuing modern practice. I will not discuss in depth the question of how “continuous” the tradition has actually been in its more than 1400-year history leading up to today, as discussed by Kenzō Hayashi and Fumio Koizumi. Rather, gagaku’s inextricable relationship with rituals, and the conceptions of the human relationship with the non-human environment embodied therein, will be considered in relation to gagaku as a performative practice as well as how its internal musical structure works in theory. Further, I will explore the relationship of gagaku’s musical principles and scoring system to the unique practices of sonic mapping prevalent in Japanese culture, suggesting along the way a key factor to help make sense of why the five-line staff notation system did not develop in medieval Japanese music, despite the development of an active musical scene comparable in scope to what we find in contemporaneous medieval Europe. I suggest that the underlying concept that equates the appreciation and respect for the non-human environment with the concept of “play” did not allow for music to be systematized in the same linear-temporal way as it was in the West.²

So what is gagaku music? Gagaku is the ancient Japanese court music, considered to be

¹ Though, it is intimately connected with the nexus of Japanese sound symbolism, as will become apparent later in the paper.

² All translations from Japanese to English throughout the paper are done by the author.

one of the oldest continuing performance traditions in the world. It was originally imported from China from as early as the beginning of the sixth century CE and was gradually influenced by and stylistically intermingled with native Japanese songs and dances, such as *Kuniburi-no-Utamai* (国風歌舞). Gagaku reached the peak of its popularity in the Heian period (794–1185). The music was associated with the aristocratic class, who regularly performed it in ritualistic ceremonies as well as in what could be characterized as a form of play, whereby the aristocrats themselves would perform and dance (*bugaku*, 舞楽) for and with one another as a recreational pastime (Garfias 1959, 16). The gagaku ensemble typically consists of three main wind instruments, namely, the *hichiriki* (篳篥), *ryūteki* (龍笛) and *shō* (笙). Depending on the occasion and feasibility, two string instruments and three percussion instruments can be added to the ensemble, but the aforementioned three wind instruments are considered the essential minimal pillars of the gagaku ensemble. With these three instruments, any piece from the canon can be performed. This music is passed down orally to this day, whereby in lieu of a musical score, its performers learn pieces by reciting and committing to memory a sung mnemonic called *shōga* (唱歌), in which each sung syllable denotes a specific pitch or a pitch pattern that is clear and coherent per context (see Figure 1). It is a very concise and efficient system, resembling in essence an encryption code or compression mechanism—one needs to implicitly know how the system and its nomenclature work in order to decipher what needs to be played. Each wind instrument from the gagaku ensemble has its own separate *shōga*, each of which has its own nomenclature system in *kana* character-syllables. Both *hichiriki* and *ryūteki* have *shōgas* in *katakana* characters. While the *shōga* for the *shō* is technically formulated in *kanji* characters that denote individual pipe/pitch names *as well as* the *aitake* chords, the *shō shōga* function in essentially the same way as the other two *shōgas*, in that abstract sounds are sung in assigned syllables, just like the *shōgas* of *hichiriki* and *ryūteki*. Even in today's practice, practitioners are not allowed to learn more than one wind instrument, and therefore the *shōgas* are sectionalized. That is, each piece of music is passed down independently only in parts, and not as a full score. The music is only passed down through the independent parts of *hichiriki*, *ryūteki* and *shō*, as delineated in each respective *shōga* with their own nomenclature system. What this means is that musical pieces, as nebulously defined as they are in the tradition, only come to life in their full glory of ensemble harmony *in practice*, when the three instruments get together and play. Nowadays, there are attempts to catalog full scores in

which all three parts are present on the same page, but that has no bearing on the present point. The music, as traditionally conceived, has an ensemble system in which only the parts are recorded and passed down through each instrument's *shōga*. The piece as a whole is evidently not meant to be formally recorded in a coherent system of symbols. The intricacies of ensemble playing and harmony only come to light after one has acquired complete mastery of one's *shōga* part, and from years of experience of intently listening to the three instrument parts come together in rehearsals. Unlike the Western orchestral score, in which one can ascertain at a glance how and when each voice is supposed to sound in relation to others, in the case of gagaku music, how the three wind parts temporally relate to each other, though a salient feature of the music, is never explicitly taught or delineated. Instead, these interrelations and alignments are ascertained as a vague, inexplicit sensibility, learned only by careful and active listening to one's surroundings during ensemble rehearsals.

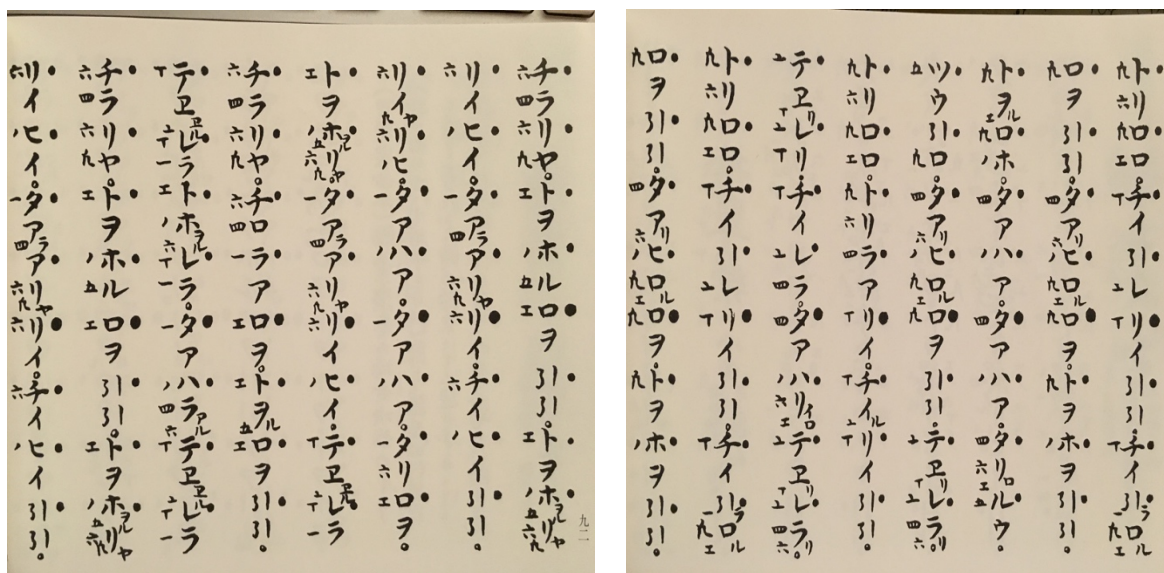


Figure 1. *Shōga* example. This figure depicts example excerpts of *hichiriki shōga* from *Seigaiha* (lit. trans. “Blue ocean waves,” 青海波). Here, we see syllabic-linguistic denotations of melodies for a piece about a natural phenomenon. It is also worth noting that these *shōga* syllables do not correspond to one universal standard key that maps one specific pitch to one specific syllable. Rather, the mapping becomes clear only in the local coherence and context of a piece or even a phrase. The *shōga* notation system thereby dispels the notion of having a fixed association between up and down that corresponds with high and low notes, respectively. None of the note names are absolute, but are only coherent within each piece or at times only within a particular phrasal context.

As peculiar as this pedagogical system may seem, it is rooted in the philosophical and aesthetic framework of the tradition. As delineated in Michiko Tōgi's *Sentiment, spirituality and ideal sound environment of gagaku* (雅楽の心性・精神性と理想的音空間), gagaku is a music to be performed in a natural setting, mimicking the sounds of the insects and birds, living *amidst* the non-human environment of nature, not in isolation from it (2016, 132–220). I want to suggest here that “nature” should not be construed in the scholastic teleological sense, but rather in line with a Spinozistic sense of nature, where it is the mere unfolding of manifold modes of an illimitable indivisibility of activity devoid of prescribed teleological order, what Spinoza calls *natura naturans* (Spinoza 2006, 20). Gagaku music, in its original function and traditional setting, was played in courtyards and shrines (see Figure 2) and rarely, if at all, in completely enclosed spaces (Garfias 1959, 23). It is meant to be situated implicitly in an ever-dynamic natural environment of chirping birds and insects. This macro-interaction of the music with its surroundings is reflected in its internal ensemble mechanism as well. The piece and its full harmony is completed only in an ever fluctuating dynamic between the individual voices of the instruments. While there is an implicit precision in how the voices align and misalign, these interactions are never meant to be explicitly set in stone (Shiba 2006, 43). Instead, they are supposed to unfold and intertwine in a dynamic, fluid way. The ensemble is complete only when the players listen intently to their surroundings by listening carefully to each other, and then in turn, as an ensemble, listen to the sounds of the non-human natural environment.



Figure 2. Scenes of gagaku performances. (Top left) A *bugaku* processional offering at the Iris Festival (*Shōbu-sai*, 菖蒲祭) at the Tsurugaoka-hachiman shrine (鶴岡八幡宮) in Kamakura. The performance is held outside in the courtyard of the shrine, where the processional outdoor stage (*Kagura-den*, 神楽殿) is located. (Top right) A gagaku sacred processional as part of the *Gion-buneshinji* Sacred Festival (祇園舟神事) at the Tomioka-hachiman shrine. The processional parade is meant to escort the gods of the local mountains down to the nearby beach and to entertain them, and is led by the three main wind instrumentalists of the gagaku ensemble, who play as they walk through the streets and forests of the neighborhood. This picture was taken at the beach nearby the shrine, which is the final destination of the processional parade. It is at this beach that the main festivities will take place. In this case, two teams of oarsmen, each on their respective boat, will race against each other in the ocean. This is another good example of the notion of “prayer as play” in action. (Bottom) An instance of a processional gagaku performance at Tanzan Shrine (談山神社) in Nara. Top (right and left) photos taken by author, bottom photo taken by Saiga Kōsaborō.

We see resonances of this idea of singing amongst the pervasively singing things in nature, or singing along in the grand orchestra of natural sounds, in numerous accounts. As illuminated in the *kanajo* (仮名序) of *Kokin-wakashū*, an imperially commissioned anthology of *waka* poems (古今和歌集), there is a passage that reads “*ikitoshi ikerumono, izureka uta wo yomazarikeru*” (生きとし生けるもの、いずれか歌をよまざりける), which roughly translates to “all living sentient beings cannot help but sing” (Ki and Saeki 1981, 9). Here we start to see an interesting bottom-up and, if you will, democratic conception of agency among living things. Unlike the Judeo-Christian model that bestows a special status of agency on human beings, who alone are regarded as capable of engaging in creative acts like singing, the *kanajo* reveals to us a more all-inclusive idea of creative agency, whereby it is not only humans but all sentient beings that join together in singing. Singing is not a unique attribute of humans but instead is something much more ubiquitous and intrinsic to all parts of nature. We do not need to venture far to then say that gagaku is very much in line with this underlying sentiment, that gagaku is just *our* form of singing and making music, where we are *joining* the rest of the universe, or nature, in singing. Gagaku is just humans joining in the grand chorus of this illimitable activity, jamming with the unpredictable welter of natural voices of our surroundings and by extension of the world. In fact, the gagaku ensemble as a whole was initially conceived as a representation of the actual physical and metaphysical universe, as it was understood at the time. As explicated in the writings of Robert Garfias and Sukeyasu Shiba, each instrument has a specific role and represents its counterpart in the real world (Shiba 2006, 53). The *shō*, for instance, is meant to represent the sun-rays of the heavens, the *hichiriki* the earthly human voices, and the *ryūteki* the airy, windy bodies that connect the two.

In a similar spirit to R. M. Schafer’s idea of a “soundscape,” though not worked out at all in the same way, there is a long-standing custom in Japanese culture of paying close attention to the sounds of nature. These sounds are identified not only with general descriptive terms like “chirp” or “hum,” but also through the attribution of specific linguistic-syllabic denotations, somewhat in the manner of onomatopoeias, to specific chirping sounds in *kana* characters. This custom can be found in songs sung by elementary school students in modern Japan as well. For instance, “Mushi-no-koe” (lit. “The Voices of Insects,” 虫の声) is a song ubiquitously known in Japan and often sung in elementary schools, whereby the lyrics go through specific chirping sounds of insects in *katakana*

characters. The custom of promoting a symbolized sonic mapping of one’s surroundings, that one might trace as rooted in a kind of “audiocentric” ontology, is ubiquitous throughout Japanese cultural history. The propensity of this linguistic-syllabic mapping of sounds from the environment can also be found in Nō theatre, as in the cryptic opening line of “Sanbasō” 三番三 (Okura 2017, 93), and in the sonic confluences of the comedic *jiguchi* play-songs (地口) from the Edo period. We can arguably even trace it in the Japanese sound-symbolic words that pervasively denote gestures, sound effects, states of the external world and psychological states, a prominent example of which is their usage in manga.

Similarly, *shōga* also attribute linguistic-syllabic denotations to specific pitches. In other words, the *shōga* that denote abstract sounds (i.e., pitches) have a similar cognitive resonance to the deep-rooted Japanese sonic ontology that involves the linguistic-syllabic mapping of concrete, specific sounds from the natural environment.³ Here we see a sense of conceptual continuity between the sounds of nature and the abstract sounds of gagaku music. They belong to the same ontological classification.⁴ No clear linguistic or practical distinction is made in considering sounds “sung” by insects and birds in nature and musical notes played by humans.⁵

³ It is worth emphasizing that Japanese sound-symbolic words cover a wider range of meanings that go beyond mere sound mimicry. Japanese sound-symbolic words can also be for things that do not originally make any sound. They also possess a grammatical versatility, whereby they can not only function as adverbs, but also as verbs and adjectives. A further wrinkle to this flexibility is that words that are originally verbs can also be turned into these sound-symbolic words. So these Japanese sound-symbolic words inhabit an interesting floating linguistic space that is not merely sonic, nor quite just symbolic or grammatical. This feature is very much in line with the idea that the sounds of nature and the abstract sounds of music belong to the same ontological plane, which are cognitively mapped in the same way as a result.

⁴ There are many implications to explore here, especially in relation to a trans-species notion of music, and by extension zoomusicology and cultural biology.

⁵ It is worth noting in some detail here an intriguing example of this sonic mapping that encapsulates well what is at stake. The linguistic-syllabic denotation of the Japanese bush warbler (*Horornis diphone*)’s chirp in *kana* is “*hō hokekyō*” (ホーホケキョー), which is phonetically the same as the Japanese pronunciation of the Lotus Sutra, “*hokekyō*” (法華經). As a result, this conflation registers as a notion that the Japanese bush warbler spontaneously and innately sings the Lotus Sutra, even to the point that the bird is also referred to as the “sutra-reading bird” (経読鳥) as its alternative epithet. This resonates with the aforementioned idea that all sentient beings are born to sing and further with the broader Buddhist idea that Buddha Nature innately resides in and manifests as all sentient beings. In the context of Japanese Buddhism, this idea can be thought to belong to the broader notion dubbed as “*sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu*” (草木国土悉皆成仏), wherein even inanimate

For the sake of a brief comparison, I will now compare the sonic ontology found in medieval Japan with ideas of sounds and how they function in European medieval music. As a comparative and illustrative example, I would like to point to Laura Macy's (1996) detailed analysis of Jacob Arcadelt's "Il bianco e dolce cigno," or "The Gentle White Swan," which also takes up a non-human living being as an overt central subject matter and was performed in a similar social setting. While the idea of word-painting and related notions are also found in some of the earliest Gregorian chants, I point here to a madrigal, since it exemplifies and emblematically puts to the fore the mechanism I want to point out for the sake of comparison. According to Macy (1996, 6), the art of courtesy and the art of conversation were prized skills and attributes in the fragmented world of Italian society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Madrigals punctuated social occasions, and people learned the skills of elegant witticisms through singing madrigals. These madrigals, therefore, have a *conversational* style to help aid this learning. Although, as Macy points out, the madrigal's audience was more the singers themselves rather than the listeners, much as in the performance of gagaku music in the Heian period, we start to see here a key difference from gagaku, which provides an important clue to its difference from Western canonical music more generally. The key difference here being that, in the madrigals, the words *teleologically* guide the music. That is, the world of intentional meanings and defining essences is what bestows significance on the musical sounds that are in turn there to serve and accentuate those meanings, directed toward the intent behind the word. The musical

objects are thought to possess and manifest Buddha-hood. In addition, the importance given to the actual enunciated raw sounds in the act of "singing" (*tonaeru*, 唱える) sutras in general shows that this is a salient feature of what a sutra is, whether it is humans or birds manifesting and realizing it into sound. This semiotics of environment adds an extra dimension to the sonic mapping system that is used for sounds of nature as well as for abstract sounds made by humans. As we saw, the sonic semantics therein effectively conflates the cognition of concrete sounds from nature and abstract sounds made by humans. However, now a further layer is added to this conflation, namely, the implication of shared *knowledge* between humans and nature. What this means is that knowledge is not something only humans possess, but is something that is *actively* out there—not passively waiting to be discovered by humans but actively unfurling the manifold modes of an illimitable indivisibility upon itself. So it is not so much knowledge *of* nature as *nature knowing* or even *knowledge knowing* (à la Spinoza's *natura naturans*), which also resonates with the aforementioned conception of the gagaku ensemble as something that is supposed to play among nature. This semiotics of environment and its conflation of cognitive agency that come forth from the linguistic-syllabic mapping of sound, with its attendant blurring of the line between "the metaphorical" and "the literal," puts pressure on what we even mean by "literal" in the first place. This in turn has implications for questions in zoomusicology and biosemiotics, as it adds a wrinkle in how we should define musical ability, sound perception and non-human cognition.

pitches are teleologically guided by the meanings behind the words, as functions of intentional speech. That is, the words and their meaning are primary, and the sonic dimensions are secondary, serving to accentuate and bolster the intentional meanings of the words. Unlike the Japanese *audiocentric* sonic ontology, the human constructions of teleology and meaning take charge over the sonic and musical dimensions. Music is not conceived as sounds, *qua raw* sound, to be played *among* natural beings, or *with* nature, but rather is meant to fulfill the singly directed goal of bolstering the concepts and words embodied in intentional speech. The music is therefore meant to first and foremost help *describe* things in nature, by bolstering the labels of its constituents in the spirit of deploying them toward human aims—echoing to some extent the Judeo-Christian concept of the relationship between humans and nature, in which humans have a divine mandate of stewardship over the earth, and nature as a whole is conceived as a teleological result of a single design of a single divine agent.

It is worth noting here that there are in fact songs with words like *saibara* (催馬楽) and *rōei* (朗詠) in the gagaku tradition as well (Garfias 1959, 23), whereby well-known poems are sung in either *on-yomi* or *kun-yomi*.⁶ However, it is intriguing to note that, according to master Hideaki Bunno from the Imperial Household Gagaku Ensemble, these words are never meant to be appreciated as denoting specific meanings but rather are supposed to be enjoyed for the pure sonic aesthetic, in how the words actually sound. So, even in the case of songs with lyrics in the gagaku tradition, the *mere sound* of the words sung takes primacy over their semantic content.⁷ If this is correct, then even the music in gagaku songs is not in the service of the prescriptive meanings embodied in words expressing teleological intentions and therefore is not associated with the idea of owning and mastering nature in the service of intentional ends. Further, the fact that the sounds of the words hold primacy

⁶ These two different genres of singing, distinguished by whether it is done in *on-yomi* or *kun-yomi*, point to the fact that there are two different sonic ways of expressing and appreciating the same *kanji* characters. In other words, it is the *sonic* system of rendition and manifestation that defines the genre and thus holds primary status as the key characteristic of the genre.

⁷ It is worth briefly noting here that Zeami's manuscripts of Nō pieces are all written predominantly in *katakana*. While it is possible that this is out of a more pragmatic need to facilitate the reading of the script by Nō actors, many of whom were illiterate in *kanji*, it still is an intriguing facet of the manuscripts, as this choice also resonates well with the sonic-centric aesthetic of Nō plays more generally. Further ramifications regarding why exactly *katakana* was used in his manuscripts still need to be considered, but the fact is nonetheless noteworthy in relation to the theme of this paper.

over their semantic meaning seems to indicate a kind of subduing of human-constructed meaning as such, perhaps curbing its hubris as distinct from and above the non-human environment and keeping it in check as one among many sounds found in the variegated welter of natural events.⁸

Now that I have explicated the ways in which gagaku from medieval Japan is conceived as being a part of nature, as it were, I would like to suggest a key factor to help account for the divergent notation systems in medieval Japan and medieval Europe. Given that the Japanese gagaku ensemble is in fact concerned with the temporal interrelations of at least three recognizable and distinct musical voices, it is not exactly obvious why such a flourishing tradition with rich resources and history would not eventually come up with a notation system similar to that of the Western five-line staff notation, especially in light of so many structural similarities between these two musics. Both musics assign great importance to the temporal interrelations of melodies and harmonies, taking their alignments and misalignments in time as salient features of the music.⁹ While these alignments and misalignments are never explicitly taught, they are still considered a salient feature of the music and are retained with precision in performance when the ensemble plays together. On the surface, it is entirely possible and in fact efficient to transcribe a gagaku piece in five-line staff notation, but something very important gets filtered out and becomes inaccessible in doing so. It will render the “right” notes with the right timings, and in fact some modern practitioners of gagaku simply use Western notation for ease of reading, but something fundamental about how the music works is arguably thereby lost. This arises from the fundamental difference in the conception of the linguistic-syllabic ontology of sound, and I propose this is why the five-line staff system or something even remotely similar did not emerge in the gagaku tradition. While there are many other conceivable reasons as to why

⁸ If we consider this in relation to the other instances of cognitive mapping of sound, we can start to see a coherent picture that opens up different possibilities for further inquiry that would shed light on questions that pertain to the semiotics of perception, environment and translation.

⁹ As an aside, it is worth noting here also that the gagaku ensemble is sometimes dubbed “the world’s oldest extant orchestra” in more commercial settings, such as advertisement posters and tourist brochures aimed at the general public. Setting aside the rigorousness of that claim academically speaking, there still seems to be something noteworthy in that label, at least in terms of the reception of the music in public consciousness and how it is situated in the context of more global and modern musical spheres. At the very least, it further points to how ostensibly comparable and similar the gagaku ensemble is in structure and form to the Western orchestra, at least on the surface.

the system of transmission is so different, I will suggest that a key factor here is that gagaku music is conceived on the same ontological plane as nature and the rest of the universe, as I have discussed at length. The sounds from music and the sounds from nature are on the same conceptual continuum. Adding to this concept is the ritualistic context in which the music is meant to be performed. As pointed out by Seiji Sasamoto (2010, 132) in his extensive study of scrolls and *byōbu* screens depicting festivals that date back to medieval times all the way up to the Edo period, many ritualistic performances revolve around the idea of play as a form of prayer. For instance, we can see this in the *hōkokusaireizubyōbu* (豊国祭礼図屏風) by Kanō Naizen (狩野内善), depicting the ancient festival held to pray for and celebrate good harvest (see Figure 3). In this depiction, we see many people in the courtyard with drums and other instruments excitedly joining in the festivities. This is what the “prayer” is—it is the *asobi* (literally “playing,” 遊ぶ) and merrymaking through making music and dancing to it in the presence of the gods, as is the case for the Heian aristocrats as well. Another resonance of this idea is found in the *Ryōjinhishō* (梁塵秘抄), a book from the Nan-chō (南朝) period (1338–1392) containing medieval Japanese popular songs that were sung in ceremonies by prostitutes and emperors alike. A passage in the second chapter reads, to paraphrase, that one is simply born to play, and without play there is no fertility, and in turn no good harvest and prosperity (Goshirakawa and Sasaki 1957, 66). While the full ramifications of the notion of play here far exceed the scope of this paper, I will delineate what I see as two key aspects of this notion. First, it is worth emphasizing here that I do not mean “play” in the sense of “playing music,” though there lies an interesting etymological concern in itself. I mean “play” in the more literal sense, like playing with toys or playing around with friends. Second, it is crucial to distinguish this notion of play from “praise,” which would indeed be a key function of music in a Western context such as the church, whereby music serves to praise a deity. This second feature gets us into the meat of the analytics of play. If play is not a kind of praising of the gods per se, then what is this play in the context of the rituals that are inextricable from gagaku music? From the aforementioned quote, we can infer an implication of sexual indulgence, still very much present in the modern usage of the word “*asobi*,” whereby “play” denotes sexual activity that thereby literally yields fertility. A second interpretation would be that play is seen as not self-indulgence per se but as a kind of service or offering to the gods, as a kind of barter, in exchange for good harvest and prosperity in the future. But the heart of the matter is

precisely the ambiguity between these two meanings: there is no real way to distinguish between these two separate interpretations in the original excerpt. The requirement to decide between them arises only when diagnosed through the lens of Western conceptions of piety and its attendant religious sentiments. On its own terms, it is neither one or the other, it is simply both—that is, the distinction between the two interpretations I have just delineated is rendered a moot one. The notion of play, *asobi*, is intrinsically ambiguous, and this ambiguity is precisely the point. The notion of pious barter with the gods with the single teleological goal of pleasing them, and the notion of self-indulgence (whether it is sexual or merrymaking or cracking jokes), are here viewed as one and the same thing—to play, with all its plurality of goals and counter-goals, is to please the gods. With this sentiment in mind, the aforementioned linguistic-syllabic parsing of the sound of insects and *jiguchi* play-songs also becomes a kind of consecrated *play* with words that is precisely afforded by the limiting of phonemes—a direct consequence of parsing these sounds as belonging to the same continuum as human voices and words. Therefore, these “word-plays” with the sounds of nature, insofar as the sonic ontology behind them is the same as that inextricable from the consecrated rituals of gagaku music, lead to the idea of *play* as a kind of sacred activity. In other words, linguistic-syllabic sonic perception, which acts as a fundamental principle in both sacred gagaku music and word-play with natural sounds and names of places, corroborates this idea of “prayer as play.”¹⁰



Figure 3. *Hōkokusaireizubyōbu* Left-side Screen (豊国祭礼図屏風(左隻)) by Kanō Naizen (狩野内善).

¹⁰ There are many implications here worth exploring, especially in relation to the philosophy of translation.

What all this shows is an intriguing idea of what the ritualistic performance of music was in medieval Japan. In the case of gagaku, this idea is manifested in the conceptual continuity of linguistic-syllabic delineation of sounds—of both abstract musical notes and concrete sounds of nature alike. Gagaku prompts its participants to partake in a kind of *play* with and amongst nature while being sonically attuned to it. From the interpretation that gagaku music is also a form of *play* that is equivalent to ritualistic prayer, it does not make sense for it to be parsed in terms of linear-temporal lines of concurrent sounds, as is the case for five-line staff notation. Gagaku music, conceived as play, should not really have an explicit linear teleological narrative in the service of intentional meaning-making. It is a music that comes to life only as its participants come together and implicitly co-create harmonies. The intertwining of the voices of the three main instruments is not something that is *prescribed*, but rather something that coalesces organically as the instrumentalists physically get together in the spirit of *play*. The instruments are essentially *playing* with each other, whereby each instrument is given a set of rules to follow regarding what sequence of notes to play, in the form of the aforementioned *shōga*. In other words, the individual sequence of notes of each instrument is prescribed, but otherwise what happens between the instruments and how exactly these individual sequences coalesce is a dynamic and spontaneous process that happens only when the instrumentalists get together in *play*. Therefore, having an intrinsically prescriptive notation system, as epitomized by the Western five-line staff notation system, does not make sense in the context of gagaku music. Even though gagaku does indeed have intertwining voices that harmonize with each other in a temporal space, the way this process takes shape has a completely different, and inherently pluralistic, ontological standing from Western notions of music making. It is due to this key factor that gagaku music maintains a sectionalized linguistic-syllabic system of sonic mapping, and not a prescriptive linear-temporal narrative system of five-line staff notation. By comparing different cultural and theoretical paradigms at a more conceptual and philosophical level, we can begin to develop a deepened understanding of what exactly is meant by “music” in the first place in both lineages of thought and how the notion fits into the different theoretical paradigms therein. And in turn, a refined notion of music and a deeper analysis of its attendant semiotics of linguistic-syllabic sonic perception can aid in developing philosophical ideas and the semiotics of sound. Further, in conjunction with the analytics of play, the workings of an *audiocentric* framework that I have explored throughout

this paper also have bearing on questions in zoomusicology, and by extension, comparative cognition. The framework's alternative semiotics of perception and environment can potentially open up new interpretative terrain that situates music and its attendant mechanisms of sound cognition as a lens for investigating philosophical questions that come out of comparative cognition. This alternative vantage point can also provide the beginnings of a framework to explore a responsible bridging between human cognition and non-human cognition, creating ground for the sciences and philosophy to have a more meaningful dialogue while circumventing Thomas Nagel's criticism about the epistemic limit of interpreting non-human cognition in his seminal paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat" (1974, 435). A further analysis of the linguistic-syllabic sonic perception that come out of this *audiocentric* framework would also have implications for questions related to the primacy of pervasive implicit feelings and qualifiers in perception brought forth by Robert Zajonc (1980, 151–75), and to semiotic questions that pertain to the multi-lingual, multi-species nexus of bird songs in Toshitaka Suzuki's work on zoo-linguistics (2020, 2616–20).

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