

EDIFYING TONES

Using Music to Teach Asian History and Culture

By E. Taylor Atkins

For millions of people around the world, regardless of cultural background, social status, profession, gender, or national affiliation, music occupies a special place in life. “Of the many domains of culture, music would perhaps seem to be one of the least necessary,” the eminent ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl asserts, “yet we know of no culture that does not have it.”¹ Music influences the ways we entertain ourselves, worship, dress, even the ways we perceive the world around us. We crave it to soothe ourselves or to provoke others. Social groups and subcultures define themselves, their fashions, and their values, in relation to particular genres of music. And yet, in spite of its endless potential as a “hook,” many educators are hesitant to use music in the classroom. Teachers of U.S. history have of course made prolific use of some song genres—notably African American spirituals, hillbilly tunes, or 1960s rock-n-roll—to help establish a historical context that students are likely to appreciate. But I suspect that few social studies or history teachers who cover non-Western societies have even begun to exploit the pedagogical value of music. With the obvious exception of musicologists, most Asian specialists are functionally illiterate musically, for music has little place in their professional preparation. Asian music must be even more of a mystery to those who lack substantial experience living in Asia or learning Asian languages, but who are nonetheless responsible for teaching Asian content to students. Few professional development workshops allot precious time to music, which many regard as tangential despite its enormous importance in our personal lives.

For some people the reluctance to take music seriously as a classroom tool is a result of simple aesthetic prejudice. Most Asian musics strike non-Asian listeners as unpleasantly dissonant because our ears are culturally conditioned to particular concepts of what is “melodious,” “beautiful,” or “in tune.” On the other hand, there are no doubt many who consider Asian music to be quite lovely and emotionally enriching, but who do not necessarily feel confident enough in their knowledge of Asian musical systems to discuss them intelligently in the public realm of the classroom. My experience using music in the classroom suggests that thorough musicological comprehension is not necessary to teach selected non-musical topics or themes, such as political ideology, cosmology, and social and aesthetic hierarchies. Relatively few of my students develop an affection or aesthetic appreciation for the music I present in class, but that is not my principal goal. What

they gain is an understanding of particular philosophical, spiritual, and social systems, through a form of art—music—in which most already have an intrinsic interest.

Whenever I play music in class, I direct students to engage in (for lack of a better term) “deep listening.” By this I mean nothing more complicated than to pay close attention to the particular sonorities, moods, accents, rhythms, and other general traits, and then to describe those qualities in a subsequent discussion. Then I ask what those musical characteristics tell us. Why does the music sound the way it does? What cultural function might it serve? What message or emotional impression is the music trying to convey? The last two questions sometimes require supplementary readings to answer credibly, but the first does not. I encourage students to trust their ears, for although responses to music are to some degree culturally conditioned, certain aspects may evoke nearly universal reactions. If the music is designed to convey a sense of awe, ecstasy, or spiritual calm, for instance, even listeners without prior exposure to the musical system are certainly capable of apprehending those particular moods through deep listening. In other words, it is not necessary for students to know much or anything about a particular musical system or performance to elicit insightful responses.²

What follows are descriptions of specific lessons on East and Southeast Asia in which I have incorporated music.³ While not all musical examples listed below would be regarded as “popular music,” we must remember that to some degree the adjective “popular” is relational—in other words, it has meaning only in relation or contradistinction to other descriptive terms, such as “high” or “elite” culture or “fine art.” As I point out below, juxtaposing the “popular” (meaning either “of the populace” or “widely fashionable”) with the elite, canonical, or otherwise “not popular” is a useful strategy for introducing elaborate social structures in which one’s inherited or acquired status conditioned practically all social interaction and discourse.

I have included discographical citations for the specific recordings I use, but there are many recordings of Asian music available that can serve the same intellectual purposes. I also cite supplementary reading assignments that provide enough background information to contribute a great deal to the quality of ensuing discussions. I am convinced that there are several other potential themes and topics to which music can contribute pedagogically, and I hope that my experiences will inspire others to explore these.

Political Philosophy

Confucius, founder of East Asia's dominant philosophy of social and political ethics, gave special prominence to music as a didactic force. "The superior man tries to promote music as a means to the perfection of human culture. When such music prevails, and people's minds are led towards the right ideals and aspirations, we may see the appearance of a great nation." An appreciation for music was considered paramount for the ideal Confucian gentleman. Mencius, best known for articulating the right to rebel against unjust rulers and for asserting the essential goodness of human nature, contended that "If the king loves music, there is little wrong in the land." Moreover, the quality of a people's music was regarded by Confucian thinkers as symptomatic of the quality of its governance: "The music of a well-ordered age is calm and cheerful, and so is its government. The music of a restive age is excited and fierce, and its government is perverted."⁴ The lofty moral principles of Confucianism thus profoundly shaped the aesthetic values of Chinese (and subsequently Korean and Japanese) music, particularly that of social elites.

The musical ideals of Confucianism are evident in the music of the Japanese imperial court (*gagaku*). As the Yamato court intensified its efforts to consolidate its authority over Japan in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries C.E., it borrowed prodigiously from Chinese models and principles of governance (e.g., the emperor as "heavenly king"—*tianwang* in Chinese, *tennō* in Japanese—rather than the earlier, and less grandiose, indigenous title *ō* or *ōgimi*). Chinese rituals and concepts were deployed to persuade both foreign emissaries and rival aristocratic clans to accept Yamato hegemony. Music and dances appropriated from the Tang Chinese court were to serve this agenda by conferring an aura of regal mystery and cosmic legitimacy to Japan's nascent imperial institution. Students who listen deeply to *gagaku* excerpts in my Japanese history classes typically describe the music as sounding "mysterious," "orderly," "calm," "stately," even "lethargic." I then ask why an institution attempting to demonstrate its imperial legitimacy would favor music that sounded so. Students respond that the structure, pace, and mood of the selection seem intended to inspire awe in an audience, to confer majesty upon the court, perhaps even to induce a trance or meditative state accentuating the spiritual and cosmological basis of the sovereign's authority.

Further analysis is facilitated by reading translated selections from two sources: imperial decrees and early historical chronicles that document the evolving concept of imperial suzerainty and spiritual authority in Japan;⁵ and verses from the *Yueji* (*Book of Music*; compiled in Walter Kaufmann's collection of classical Chinese texts) that address the didactic role, ideal aesthetic qualities, and ritual significance of music. Pivotal quotations for inciting discussion include: "The purpose of music, ceremony, punishment, and laws of conduct is one and the same: all [these elements] are used to unify the minds of the people and create proper order in the land."⁶ By listening to *gagaku* while pondering the ancient texts on music and governance, students can develop a keener awareness of the ideal, harmonious society envisioned by East Asian Confucians, since the music was designed to *sound like* such a society should be, and indeed to *expedite its realization*. In sum, students not only learn about political ideology and

the social utility of art, but also develop an appreciation for the way that specific aesthetic devices (timbre, tempo, mood, etc.) can be used to disseminate particular ideological messages.

Cosmology and Religion

In the East Asian Confucian tradition, music should not only *represent* but indeed *cultivate* the ideal order of human society. In other Asian cultures, music mirrored cultural notions of how the entire universe operated. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that cosmology shaped musical form. This is clear in musical systems of insular Southeast Asia, which reflect the complexity of their societies and worldviews. Music has been such an integral part of social life, labor, and religious practice in much of Indonesia that its omission from an introductory unit would be misleading at best. For instance, practically all Balinese have traditionally received some kind of artistic training and share responsibility for performing in village ensembles. Moreover, the various *gamelan* ensembles that give voice to most Indonesian popular and elite musical expressions require a high degree of cohesion and precision from performers, and thus are emblematic of the value of social harmony and a communal sense of purpose. Melodies are constructed through interlocking phrases played by individual instrumentalists (or vocalists, as in Balinese *kecak* or "monkey chant"), symbolizing the mutual dependence and cooperation necessary for the prosperity of the entire community.⁷ When playing excerpts from this music, I ask students to identify the different components of the melody and (if I'm feeling feisty) break them up into small groups, each responsible for singing a melodic phrase and contributing to the re-creation of the ensemble piece in the classroom. The resulting "piece" obviously falls apart without precise and willing participation of all members of the "ensemble," symbolizing the failure of social life should each individual not perform her or his assigned role. The teaching objective is to familiarize students accustomed to the cultural prominence of individualism with the ideals of communal harmony, collective responsibility, and mutual dependence that traditionally governed village life in Indonesia.

Insular Southeast Asia has often been characterized as the "crossroads" or point of contact for peoples and cultures from East Asia, India, Europe, and Arabia. The cultural consequences are reflected in Indonesian music, Margaret J. Kartomi contends, as the complex interplay between animist, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian "layers" that constitute Indonesian cultures is reflected in "musical strata." The musical traditions of Java, Sumatra, and Bali, Kartomi argues, all exhibit "an artistic stratum of spirit and ancestor worship and veneration of fertility deities, a tradition presumably predating periods of substantial foreign contact." This was eventually overlaid by a layer of musical repertoire, instruments, and dances from India adopted by the Hindu and Buddhist courts of Java and Sumatra. The arrival of Islam from the twelfth century onward added another stratum, as did the Christianity propagated by the Portuguese in later centuries (though, Kartomi notes, the Hindu and animist strata still predominate in Bali). In other words, the waves of foreign influence that swept the Indonesian islands over the centuries are documented musically.⁸ It is admittedly difficult for most students or instructors without special training to discern these "layers" in a classroom performance, but pointing out, for instance, the prominence of the Indian *Ramayana*

epic in Indonesian musical repertoire, or Islamic pieces sung in modified Arabic, can heighten students' awareness of the ways that Indonesian cultures, rather than developing in isolation, were shaped by frequent contacts with outsiders that preceded the colonial era by centuries.

The "religious significance" of all the arts, particularly music, also makes it feasible to use music as a vehicle for introducing the spiritual and cosmological systems of Indonesian peoples. Animism is evident in the belief that each gamelan orchestra possesses a spirit and is given a name; one does not step over an instrument as a gesture of respect for this spirit. Indian religious teachings are likewise evident in compositional structure. Instructive in this regard is Judith Becker's analysis of the Javanese composition *Langen Bronto*, which she categorizes as a "timeless" musical piece, invoking a sense of "time out of time," dependent not on a "perception of change, but rather its opposite, no change, the intimation of eternity, of Nirvana, the sense of being outside of any time framework at all." The piece's "endless cyclic repetitions, . . . unvarying tempos, . . . steady dynamics and textures are not, as some might suppose, a consequence of enfeebled imagination," Becker asserts, but rather calculated to induce trance or meditation. *Langen Bronto*, "a relic from the pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist era of Javanese history," is an "aural mandala" whose cyclical repetitions "tend to focus concentration, to subdue distraction in the minds of players, dancers, and listeners. By inhibiting the mind's tendency to follow and seek change, these pieces are inducive of meditative states." Moreover, the inherently collaborative nature of the performance, which discourages any single musical line from standing out, likewise encourages performers and audiences to lose their sense of "personal, unique selfhood," which Hindu-Buddhist teachings condemn as an "illusion with dangerous consequences for the spiritual development of a person."⁹

Students listening to such pieces in class usually find them boring, for there is practically no linear melodic or rhythmic development (as if their beloved hip-hop, punk, and techno were not equally repetitive!). But after being introduced to the relevant cosmological and spiritual principles they can in fact "lose themselves" in the music and even achieve, to some degree, the intended meditative state. Music thus enables a vicarious ritual experience, an all-too-rare opportunity to "learn by doing," within the social science classroom.

Social Order and Resistance

Hierarchy has been a basic principle of East Asian social organization. Music can be illuminating evidence of both the official ideal of social order and resistance to that ideal. It is no coincidence that aesthetic categories—distinctions between high/elite, popular/folk, and mass culture—are closely linked to social categories. A number of scholars have persuasively argued that aesthetic valuations, rather than having tangible, objective, and unchanging rationales, in fact have served as mechanisms by which aristocrats and bourgeois elites buttressed their status and kept "the rabble" at arm's length.¹⁰ Of course, such aesthetic distinctions are increasingly in flux in an age in which classical cellist Yo Yo Ma is a pop superstar and avant-garde film techniques are de rigueur in television ads and music videos, but in past centuries aesthetic distinctions were of profound significance. We can use these aesthetic categories to introduce and explore the highly stratified social struc-

tures of earlier Asian communities, for people living in the same country but on different social strata had very different kinds of music and art. Through music, we can demonstrate the social diversity of traditional Asian societies and thus discredit myths of cultural homogeneity. I try to get students to drop phrases such as "the Japanese" by badgering them with the question "Which Japanese?" Music can help reinforce more appropriately complex thought habits by signifying social difference aurally.

My favorite tactic for developing this awareness is to juxtapose excerpts from Japanese gagaku with rural festival music (usually a bubbly piece from *Japanese Dance Music*, the second volume in King Records' *Music of Japanese People* series), with no explanatory remarks.¹¹ Then I ask who would be apt to listen to each kind of music and why. Students usually respond that elites would most likely prefer the slow majesty of gagaku, while commoners would favor the more up-tempo, joyous rhythms of the festival music. "Why?" I ask. Ensuing discussions then focus on how different musical tempos and moods may be related to the respective lifestyles, social and physical environments, and worldviews of different status groups. Some students have even gone so far as to speculate on similarities in aesthetic tastes between elites and commoners in Japan and other regions of the world, working toward a cross-cultural theory of the connections between musical/aesthetic attributes and social class.

The popular music, theater, and dances of Korean commoners are likewise excellent vehicles for discussing social tensions in pre-twentieth-century Korea, since they openly satirized the *yangban* aristocracy, Buddhist clergy, and the ideologies that bolstered their elite status. Having read the ancient texts that constitute the East Asian traditional canon, students then learn how these traditional ideals facilitated the oppression of some by others, how tradition itself became a blunt instrument to cudgel commoners into submission, and how common folk responded to abuse and hypocrisy, by viewing excerpts from the Asia Society video *Pongsan Masked-Dance Drama from Korea*. The dances depict stock characters—frivolous playboys, high-class temptresses, corrupt officials, lecherous Buddhist monks—who habitually violate the codes of conduct (benevolence, self-discipline, chastity) they have sworn to uphold. Through music and dance commoners thus critiqued the premise of the elite moral superiority on which Korea's social hierarchy was based, and ridiculed those with delusions of immunity from human foibles.

Similar themes are explicit in *p'ansori* operas, which can be readily brought into class.¹² In a course on the Korean War, I developed a lesson on social stratification in late Chosŏn Korea around the *p'ansori* opera *The Tale of Ch'unhyang*. In this classic tale, the son of a scholar-official marries Ch'unhyang, the daughter of a *kisaeng* (courtesan-entertainer), whom he must leave behind as he goes to Seoul to prepare for and take the civil service examination. Ch'unhyang is beaten and imprisoned by the new provincial governor, whose sexual advances she resists out of loyalty to her husband. The governor insists that the daughter of a courtesan cannot be considered chaste and thus has no reason for refusing to obey his orders, yet Ch'unhyang's reputation as a loyal wife spreads throughout the province and hastens the governor's demise. The drama's implicit message is that even lowly *kisaeng* are capable of exemplary virtue, and accomplished officials of vile

corruption. Im Kwon-taek's brilliant movie adaptation (available on DVD from New Yorker Video) is actually narrated by a p'ansori singer.¹³ My students in the Korean War class did not find p'ansori singing particularly appealing, but having read an essay Katharine Purcell and I co-authored comparing the musical aesthetics, social functions,¹⁴ and literary strategies of p'ansori and African American blues,¹⁴ they could at least comprehend how Korean outcasts utilized art to critique the hypocrisy and corruption that plagued Chosŏn society. This facilitates crucial educational outcomes: students become sensitized to the ways that cultural ideals are contested and indeed serve the interests of some social categories over others; and they learn to take social status into account and thus avoid overgeneralizations about "Koreans," "Japanese," etc., as discrete, undifferentiated categories.

Conclusion

My aim here has been to share methods for teaching *through* music rather than *about* music. With increasing curricular emphasis on "coverage" of "the basics," teaching *about* music seems positively luxurious, yet that need not imply the exclusion of music from our pedagogical strategies. Since so much of "the basics"—foundational cultural principles, spiritual practices, forms of social organization—are enshrined in musical forms, we might as well take advantage of music's inherent "hook." My own experience suggests that students develop a deeper understanding when their reading of texts is supplemented with musical examples. They also find it fun, as do I. Whenever I walk into the classroom with my boom box, I get a warmer, more enthusiastic greeting than usual. So I keep looking for new excuses to do so. ■

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Asia Society's AsiaStore: 725 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021; (212) 327-9217; AsiaStore@asiasoc.org; www.asiasociety.org
 International Music Archives: www.eyeneer.com/World/
 Multicultural Media's World Music Store: www.worldmusicstore.com
 Smithsonian Folkways Records: www.folkways.si.edu
 World Music Institute: www.heartheworld.org
 World Music Network—Rough Guides to the World of Music: www.worldmusic.net

NOTES

I am indebted to Lucien Ellington and *EAA*'s reviewers for their suggestions; to my colleague Professor Kuo-huang Han for introducing me to Southeast Asian musics and the relevant ethnomusicological literature; to my friend and collaborator Katharine Purcell for deepening my appreciation of *p'ansori*; and to my students at Northern Illinois University and the University of California-Berkeley for their contributions to our in-class "jam sessions."

1. Quoted in Mickey Hart and Frederic Lieberman, *Spirit into Sound: The Magic of Music* (Petaluma, CA: Grateful Dead Books, 1999), p. 120.
2. I am not suggesting that performance contexts or musicological traits are unimportant, just that most social studies and history instructors do not have the luxury of dwelling on them at the expense of broader issues.
3. Most examples are from my Japanese history and culture classes. I have used music in world history as well, which affords an opportunity to play songs with English lyrics. To discuss historical legacies of the African slave trade, for instance, I play Peter Tosh's "African" (from *Equal Rights*, Columbia CK 65923, 1977), which celebrates pan-African cultural identity, and Oscar Brown, Jr.'s "40 Acres and a Mule" (from *Mr. Oscar Brown, Jr. Goes to Washington*, Verve 314 557 452, 1965) to provoke discussion on reparations for slavery. My colleague James Schmidt comes in to perform nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American labor songs expressing the

social consequences of the industrial revolution. I also use the "Afro-Beat" music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti to initiate discussions of cultural hybridity and the political utility of music.

4. All quotes taken from Hart and Lieberman, pp. 120, 122, 123.
5. I use David Lu, ed., *Japan: A Documentary History* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), but both the old and new editions of *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958; 2d ed. 2001) contain similar documents.
6. Walter Kaufmann, *Musical References in the Chinese Classics*, Detroit Monographs in Musicology no. 5 (Detroit: Information Coordinators, Inc., 1976), p. 32.
7. Representative recordings for classroom use include: *Java: Javanese Court Gamelan* (Elektra/Nonesuch: 72044, 1991); *Music from the Morning of the World: The Balinese Gamelan and Ketjak, The Ramayana Monkey Chant* (Elektra/Nonesuch: 79196, 1988); Smithsonian/Folkways' seventeen-volume *Music of Indonesia* (SF-40055-57, 40420-28, 40441-44, 1991-96); and *Music for the Gods—The Fahnestock South Sea Expedition: Indonesia* (Rykodisc: 10315, 1994), produced by Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart for the Library of Congress Endangered Music Series.
8. Margaret J. Kartomi, "Musical Strata in Sumatra, Java, and Bali," in Elizabeth May, ed., *Musics of Many Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 111-33.
9. J. Becker, "Hindu-Buddhist Time in Javanese Gamelan Music," in J.T. Fraser, N. Lawrence, and D. Park, eds., *The Study of Time IV: Papers from the Fourth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time, Alpbach-Austria* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), pp. 163-4, 168-9, 171. *Langen Bronto* appears on *Gamelan Garland* (Fontana: 858614 FPY) in Becker's discography.
10. Examples include Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000); and Jim Collins, ed., *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).
11. In 1991 Japan's King Records issued two series, *Japanese Traditional Music* (KICB 2001-2010) and *Music of Japanese People* (KICB 2021-2030), which provide a wonderful overview of the diversity of Japanese performance styles. Both series are available in the United States and have extensive explanatory notes in English and Japanese by noted ethnomusicologists. However, there are many other readily available recordings that will serve the same purposes.
12. I am aware of two textual versions of the *p'ansori* classic *Sim Chong*: a short summary in Chung Chong-wha, ed., *Korean Classical Literature: An Anthology* (London, New York: Kegan Paul International, 1989); and a longer, direct translation in a poetic format in Marshall Pihl, *The Korean Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). The CD *P'ansori: Korea's Epic Vocal Art and Instrumental Music* (Elektra/Nonesuch: 72049, 1988) includes excerpts from *Sim Chong* performed by Living National Treasure Kim Soh-hee.
13. Morris Kwon-taek, dir., *Chunhyang* (Taehung Pictures/Lot 47 Films, 2000; DVD on New Yorker Video A1-21256).
14. Katharine C. Purcell and E. Taylor Atkins, "Korean *P'ansori* and the Blues: Art for Communal Healing," *East-West Connections: Review of Asian Studies* 2 (2002): 63-84.

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