Changing Identities of Japanese Traditional Music in Twenty First Century

Thitipol Kanteewong

Introduction

In many countries in Asia, music has always been part of the people’s lives. It has a role to play in both their spiritual and the temporal worlds. It is both sacred and secular since it has a place in religious ceremonies and rituals, just as it has a place in entertainment.

Japanese traditional music has characteristics which set it off from the music of the rest of the world. Studying its nuances could help in The Clash of Civilization. As Huntington expressed (1993, 1-23)

... To understand cultural and social movements in the Twenty First Century, we might concentrate particularly on cultural aspects rather than on political and economic ones. Cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones.

During the feudal age, folk music expressed what life was like for people in a small community. Later, when there were kingdoms and monarchs, music played in the royal courts was referred to as classical. During and after the Japanese industrial revolution, music became pop—something the masses could relate to and which also served as a tool for spreading information and promoting certain causes. But even in the modern period, Japanese music contains lyrics reminiscent of traditional Japanese music.1

The experimental integration of foreign music and traditional Japanese music began in the nineteenth century. This led musicians and the general public to appreciate the uniqueness and value of Japanese traditional music, which subsequently started the Japanese cultural reform.

The enlightened society that appeared in Japan during the 19th century manipulated traditional Japanese music. It led to changes in the music notation system, in musical forms and functions, in teaching styles, music education, music philosophy, and in the sense of beauty inside music. The meaning of music changed as a result of different social contexts in various times.

The modification of traditional Japanese music manifested itself in new forms during the postwar period. Traditional music was qualified and conserved by the traditional learning system—the “iemoto” system.2 On the other hand, modern society concentrated on high-technology features that changed traditional music and made it more authentic.

In the 1960s, Japan was attempting to reform the national culture by concentrating on Western cultures, which had been introduced during the postwar period. Classical music composers attempted to use traditional Japanese music in their music compositions. Traditional Japanese music was introduced to the world and was made well-known by a masterpiece (“November Steps”) of Toru Takemitsu in 1967. Takemitsu began to explore new sound materials by using the “shakuhachi” and “biwa” double concerto in his musical compositions. Japanese musical instruments were incorporated into Western music, which introduced the Japanese musical identity to the modern world.

Traditional musical instruments were promoted in world music genres, and were more popular in the beginning of the 1990s. Traditional Japanese music was then a major brand in world music and represented the Asian musical identity at that time.

After the 1990s, traditional Japanese music was transformed into various genres. There were collaborations with Western classical music and with several favorite musical genres such as pop, rock, jazz, folk music, etc. that may have caused traditional Japanese music to lose its identity in modern Japan.

The diversification of Japanese music became more pronounced in the 20th century. It was widely accepted so that it inspired more experimentation that facilitated its entry into the mainstream. Contemporary music was created by talented musicians who had developed good technique in several traditional music genres such as “tsugaru jamisen”, Okinawa “sanshin”, “koto”, “biwa”, “shakuhachi”, “gagaku”, “taiko”, “tsuzumi”, vocal, and various other kinds of folk music. Traditional musical instruments were also involved in reforming Japanese musical style in a modern way.
Objectives and significance of the study

This research sought to understand the changing identity of traditional Japanese music in the 21st century. The shift in the social paradigm has been noted to be highly and mutually beneficial to everyone in the fields of art and culture.

The research concentrates on the transmission process with regard to traditional music in Japan. It is particularly focused on musical styles and social perspectives. It uses a cross-field study in ethnomusicology and sociology. It also focuses on musical collaborations that have brought together traditional Japanese music and the musical instruments of northern Thailand.

Methodology

For the research, three main groups were interviewed to serve as primary sources: 1) music scholars, 2) traditional Japanese music composers and musicians, and 3) audiences. These primary sources were used to organize and analyze the changing identity of traditional Japanese music in the 21st century. They were asked about the following topics: the definition of traditional, contemporary, and neo-traditional music; the national policy on public organization, Japanese neo-traditional music; and the traditional musical identity of the Japanese nation.

The secondary sources used for the research included academic papers, texts, and journals dealing with the history and social background of music, systematic music theory, and social analysis. From them were derived information on Japan’s musical history, the role of traditional Japanese music in farming and fishing, the traditional music learning system, the change in the Japanese social paradigm, the industrial culture after World War II, the reformation of Japanese music education, traditional music during the Meiji period, and modern Japanese music.

Participative activities have taken on the forms of attendance at musical concerts and a musical collaboration involving Northern Thailand’s neo-traditional music and traditional Japanese music, resulting to contemporary works. The result of this collaboration/experiment will be described.

This research will act as a case study for understanding the collaboration between traditional forms of music that exist in each country in the 21st century. The sample music recordings and the musical notations will be used to analyze and group musical styles as they appear in 21st century Japan.

Results

The experimental works of “Lanna Thai” and Japanese neo-traditional music are a significant part of this research. The music systematic of traditional music is remarkable in terms of both music theory and historical background.

The string instruments of Lanna are used in Japanese neo-traditional music. Three major strings instruments—the “seung”, a plucked four- or six-string instrument; the “salor”, a two-string fiddle; the “pin pia”, a harmonic four-string plucked instrument; and a flute—were chosen to play in four groups of Japanese neo-traditional music and performances. These groups were: 1) the Mahora group, a new “gagaku” ensemble; 2) the Kurobyoushi, a new Japanese “taiko” drum group; 3) Sana Hayashi, a “shamisen” and “koto” player; and 4) Jun, a Japanese contemporary dancer.

The traditional Japanese music philosophy is the most significant aspect when it comes to creating new forms of musical compositions. The art’s aesthetic such as the “ma”, a space or silence, and the “sawari”, a drone sound, were parts of the significant fundamental approach which came from Japanese religious philosophies, namely, Zen Buddhism and the Shinto religion. The philosophies of Zen Buddhism and the Shinto religion emphasize a respect for nature and the need to coexist harmoniously.

From the beginning of the 21st century, however, small art spaces or private theaters were gradually raised in importance equal to that of grand theaters in Japanese contemporary society. The small number of people in the audience are thus able to appreciate the natural sound of musical instruments and sit closer to the musicians and performers, so unlike the set-up in music concerts to promote a CD or organized by music companies. Indeed, the compact live concert has become increasingly recognizable in Japanese society.

Moreover, the Japanese traditional learning system called the “iemoto” still plays a part in preserving traditional music. Amateur musicians, patrons, and central government support it.
As for the changes in traditional Japanese music, these can be divided into three new major types, as follows:

First, the advancement of old traditional Japanese music through the introduction of new playing techniques has created new musical repertoires. Second, traditional Japanese music has taken on a more popular style, which promotes such music through popular music reforms performed by a younger generation of musicians. Marketing campaigns are resorted to in an effort to attract mass audiences through media. Several popular musical styles have accompanied traditional Japanese music, among them pop, rock, blues, and jazz. Traditional musicians have been promoted like pop stars and have become well known amongst the Japanese people. Lastly, experimental versions of traditional Japanese music have been developed by contemporary musicians and artists who have demonstrated their creativity in new art forms through the co-creation process, with several musical cultures from outside Japan.

More importantly, experiments in traditional Japanese music have affected the Japanese cultural identity in the 21st century. They have also resulted in three different outputs involving neo-traditional music, as follows:

1) Experimental music. It has improved the playing techniques used in traditional Japanese music. Experimental music has also considerably enhanced the philosophy of neo-traditional music.

2) Japan’s cultural identity or “Japaneseness”. Traditional Japanese musical instruments are recognized as the Orient’s sound and are represented in Western contemporary musical compositions under the classification of “exoticism”.

3) The co-creation process. It has incorporated Japanese culture by using Japanese musical philosophy to exchange ideas with different musical cultures from all over the world.

In the end, the co-creation process is recognized as a significant system by traditional Japanese musicians, because it has allowed them to create new musical forms with diverse musical cultures, their collective output now making up what is known as Japanese neo-traditional music. Learning about different musical cultures helps people understand the co-creation process that, in turn, enables them to live peacefully with other persons, societies and countries.

However, as a result of significant circumstances in the 21st century, the world’s paradigm has changed and people from all around the world have awakened. They have come to realize that they face similar problems such as international terrorism, global warming, and the economic crisis. The world crisis serves to remind people of the unstable living conditions that exist, prompting mankind to find a shared solution, with nature taken into consideration.

Traditional Japanese musical philosophy has been transformed to inspire musicians to create several new genres of music. The sensitive and perfect sound of traditional Japanese musical instruments certainly symbolizes the Japanese musical identity.

The distinctive changing identities of traditional Japanese music in the 21st century can be seen from many viewpoints, but only three will be discussed here: the change in systematic music, changes in social movements, and the changing Japanese music culture.

Let us first consider the changing systematic music of traditional Japanese music. Japanese musicians have freely created new music modes or scales as part of their musical repertoire, in collaboration with other musicians. Also, new ensembles have been formed as a result of new orchestration. New music compositions have been rearranged into harmonic textures as has been the case with Western music. Perhaps, they were played using heterophony or polyphony textures, using different musical instruments tuning from 438 - 445 hertz in concert A sound. The chromatic scale is used more frequently in the new compositions, as well as in jazz music.

Second, the changing social movements are demonstrated by the new trends in music marketing,
The value of music has been diminished by technology, which allows music to be uploaded from music data sources in the Web. People can now select and download their favorite songs without having to buy an entire album. Small live concerts have become fascinating to many people who are keen about the acoustic sound of instruments and the exotic sounds made by traditional Japanese musical instruments. Likewise, Japanese folk music from several areas such as Amami Island, Okinawa Island, and the Aomori prefecture is now accepted by people in the urban areas. The Japanese themselves have awakened to contemporary art and music. Music concerts are no longer confined to formal ones; musicians now hold casual concerts in restaurants, a short bar, an arts space, or a mini private theatre. Neo-traditional music’s audiences differ in terms of age and gender, and may be broken up into various small groups depending on their preferred musical styles. Moreover, traditional Japanese musicians normally illuminate certain aspects of a traditional musical instrument’s historical background and the traditional philosophy of musical repertoires to audiences during their performance.

Third, the changing musical culture of the Japanese has led to the introduction of new forms of traditional musical styles, while the “iemoto” tradition of household learning and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology have rightly preserved traditional Japanese music. Traditional Japanese music is part of Japan’s new educational system, and Japanese junior school students are required to learn Japanese traditional music while at school. It is important for the Japanese to realize that their traditional musical culture needs to keep up with Western music in the 21st century.

Indeed, the Japanese people should pay attention to their traditional music and cultural identity. These should not be used to promote nationalism the way it was in the past. Instead, the Japanese should develop an understanding of their own cultural identity. They should focus on ensuring that it is in harmony with other cultures in light of globalization.

The world crises seem to spell trouble for people everywhere; everyone is confronted with similar problems. That is why it is so richly inspired traditional Japanese musicians to co-create new forms of traditional music with other musicians from different cultures, using the traditional Japanese philosophy which is related to the belief in, and respect for, nature.

In short, the Japanese cultural identity should resurface through new forms of Japanese traditions like “Japanese neo-traditional music”.

**Problem with regard to collaboration**

In previous examples of collaborative works, the aesthetic of the new form of traditional Japanese music was represented by various traditional playing techniques. As mentioned previously, there are the “ma”, a space or silence and the “sawari”, a drone sound. However, there are some problems in playing techniques with regard to collaborative works involving traditional Japanese music and the music of Northern Thailand.

The following example shows how the traditional music of Northern Thailand has different tunings. It has seven tones which can be played in two simple modes: (1) the major pentatonic mode (C D E G A) and (2) the minor pentatonic mode (C Eb F G Bb). Meanwhile, traditional Japanese music has twelve tones created in several modes and scales in the traditional style. Moreover, the traditional musical character of Northern Thailand is played continually to create the heterophony texture without a rest note or pause, while traditional Japanese music concentrates more on the silence between one sound and another.

![Figure 2 The Collaboration concert of Sana Hayashi and Thitipol Kanteewong, Kobe](image)

Although several problems in terms of collaboration have been encountered, rearranging new music compositions and retuning as far as possible the musical instruments used, solved the problem. In short, the musician’s experience is a necessity when it comes to co-creating new solutions with other musicians. The solution to the problem of collaboration has created new forms of Japanese neo-traditional music.

*The Work of the 2009/2010 API Fellows*
Definition of Neo-traditional Music

The term “neo-traditional music” has appeared in several countries in the 21st century. It refers to a desire to continue a country’s own traditional music and the transmission of traditional music from the past to the present. Neo-traditional music means “a new style of traditional music that has been reformed and changed in terms of musical styles in order to serve its new social function in the 21st century.” Traditional music had changed systematic music to include three main styles: (1) the development of new ensembles by involving several Western and non-Western musical instruments and performances, (2) the development of new styles of traditional music that have been reformed to popular music with influences from jazz, pop, rock, and world music, and (3) the use of experimental traditional musical instruments in new musical compositions influenced by avant-garde music.

Neo-traditional music is a new style of traditional music that has been changed by social movements and paradigms to affect music and its philosophy. Neo-traditional music in the 21st century will become the traditional music of the future.

New Forms of Neo-traditional Music

Japanese neo-traditional music has four different musical forms which have led to collaborative works. These include: (1) new forms of rearrangements with traditional Japanese repertoires, (2) new forms associated with playing Western classical repertoires, (3) new forms of free improvised sessions, and (4) new forms of Japanese musical compositions.

The new forms of rearranging Japanese traditional repertoires involve the process of preserving and developing traditional Japanese music in the 21st century. Traditional Japanese musicians have developed solo techniques with their musical instruments by using more complicated, high-level techniques; or by arranging new orchestration that uses Japanese musical instruments in the new ensemble. This process is appropriate when it comes to preserving and developing traditional Japanese music in the 21st century.
In conclusion, the four different new forms of traditional Japanese music have made their cultural appearance in the 21st century. Japanese neo-traditional music has transformed old traditional music to new traditional music through experimental and co-creational processes. The world’s paradigm is concerned with the security of life from the social, economic, political and natural perspectives. In the 21st century, the world has been confronted by the global warming phenomenon, the world economic crisis, and international terrorism that have affected mankind and remind us of these problems. These problems have inspired many musicians to create their music and to perform them in light of conceptual co-creation and in terms of their relationship with nature.

Understanding the concept of diversity with regard to culture is a significant step to learning how different things outside Japan are. People must be open-minded and must be accepting of different cultures. They must learn to live together in harmony.

Japanese Neo-Traditional Music in the 21st Century

The trend in contemporary music in the 20th century changed to neo-traditional music at the beginning of the 21st century. The world had shifted from industrialization to globalization in the 20th century. As previously mentioned, contemporary music was developed using technological methods. People believed in the power of human beings to conquer nature through technology.

Traditional Japanese music represented Japan’s national identity to the world, which was confronted by the dangers of climate change that made people more conscious of similar problems in the 21st century. Japanese neo-traditional music itself has concentrated on collaborating with various genres of music and has crossed the different boundaries separating nations. The most conceptual part of neo-traditional music has been its relationship with the spirits of nature, which is compatible with traditional Japanese music such as the sacred music of Shintoism and Zen Buddhism.

Traditional Japanese music had an impact on the Meiji cultural restoration in the modern era, when Western music was introduced to the Japanese. Western classical music from Europe was considered mainstream music by virtue of national music education. Therefore, most of the younger generation of Japanese familiar with Western classical music do not understand traditional Japanese music. Japanese people appreciate European art more easily than they do their own traditional art.

Although Western music has had an influence on the traditional music of Japan, it proved advantageous for the younger generation to develop their musical skills through western music education before they became interested once more in traditional Japanese music in the 21st century.

The distinctive musical styles of Japanese contemporary music in the 21st century can be seen from several viewpoints. However, we discussed only three significant styles in this thesis: Western-influenced music, popular music, and experimental music styles.

To begin with, the influence of Western music continued from the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century. There have been some contemporary Japanese music composers who have worked with traditional Japanese musical instruments and they have become renowned in Japan and overseas, among them Toru Takemitsu, Yuji Takahashi, and Jo Kondo. The avant-garde music of these contemporary composers has influenced many contemporary music composers to incorporate traditional Japanese musical instruments in their music compositions. For example, Toshio Hosokawa’s contemporary music compositions use traditional Japanese musical instruments. He composed the “Komponistenporträt” for chamber music that includes the Arditti Quartet, and the “shō” performed by Mayumi Miyata in 2008.

There is an audience keen on Western-influenced music. Although it is an alternative form of music, there are CDs of this type of music sold in the market. While it has been difficult to appreciate avant-garde music because of the conceptual composing process that uses serialism and objectivism which are complicated with unpleasant sounds, the exotic sounds of Japanese musical instruments have attracted a certain audience.

Secondly, popular music produced using traditional Japanese music is one of the three main styles that exist throughout Japan. New trends in traditional music have made a comeback in Japanese society after people realized the culture of their own nation in the late 20th century. The sound of traditional Japanese music is present in some contemporary music compositions. Also, Japanese folk songs have been influenced by a
popular western music accompaniment called the “enka” (演歌).

Besides, television and radio broadcasts have been promoting the new styles of traditional Japanese instrumental music. Music recording companies have released CD albums produced by young Japanese neo-traditional musicians. New idols of neo-traditional music have emerged in Japan in the persons of the Yoshida brothers (“tsugaru jamisen’s” player), Togi Hideki (“hishiriki’s” player) and Agatsuma Hiromitsu (“shamisen’s” player). They are promoted as musician pop stars in the mainstream music scene. The album has been a success in terms of publicizing the new trend in traditional Japanese music from the urban areas to many other cities in Japan. In short, the masses support the traditional Japanese popular music style.

Finally, the experimental music style associated with traditional Japanese musical instruments has created new forms of music that are related to the old traditional music, combined with the new tradition of the 21st century. The process of “co-creation” is a significant method with regard to the collaboration of traditional Japanese music with other musical genres and performances. The experimental music is not mainstream music in terms of being a popular style, but it has been dispersed in many areas. Musicians have engaged in collaborative work in more confined spaces where the audiences are able to participate closely in the performance.

Furthermore, it is not only the traditional techniques of playing that have been used in the collaborations. Traditional Japanese music philosophies are also widely used in the new works. For example, "ma", which means silence or signifies spacing between sounds, is used in the new compositions which affect human emotions by requiring listeners to envision different images, depending on their experiences with silence. Traditional Japanese music has a strong character in terms of systematical music, so that new musical forms can be identified by the “co-creation” process with other musical genres. Indeed, traditional Japanese music is still being played in Japan, despite the fact that new forms of traditional music are being experimented on.

In conclusion, neo-traditional music has transformed playing techniques, musical skills, traditional songs, and the philosophies of traditional music from generation to generation. Indigenous knowledge inherent to traditional music is a significant basic element for the new generation, which can be identified as part of Japanese culture in the 21st century. “Co-creation” is a process of cultural transmission from the 20th to the 21st century.

The diagram of traditional Japanese music in the 21st century shows the process of traditional music development based on several genres of traditional Japanese music. The eight groups are the “syommyo”, “gagaku”, “nob”, “shakuhachi”, “shamisen”, folk music, “koto” and the “biwa”. “Co-creation” is an important method of experimentation in traditional Japanese music. There are several kinds of music from Japan and overseas that transformed traditional music into neo-traditional music in the first decade of the 21st century. As a result, neo-traditional Japanese music in the contemporary style can be divided into three main styles: (1) the development of new ensembles, (2) the new styles of traditional music that have been reformed to popular music, and (3) the use of experimental traditional musical instruments in new musical compositions.
In summary, traditional Japanese music is still being played in Japan nowadays, with the existence of certain traditional music that have been appropriately changed to new forms but still of the traditional style in the 21st century. Although certain traditional Japanese music styles have changed from the old traditional music to neo-traditional music, Japanese musicians nevertheless still preserve the philosophy of traditional music by creating new techniques of playing, new musical repertoires, and new ensembles; and through their conceptualization of performances, and through the collaboration forged using oriental and occidental musical instruments.

Conclusion

In the world as it exists today, the social paradigm is changing from industrialization to information technology, where people can swiftly communicate with one another from any place around the world. External cultures have influenced Japanese culture. As a result of this cultural exchange, Japanese traditional arts are being converted to neo-traditional styles that also affect the world. The Japanese art philosophy is one of the most renowned Oriental philosophies across several fields. It is evident in modern minimalist visual arts, in the use of silent sounds in contemporary music, and in the design of emptiness in terms of using space in architecture.

Furthermore, the terms traditional, contemporary, and neo-traditional with regard to music have different interpretations on the part of many scholars. These terms are key or significant words when it comes to comprehending the situation of the changing Japanese musical and cultural identity, that are reflected in Japan’s social paradigm in the 21st century. In short, the definitions of these significant terms have been argued about and discussed by a number of scholars in different fields. From whichever point of view, three main key terms may be distinguished with regard to music: the traditional, the contemporary, and the Neo-traditional.

Changing traditional Japanese music is one method of cultural preservation. It identifies Japanese culture in new forms of systematical music as part of the process of globalization in the 21st century. Japanese neo-traditional music has defined Japan’s cultures in a new paradigm that has clashed and joined external cultures. New forms of traditional music have transmitted the old style of traditional music in contemporary music that emphasizes the transformation, creation,
dissolution, and preservation of traditional Japanese music within modern society through the process of “co-creation”.

In conclusion, Japanese tradition is contributing to the establishment of a cultural identity through cultural productions and consumption. Japan’s culture is a significant tool that presents her unique personality within the world community.

NOTE

1 Which are included; 1) "Koten" - Japanese classical music, 2) "Shin KYOBU" - new music, 3) "Gendai Hogaku" - new traditional music.

2 The term "iEMOTO system means under a house or school head. The "iEMOTO" is actually a top musician, or has the highest status of a musician in one school that has its own pupils, passing down in a self-replicating structure. It transforms music styles from generation to generation, that has more traditional Japanese.

3 The term "Lanna" means Kingdom of Million Rice Fields. Located in the northern part of Thailand it is now divided into eight provinces; Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Lampang, Prae, Nan, Prayao, and Mae Hong Sorn.

4 A small-sized bar found on/under ground in the urban areas.

5 The "ichikatsu" (D), "tanpin" (D#), "hojo" (E), "shoetsu" (F), "shimonu" (F#), "sojo" (G), "fusho" (G#), "oshiki" (A), "ranket" (A#), "banbiki" (B), "shinsen" (C), and "kaminu" (C#).

6 The term "neo" - means modern, or new; it is used with many nouns and adjectives to make nouns and adjectives refer to or describe things that exist in the present, in forms slightly different from the way they existed in the past.

7 Japanese traditional popular music. The "Enka" flourished during the post-war era, and was adapted in Japanese traditional songs with western music; it represented the nationalism of Japan in the modern period.

REFERENCES


The Work of the 2009/2010 API Fellows