

Approaches to Past and Present in Japanese Music: The Case of Female *Biwa* Players

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It is no exaggeration to say that to date scholarship on the intersection of gender issues and Japanese historical music culture has only touched the surface. Studies on topics close to my own—how certain musical traditions and instruments were defined by maleness and the exclusion of women—are far and few between. While there is no lack of books on traditions that were borne by women, such as *goze* 瞽女 (blind female professional singers and *shamisen* players) and *onna-gidayū* 女義太夫 (women's *gidayū* recitation with *shamisen* accompaniment), with regard to the mainstream traditions of music history many basic questions about gender-coding in both Japanese musical life and the music itself remain unbroached.¹ For example, what were the nature and scope of men's and women's song repertoires, the characteristics of male and female vocal styles, the distinctions between their performance styles in instrumental traditions that were available to both sexes, and in what circumstances did women who were not entertainer-courtesans become professional musicians, or conversely important figures in transmission of repertoires borne primarily by non-professionals? In 2006, these and many other gender-related issues that can substantially enrich broader understandings of music history and practice have yet to be researched.

Research on women and *biwa*

Turning to the *biwa* 琵琶, to date there has been no research on the question of whether women engaged in anything other than avocational performance of *biwa* prior to the Meiji period. The conspicuous importance of professional women players in twentieth-century *biwa* music has been the subject of just one article, written by Kindaichi Haruhiko 金田一春彦 in the early 1980s. Data about pre-Meiji female *biwa* players may yet come from historians who direct their attention to gender-related passages in the documents of all three of the pre-Meiji period institutions for the blind (all three of which were primarily musicians' means of association, namely, the *Tōdō-za* 当道座, *mōsō* 盲僧 and *goze*). For the time being, however, the puzzle of *biwa* music's history warrants a broad interpretive approach, one that takes into account both the musical and thematic nature of the oral narratives that have formed the core of *biwa*'s repertory, as well as what is known of professional women performers—and in particular blind women—during various periods of Japanese music history.

¹ I refer to scholarship on male and female participation in historical musical traditions, as distinct from the work that has been done on gender issues in recent popular music, and gender exclusion and representation in the *onnagata* acting tradition of kabuki, and in the noh theatre. The only research writings that address gender in traditional music from a broad perspective are short papers in two issues of *Kikan hōgaku* from the mid-1980s.

Women and the courtly *biwa* tradition

Chinese and Korean musicians introduced various forms of *biwa* (Chinese *p'ip'a*, Korean *pip'a*) to Japan by at latest the end of the seventh century. They were played in the court music ensemble repertoires now referred to as *gagaku* 雅樂. The four-stringed Tang *biwa* continues to be played in that context. It was widely performed by both men and women of Heian court society, for both solely instrumental and vocal performances. In the *Tale of Genji* 源氏物語, Chapter 21 ('Otome' 少女/乙女), Tō no Chūjō 頭中将 at one point comments that "one would prefer not to watch a woman play the *biwa*."² He nonetheless goes on to praise the superb skill on *biwa* of Akashi no Kimi 明石の君 (the Akashi lady). While the *koto* (*sō no koto* 箏の琴) was the instrument most often associated with women in literature, from the Heian through Muromachi periods it was far from uncommon for women of court society from the Heian through Muromachi periods to learn *biwa* from their childhood days; one of the best-known among such highly accomplished players was Go-Fukakusa-in no Nijō 後深草院二条, author of the early-fourteenth century text, *Towazugatari* とわすがたり.³ References to women performers include them among successors to important solo *biwa* traditions, in particular within the Saionji 西園寺 clan. In the mid-thirteenth century, moreover, Gyōbukyō no Tsubone 刑部卿局, grand-daughter of the renowned author of treatises on *biwa* and other aspects of *gagaku*, Fujiwara no Takamichi 藤原孝道, taught the instrument to several members of the Imperial family.⁴

Biwa and musical narrative in medieval and pre-modern Japan

Biwa's primary place in music history after the Heian period is as a vehicle for the development of various styles of musical recitation of poetic narrative, some of which were, at least initially, orally composed by blind singers and *biwa* players called *zatō* 座頭 or *biwa hōshi* 琵琶法師. The best known and most important corpus of narrative developed by these blind musicians is called the *heike* 平家 in its performance tradition (later also known as *heikebiwa* 平家琵琶 and *heikyoku* 平曲), and *Heike Monogatari* 平家物語 in written form.⁵ The importance ascribed to blind *biwa* players in the creation of medieval narrative literature has led scholars to write about them from historical, literary, iconographic, folkloric and other perspectives. Performing arts historians also position them at the start of the stream of performed narrative genres called *katarimono* 語り物, among which are the various *biwa* narrative traditions, *ningyō jōruri* 人形浄瑠璃 or *bunraku* 文楽 puppet theatre, and much of the stylised recitation of the music of *kabuki* 歌舞伎 theatre.

2 *Genji*, p.385

3 Nijō wrote that she 'mastered all the usual court pieces' and at age ten performed in a palace rehearsal for celebrations of Emperor Go-Saga's fiftieth birthday (*Towazugatari*, p.96).

4 Terauchi 1996, pp. 147–149.

5 The standard edition is based on a 'performance text' (*katari-bon*) produced under the supervision of the *biwa-hōshi* Akashi no Kakuichi in 1371, so elements of the performance tradition are embodied in the written tale.

For at least two centuries after the end of the Gempei Wars in 1185, *biwa-hōshi*'s recitations about episodes of the Wars and its famed protagonists were the most common form in which people heard tales from the *Heike* narrative corpus. There is evidence that the format of performance was variable, so that the tales might be presented by two reciters, or a reciter and an instrumentalist, but the standard performance involved only an individual *biwa-hōshi* with his instrument. Due to the great popularity of *Heike* narrative, the most celebrated *biwa-hōshi* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries founded various schools of performance (*ryūha*), as well as the exclusively male professional guild, the Tōdō-za, established in the capital by the late fourteenth century. The guild dominates the history of *biwa* from that time until its dissolution by the Meiji regime in 1871. During the seventeenth century, however, a series of Tōdō-za petitions to the Shogunate bore fruit in sumptuary laws of 1674 that accorded members of this exclusively male guild a monopoly on the performance of narrative with *biwa* throughout Japan; officially, then, all blind male musicians who engaged in narrative performance were compelled to join the guild and receive its protection.⁶

While historical depictions of blind female musicians, *goze*, are numerous and have been thoroughly documented, not a single known reference to or depiction of a female *biwa-hōshi* has been found. At a time when the Tōdō-za guild did not yet exercise a monopoly on recitation of the *Heike* narrative, however, a *chūsei* source yields the first account of blind female musicians in which the performers are named; there is a possibility, moreover, that the musical narrative they performed may have been *Heike*: Aiju 愛寿 and Kikuju 菊寿, are named as blind performers who presented “five or six *ku*” for a large gathering of court nobles on an evening in the eighth month of 1418.⁷ The term *ku* was used to refer to an episode or ‘item’ of the *Heike* narrative corpus, but may also have been used as a general term for episodes of narrative.

The wealth and status afforded high-ranking *biwa-hōshi* of the Tōdō-za guild by the Tokugawa Shogunate's patronage determined the contexts of *Heike* performance during the Edo period: In addition to ceremonial performances (*shikigaku* 式楽) for the Shogunate, *biwa-hōshi* of the penultimate rank of *kengyō* 檢校 performed in the metropolises of Edo, Kyoto and Osaka for gatherings of haiku poets, tea ceremony practitioners and others who regarded *heikyoku* (an Edo period term meaning ‘Heike music’) as an elegant antiquarian pursuit. In this context some Tōdō-za professionals taught sighted amateur enthusiasts, and also a few women. Among them is Fujii Masako 藤井真子, wife of the painter and student of *heikyoku*, Fujii Setsudō 藤井雪堂. It is recorded that like her husband, she often ‘enjoyed reciting *Heike*.’⁸ Another account, of an 1856 performance for the Tsugaru domain *daimyō* in Edo, states that two blind Tōdō-za musicians and an elderly wife of the Tsugaru clan named Fujio 藤尾 all performed *Heike* well (Suzuki 2000: 69–70). In these references there is no unequivocal statement that the women played *biwa* (but neither are there statements that they did not).

6 Many Kyūshū and western Honshū *biwa-hōshi* were able to remain outside the guild, but were prohibited from playing *biwa* except in *harai* rites of local belief.

7 The performance took place at the residence of the Gosukōin 後崇光院 (1372–1456), father of the Emperor Go-Hanazono, and is described in his diary *Kanmongyoki* 看聞御記.

Women *biwa* players in modern times (*kindai* and *gendai*)

A re-vitalisation of *biwa* music—to which women came to make important contributions—started soon after the Tōdō-za guild's dissolution by the Meiji government in the 1870s. New styles of *biwa* independent of the *heike* tradition—from the 1880s *satsumabiwa* 薩摩琵琶, and from the 1900s what came to be called *chikuzenbiwa* 筑前琵琶—became the two principal streams of modern *biwa* narrative music. In *chikuzenbiwa*, from the very first, women were involved, as the style and its remodelled instrument were developed through collaboration between a *biwa* player and a Fukuoka-region *geisha*, and a majority of the twentieth century *chikuzenbiwa* players were women—none more celebrated



Suitō Kinjō playing modern *biwa*.

than the late Yamazaki Kyokusui 山崎旭萃 (1906–2006), who was designated a Living National Treasure. By contrast, *satsumabiwa* players held true to the style's origins among samurai-class men from the former Satsuma domain in their refusal of women students for several decades after introducing the style to Tokyo. In the 1910s, however, a young Tokyoite named Nagata Kinshin 永田錦心 revised the recitation style in a way that incorporated elements of Edo *shamisen* song styles. This made the music more suitable for women's voices, and although few in number by comparison with men, prominent women performers of the Kinshin School (*Kinshin-ryū satsumabiwa* 錦心流薩摩琵琶) soon emerged. It was one of these young musicians, Suitō Kinjō 水藤錦穰 (1911–1973), who founded the *nishikibiwa* school at the age of sixteen, in 1927 (the year of

her teacher, Kinshin's death) and developed a five-stringed instrument, also called the *nishikibiwa*.⁹ Suitō's student Tsuruta Kinshi 鶴田錦史 (1911–1995)¹⁰ then went much further in revising both performance and compositional techniques. She also remodelled the structure of the *nishikibiwa* 錦琵琶. Together with the leading *chikuzenbiwa* players—most of them women—Tsuruta Kinshi's students today dominate the *biwa* world.

Interpretation of the historical materials

These strands of historical data certainly do not negate the established view that no women learned or performed *katarimono* (narrative) *biwa* for most of the instrument's history. Yet they may yield possible alternative ways of understanding that history of exclusion. I suggest the following three broad lines of interpretation:

8 Tateyama 1911: 566.

9 I denote the instrument, as distinct from the performance tradition, by separating *biwa* from what precedes it.

10 See the entry on Suitō in Kikkawa, ed. 1984.

GENDER IDEOLOGY, FEMALE PERFORMERS AND BLIND WOMEN

From what I have said, it is clear that several gender ideologies¹¹ were significant for *biwa* performance during the thousand years prior to the birth of the modern *biwa* genres: for example, those of the Heian court society, of the warrior-class patrons of performers of 'Heike' during its heyday, and of the Edo *bakufu* in its attempts to legislatively control the activities of men and women throughout the country.

As the work of Wakita Haruko 脇田晴子 and others has shown, blanket statements about a steady decline of women's social power since Heian, or their subordination by the prevailing ideology and institutional practices of all these periods are simply not possible. With respect to the ancient period, a matrilineal system operated in court society, and inheritance practices favoured both sons and daughters. In keeping with those practices, most men sought to wed women of powerful families through marriages of the *tsumadoi* 妻訪い or *mukotori* 婿取り type. The important place of several female players in the court music *biwa* (and *sō no koto*) performance traditions, even well after the Heian period, directly reflects a system in which women were highly esteemed when status, wealth and accomplishment in artistic traditions (as distinct from professional involvement) were associated with their lineage.

If we consider the music performed professionally by women—in particular blind women—during the periods in question, we can at least conjecture just what it was that figures such as Aiju and Kikuju recited in 1418, and why it is unlikely to have been *Heike* recitation with *biwa*: The music historian Kikkawa Eishi 吉川英史 has argued that although professional female musicians were important as singers in public ceremony and Imperial rites prior to the importation of Buddhist and Confucianist practices from China and Korea, the low status of women in both those systems of thought brought about the gradual disappearance of women performers from music-making in public ceremony and court entertainments. (They were of course also excluded from rites and festivals associated with Buddhist institutions.) By the late Heian period, 'the only women who performed music for a living were low status female entertainers.'¹² Among the latter, Kikkawa mentions only *asobime* 遊女 and *aruki miko* 歩き巫女, two general terms for women performers.¹³ In the term *aruki miko*, *aruki* emphasises itinerancy, and *miko* the perception that some of these women offered ritual performances as well as entertainment. In Heian and early *chūsei* sources the nature of such ritual services is rarely specified, however, and 'miko' is a word used rather freely to refer to many kinds of low-status women performers, often regardless of their engagement in rituals of any kind.

While women of high birth or rank could be renowned players of *biwa* in the *gaga-ku* tradition, women who made a living through performance were of low social status

11 Ortner and Whitehead 1981.

12 Kikkawa 1984: 52.

13 While the orthography of the former term is the origin of that for *yūjo*, a word denoting prostitutes, it did not always have that meaning in Heian usage. For example, in the mid-eleventh century *Sarashina Nikki* 更級日記, the writer's daughter meets three *asobime* at Mt Ashigara, whose voices were 'incomparable, ringing clearly in the air as they sang an auspicious song' (as quoted in Moriya 1985: 100).

throughout both the ancient and medieval periods. Accounts of female entertainers such as *asobime*, *aruki-miko*, *kugutsu(me)* 傀儡, *shirabyōshi* and others invariably praise their skills in song and dance, but are unequivocal about their marginal status. Yet it is likely that this stigma derived not so much from the sex of those performers, as from their ill-defined and often itinerant lifestyles, and the very fact of their being professional entertainers, who as a social group were subject to discriminatory regulations and even restricted to living in prescribed districts. Notwithstanding, powerful individuals such as Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛, and even Emperor Go-Shirakawa 後白河天皇, were willing to enter into close relations (personal and formal student-teacher relations, respectively) with such women.¹⁴

In the Heian period, the majority of the genres performed by such professional female entertainers involved songs and poetry (and dance), rather than narrative recitation. In accounts of musical performance by *asobime* and other low-status entertainers from prior to the sixteenth century there is rarely distinction between blind (*mōjo*) and non-blind women.¹⁵ For this reason, an important line of investigation into just what kinds of performances blind women gave at the time *biwa-hōshi* emerged in the ninth and tenth centuries, and subsequently when the Heike narrative developed at the end of the twelfth, has to date yielded little even for specialist historians of Heian society and performing arts.

For the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (*chūsei*) there is some evidence that narrative became a more common element of repertory among women performers. From the late fifteenth century on, both images and textual references to blind women often called *gozen* 御前 or *goze* become more numerous. In most cases they play hand drums (*tsuzumi* 鼓). A few are shown or described playing *koto*, but in only a handful of cases are we told what repertory they perform. By the sixteenth century female performers clearly identified as *goze* were well-known for their renditions of *katarimono*, including war tales such as the *Soga Monogatari* 曾我物語 and *Meitoku-ki* 明德記. For example, in the anonymously authored noh play *Mochizuki* 望月 and in the *Nanajūichi-ban Shokunin Uta-awase* 七十一番職人歌合 of 1500, *goze* appear reciting parts of the Soga tale.

All of this yields two questions, which lead to a number of others: First, what was it about the Heike narrative that made it largely off limits for female performers, in the context of the prevailing gender ideology of *chūsei* Japan? Second, did proscription against performance extend to the several important episodes whose central characters are women (Giō 祇王, Kogō no Tsubone 小督の局, Tomoe 巴, and the women in “Ohara Gokō 大原御幸,” among others)? Neither question can be well answered without also addressing evidence for the repertoires and practices of professional female performers of the *chūsei* period. For instance, did female *sarugaku* 猿樂 players do *Heike*-theme plays? Did any of them ever take female roles in male-troupe performances? Was the kind of distance between ‘realism’ and performance aesthetics expressed throughout Zeami’s writings also applicable to women’s performance practice at the time?

14 The liaison between Kiyomori and the *shirabyōshi* 白拍子 Gio is recounted in the *Heike Kakuichi* text, while Go-Shirakawa’s studies of *imayō* 今様 with professional singers are documented in the *Ryōjin hishō* 梁塵秘抄.

15 Hirose 1997: 122

For now, I will make one brief observation, in light of recent developments in *Heike* research: The literature and folklore scholar, Hyōdō Hiromi 兵藤裕己, has written much about the ways in which *Heike* performance texts (*katari-bon* 語り本) were closely monitored and regulated by the various groups that *biwa-hōshi* formed, such as *ryūha* and the Tōdō-za. He has shown, furthermore, that the Ashikaga shogunate in particular was active in controlling the generation of any new texts, and restricting the circulation of texts that it regarded as legitimate (because of the way they told the history of the Minamoto's acquisition of power) to sanctioned channels of transmission among *biwa-hōshi*.¹⁶ If control had to be exercised to ensure 'correct' transmission of the narrative even among members of the all-male *za*, then the notion of non-member women performing *Heike* for a living would have been untenable.

To return to the "five or six *ku*" recited by the blind women Aiju and Kikuju in 1418: If indeed it was *Heike* (and not some other sort of *ku*) that was performed, then the women probably did so not as *heike* reciters by profession, but as (drum or *koto*-playing) *goze* who had learned a selection of *Heike* episodes. Such women could have learned *ku* of *Heike* narrative in many ways, ranging from *kikioboe* 聞き覚え, as a result of hearing *biwa-hōshi*'s performances, to memorising read extracts from one of several versions of *Heike* text, to actual transmission from *biwa-hōshi* with whom they interacted in both professional and personal contexts. And it is also possible that the *ku* they acquired or specialised in were the ones in which women characters figured prominently.

In the 1670s, the all-male Tōdō-za guild's achievement of a legislatively-enforced monopoly on professional *biwa* narrative performance indirectly institutionalised a prohibition against women playing such music. One can speculate, however, that even had performance on *biwa* been possible for professional *goze* during the Edo period, they would not have adopted the instrument for two reasons: (1) It had become associated with an archaic performance style at a time when the *shamisen* was gaining popularity in many contexts; (2) the *biwa*'s technical limitations rendered it physically inappropriate for playing the melodies of new styles that emerged from the late sixteenth on,¹⁷ during what was a general discursive and musical movement away from large-scale narrative toward more concise song and dance forms. (That proved to be a transitional phenomenon, as the music of the *kabuki* and puppet drama gained circulation beyond the theatres.)

Throughout most of the Edo period, then, *goze* made their living with the most popular instrument of the age, the *shamisen*. If any women played *biwa* during Edo, they would have done so as sighted amateurs of warrior-class households, like Fujii Masako, rather than professional performers.

Exclusion on religious grounds

Active exclusion of women from performing *katari* with *biwa* can perhaps be

16 Hyōdō 2000, pp. 8–25.

17 Komoda Haruko has argued that organizations of *biwa-hōshi* in Kyūshū and western Honshū who had resisted membership of the Tōdō-za, and thereby been prohibited from playing *shamisen*, were forced to remodel the instrument for the purpose of making part of their living from such popular repertory (Komoda 2003) but it seems that in the absence of any such constraint, *goze* chose to play *shamisen*.

accounted for in terms of the second common factor in gender-differentiated instrumental performance traditions, namely, ritual usage and association. Two associations are pertinent in this case: one between *biwa* and rituals for the earth deity, Jijin 地神, and the other with the 'female' patron deity of musicians, Myōon-Benzaiten 妙音弁才天.

Although documentary proof has not been found, it is possible that the association of *biwa* with ritual was established well before the emergence of war tales as the central body of *biwa* repertory:

Two Kyūshū-based sects of *mōsō* 盲僧 (blind Buddhist priests) claim that the first blind priests learned *biwa* and *harai* 祓い (rites of exorcism or placation) for Kenrō Jijin 堅牢地神,¹⁸ a manifestation of the Hindu goddess of the earth, from Chinese or Korean blind priests, and that they performed such rites in the Kyoto region as early as the eighth century.

While the origins of the ceremonies of court Buddhism in which Kenrō Jijin is venerated are well documented, there is no reliable pre-Edo source on the antiquity of the *Jijin-barai* as a rite of popular Buddhism. *Mōsō* claims for them being the 'original' rites of blind *biwa* players in Japan remain unsubstantiated, but there is evidence to show that rites for Jijin were strongly associated with the identity of blind *biwa* players, regardless of their formal affiliation with institutional Buddhism or the guild of *Heike* specialist reciters.¹⁹

The actual origins of the *harai* rites for Jijin notwithstanding, an association between blindness, Buddhist ritual and the *biwa* would have been significant for the instrument's reception beyond court society. Like other instruments chiefly associated with Buddhist priests or shadowy 'priest-like' figures at later points in history (such as *Tsukushigoto* and *shakuhachi*), *biwa* may well have been kept from women players beyond the court tradition through an active prohibition whose basis was these ritual associations.

In East Asia, avatars of the Hindu goddess of music, eloquence and wisdom, Sarasvati, have been deities significant for both indigenous or 'folk' beliefs and institutional Buddhist practice, to the extent that these are separately identifiable. In Japan the relevant deity is Benzaiten 弁財天 (or simply 'Benten,' as she is often called), the only female among the *Shichi fukujin* 七福神 ('Seven Lucky Gods'), who holds a *biwa* in the majority of her representations.²⁰

In all likelihood, the most common visual representation of the *biwa* in Japanese life over the centuries has been as the instrument held by this emphatically female deity.

In various contexts the identity of Benzaiten fused with that of the bodhisattva 'Miraculous Sound,' Myōon (Gaku) Ten 妙音(樂)天 or Myōon Bosatsu 妙音菩薩, the subject

18 The name of the deity—a translation of the Chinese Ti T'ien—is also rendered as Jichin or Jishin. She apparently derives from *drdhapṛthivi*, the mother of Indra. As such she is venerated in the eighth chapter of the *Konkōmyōsaishō-ō kyō* 金光明最勝王經 ('Sutra of Golden Light'), a sutra esteemed in early Japanese Buddhism as one of three whose recitation provided protection for the realm.

19 This includes fifteenth-century records of rites and sutras for Jijin performed by *biwa-hōshi* who also recited *Heike* (in an entry for the fifth day of the eighth month, 1423, in the above-mentioned diary *Kanmongyōki*).

20 Another common form of the deity in Japanese representations, and among the few surviving Chinese images of Biancaitian (Benzaiten), is Happō Benzaiten, the eight-armed Benzaiten, who holds many implements, but not a *biwa*. See further Ludvik 2001.

of the twenty-fourth chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Myōon-Benzaiten is generally depicted as a female deity, is shown holding a *biwa* in most sculptures and iconographic sources, and has been regarded as a tutelary deity by *both* male and female blind musicians in formal group ceremonies called Myōon-kō. Observed until the mid-twentieth century by groups of *biwa-hōshi*, and until the 1990s by *goze*, and *itako* mediums in parts of Tōhoku,²¹ the rite for Myōon-Benzaiten had origin in Tōdō-za regulations that stipulated an annual gathering of members for the purpose of venerating the tutelary deity.²²

A votive image (scroll or statue) of Benzaiten-Myōonten was set up, sutras were chanted before it, an *engi* 縁起 document about the history of the musicians' group was chanted or read out by a sighted priest or celebrant engaged for the occasion, and certain members of the group performed examples of their art for the deity. There is no substantial evidence that *goze*'s observance of the Myōon-kō was initiated under concerted pressure from the Tōdō-za guild. It seems that, if anything, at some unknown time prior to the late seventeenth century—the date of the earliest known *engi* document—the *goze* themselves opted to venerate Myōon-Benzaiten,²³ and this despite the fact that they had not and could not learn to play *biwa* as part of their profession.

Exclusion on grounds of content and performance style

Any historical contextualisation of *biwa* music must start with the recognition that *katarimono* was the dominant form of public music and music-drama among the political leaders of Japan, the warrior-class elite, for several centuries after the civil war that brought them their power. The most important of these 'medieval' age performance genres were *sarugaku*, *dengaku* 田楽 (noh), *kusemai* 曲舞 and its successor style *kōwakamai* 幸若舞 and *Heike*. In all of the leading genres, core repertory included many tales of war, and in particular the lives and circumstances of warriors and their families involved in the Gempei wars. All of these genres moreover entailed the enactment of narrative. In the case of *Heike* narrative performance, however, the voice alone was vehicle for a narrative of the civil war, and vocal 'enactment' of the narrative often took the form of 'in-character' first person dramatic (or at least *dramatised*) rendition. The Gempei conflict was the great story of its time, and it ushered in an age dominated by violence, martial conflict and political cunning. The main protagonists of *Heike* would have been well known to all, and its performances received with the sort of horrified fascination that daily reports of the Iraq war evoked from most of us not long ago. As such, *Heike* performance was fundamentally grounded in qualities of the male voice.

There is much speculation about the nature of *Heike* musical elements—both vocal and instrumental—prior to its 'textualisation' as *heikyoku* in the Edo period, but what is certain is that a number of distinctly named, formulaically-based styles of vocal delivery and melody existed (*fushi* 節). Each of them stood in regular relation to the content-

21 Fritsch 1996, pp.220–231 and 239–244.

22 This sort of gathering is what the *kō* of 'Myō on-kō' refers to. Other examples of *kō* dating from medieval times are those held by carpenters and blacksmiths.

23 Personal communication, Gerald Groemer, 6/2004.

type of narrative text passages, and probably also their syntactic and poetic features. The names of some of the most common *fushi*—such as *kudoki* 口説, and *shiragoe* 素声—in themselves suggest a practice wherein *biwa-hōshi* rendered narrative and first-person utterances in a manner that hardly distorted the sound of male speech of the time. What is more, these two *fushi* types are the longest and most frequent in the *hiroimono* 拾い物 category of episodes (*ku*), about battles and feats of manly accomplishment. As such, *Heike* performance was fundamentally grounded in qualities of the male voice, and few women performers could have hoped to emulate this effectively.

Conclusion

The probability that beyond the sphere of court music no women learned or performed *biwa* for most of the instrument's history is generally accepted. In addressing this issue further, however, I would suggest that we must also account for the *possibility* that the handful of known references to women who “performed *Heike*” is only the tip of, if not an iceberg, then a substantial chunk of unseen history. That is simply because of the many kinds of documents that could yet be examined for further evidence: there may be accounts of *biwa* narrative performances by women in documents and chronicles of daily life that record a greater range of activities than the public documents—official chronicles, guild records and the like—that have been the focus of most extant research.

Research on this issue—or indeed any other issue in Japanese music history framed by gender ideology and coding—must also provide further evidence that will help us tease out the complex relations between class and gendered practice. In the materials I have touched on in this short paper, the most cogent example of that complexity is the fact that music and performance were acceptable professions for women, but carried with them low status and marginality, while performance on string instruments with a superlative degree of skill was highly valued as a pastime for women of high birth or rank.

In the case of *biwa* music, moreover, the nexus of ideology and social practices is made denser and more complex by the centrality of blindness in the genre's history. It is in the interface among gender and class ideologies, and blindness as cultural practice, that we may find a way to appropriately reframe—perhaps even begin to answer—questions about women and the *biwa* such as those I have raised.

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Note: Some of the ideas in first explored in this paper have since been presented in Chapter 1 of my 2009 book *The Last Biwa Singer: A Blind Musician in History, Imagination and Performance* (Cornell East Asia Series, Ithaca, NY).

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