

# Music as a Gateway to Learning about East Asia

By Anne Prescott



Twelve member concert group at the Hubei Provincial Museum. The concert is given using reproduction instruments from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, interred ca. 438 BCE during the Warring States Period. Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_of\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_China).

*Editor's Note:* This is an interactive essay that enables teachers and students to hear and see examples of East Asian music and performing arts.

## Introduction: Music and Cultures

Music can be an enticing gateway to other cultures, and because music is more than just sound, it can lead to learning about the people who produce the music.

Music—the sound—is a scientific phenomenon that can be measured, documented, and replicated. Music—the phenomenon—has meaning it acquires through the culture that produces it, and to understand music—from our own or from a foreign culture—it is vital to learn about music the phenomenon. When we learn about music the phenomenon we learn about history, geography, values, environment, government, and other aspects of culture, and thus it is a legitimate and serious way to approach the study of culture and history.

Perhaps it is counterintuitive, but using musical examples that are far removed from a student's personal cultural concept of “good” music or “pleasing” sounds can work in the teacher's favor. The fact that an example conflicts with our learned perceptions about music can cause us to remember with great clarity and accuracy the musical and nonmusical reasons—cultural and historical—that contributed to the emergence of the music from the different culture. Teachers can help students listen in new ways by suspending judgment about what makes “good” music; the definition of “good” is, after all, decided by the culture. Today, what we refer to as “Western” music—music in the European tradition—is widespread across not only East Asia but also across much of the world. This does not mean that Western music is “better,” more “advanced,” or “universal.” It simply means that for some reason—historical, political, educational, or other—the people in another culture have embraced Western music.

When we listen to familiar music, we subconsciously use listening strategies from our own learned culture to understand that music. When we listen to music that is not a part of our own personal culture—whether rap, jazz, or Chinese *Jiangnan sizhu* (“silk and bamboo” music)—it's helpful to think consciously about that music. Listening with new ears makes us think about why people

in a given culture produced music in a certain way. There are several simple strategies one can use when listening to unfamiliar music.

One difference between European and East Asian music traditions is texture, or the way that the musical lines interact. In Western music, homophonic texture—music with a melody supported by vertical stacks of pitches called chords—predominates today. We call the way the pitches are stacked and the movement between the stacks “harmony.” In East Asia, a different kind of texture, called heterophony—simultaneous variations on a single melody—is predominant. **Traditional Irish instrumental music** is perhaps the most recognizable example of heterophony. Chinese Jiangnan sizhu ensemble music also offers a clear example of heterophony. There is no harmony—all of the musicians are playing the same melody but are adding their own ornaments and variations. The important thing to remember when listening to heterophonic music is that one listens to parallel horizontal lines of music, and any pitches that are produced simultaneously relate not to each other, but to the horizontal lines of which they are a part. The culturally attuned listener may not even be aware that the two pitches are sounding together. Listening to music with parallel horizontal streams is like listening to simultaneous conversations, and with practice, one can learn to listen in this way.

Musical ornaments, embellishments, or decorations are the variations on a common melody that are vital to heterophonic texture. Because the horizontal string of notes is more important than the vertical stacks, pitches are ornamented to create interest and make it easier for the listener to perceive each line. The degree and type of ornamentation are important, and ornamentation is often specific to a given instrument. For example, performers can decorate a melody by sliding between pitches on instruments without fixed string instrument frets or keys. These ornaments may be improvised, but if they are, the improvisation occurs within tightly controlled, culturally defined rules. Ornamentation can sometimes

tell you something about the region from which the music comes; just as the people in some regions prefer spicier food, some prefer “spicier”—more ornamented—music. Finally, observing which instruments are grouped together in ensembles—or which are not commonly used in ensembles—can also provide clues about the musical culture.

Keep in mind that just as repetition is necessary to learn language, the same holds true with music. Teachers and students must remember it takes time to learn to appreciate anything new, including music. It is also good to reassure students that they might not necessarily ever learn to “like” a specific kind of music. The goal should be to hear the differences, understand something about them, and therefore respect the intentionality of the differences.

This essay offers a number of approaches to the phenomenon of this music that can be used by educators regardless of discipline—including music. Students can then begin to think about the diversity of musical styles and how those differences are realized in both the phenomenon and the sound of the music. These conceptualizations about approaching the study of music in other cultures may be emphasized with the East Asia classroom examples that follow. Readers can see and hear numerous examples of East Asian music and performance throughout the remainder of this essay.

### Music and Geography

One of the easiest approaches to integrating music from a foreign culture into the classroom is a geographical survey of a musical style within a country, followed by a discussion of why the music might be different. Are there geographical features (mountains, rivers, deserts, or environment) that isolated people and resulted in different musical styles? How might neighboring countries, cultures, or languages have impacted musical styles? What about immigrants? Did a historical event influence the music? Might there be reasons for different styles that are not readily apparent?

An interesting map for Japan might focus on folk and festival music. Take these six examples: “*Soran Bushi*” (“Soran Song”) from Hokkaidō, *Edo Bayashi* (Edo Festival Music) from Tokyo, *Gion Bayashi* (Gion Festival Music) from Kyoto, *Awa Odori* (Awa Dance Festival Music) from Shikoku, “*Tanko Bushi*” (“Coal Miner’s Song”) from Kyūshū, and “*Asadoya Yunta*” (“Ballad of Asadoya”) from Okinawa. All of these are known today throughout Japan, but they maintain their strong regional associations. “Soran Bushi” is a work song from Hokkaidō, originally sung by fishermen to accompany the arduous task of pulling in nets full of fish. Today, someone who is proud of his or her roots in northern Japan more often sings in karaoke bars or at festivals.<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes accompanied by the Tsugaru (name of a region in northern Japan) *shamisen* (three-string long-necked lute played with a large plectrum made of tortoise shell), an instrument that has gained popular appeal in recent years. Edo Bayashi and Gion Bayashi are styles of music associated with regional festivals in the Tokyo (formerly Edo) area, as are the Sanja Matsuri and the Gion Festivals in Kyoto, and are purely instrumental. Awa Odori is a frenetic style of music and dance from the island of Shikoku that is performed for O-Bon (a summer Buddhist Festival). The dancers’ wild movements are

said to be those of fools, and Awa Odori “events” are now held outside of Shikoku in the summer months to celebrate the tradition. “*Tanko Bushi*” is the most popular song and dance at *Bon* dances throughout Japan, and it is often taught as a representative Japanese folk dance outside of that country. The dance form originated in the coal-mining region of Kyushu, and the dance movements mimic the work done by coal miners: digging the coal, throwing the coal into the coal hopper, and pushing the coal hopper along a track. “*Asadoya Yunta*” is one of the most recognizable Okinawan folk songs, and tourism groups use it to invoke images of the tropical paradise. Traditionally, it is accompanied by the *sanshin*, the Okinawan equivalent of the *shamisen* with a snakeskin body. It is plucked with a buffalo horn pick that covers the index finger, but a guitar pick or index fingernail may be used today.

Once students have created their musical map, they can listen to recordings or watch videos of these songs and discuss the instruments used, the clothing the performers wear, the venues where the songs are sung, and other information they can gain from the performance images. They also can listen to the vocal quality and ornamentation for regional preferences. For example, the vocal tone color used for “Soran Bushi” is harsh and constricted, while in “Asadoya Yunta” it is more relaxed and open. Both are accompanied by a type of *shamisen*, but students should be able to see physical differences in the instruments that result in different sounds. “*Tanko Bushi*” and “*Awa Odori*” are both associated with the summer O-Bon Festival but are used in very different ways in those celebrations. What are those differences? A comparison of Gion Bayashi and Edo Bayashi will also reveal quite different styles of music and ways of playing them.

Turning to Korea, a musical map of “*Arirang*,” perhaps the best-known Korean folk song, will help students to understand that even in a small geographic area (the southern half of the Korean Peninsula), there can be great differences. Most people have only



Group of female dancers at the Awa Odori Matsuri in Tokushima. Source: <http://bit.ly/dhdjpd>.

heard one version of “*Arirang*”; few know that there are several regional versions

of the song. The best-known version, usually simply called “*Arirang*,” is often found in elementary school music textbooks in the US and was arranged for concert band in “*Variations on a Korean Folksong*” in 1965 by American composer John Barnes Chance. Another well-known version is “*Chindo Arirang*,” which originated at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula.

Numerous other regional versions of “*Arirang*” exist, and using the listening strategies described above, students should easily be

able to discern differences among them. Some suggested activities to help them focus on the differences between the versions include listening for the word “arirang” in each and discussing whether it occurs the same number of times and in the same relative place within the lyrics. Is the word “arirang” sung to different rhythmic patterns in different versions? Most Korean music is in triple meter. Triple meter groups beat into threes with an emphasis on the first beat; are all the versions of “Arirang” in triple meter, or are some in duple meter—grouping beats into twos with an emphasis on the first beat? Do the singers express rhythmic patterns through their bodies, and if so, how? Does the vocal line have a lot of ornamentation? Are some versions faster than others (tempo)? Students might then add the characteristics that mark each version on their musical geography map.

For China, students can map the different members of the *huqin* family of instruments (*erhu*, *gaohu*, *jinghu*, *banhu*, etc.). This two-string bowed lute, with its small head and long neck, has become quite popular outside of China, and chances are that students have heard the sound on TV or in a movie, or if they live in a city with a sizeable Chinese population, they may have even seen someone playing a *huqin*. Upon investigation, students should discover that many of the varieties are specifically linked to a geographic location. The *huluhu* and *jiaohu* are from Guangxi Province (major cities: Guilin and Nanning); the *yehu* originated in the areas around Fuzhou and Xiamen as well as Taiwan, while others are used across larger geographical areas. The *banhu* is from northern China. Some instruments are associated with certain styles of music—the *jinghu* with Beijing opera and the *gaohu* with Cantonese music and opera. Students can describe the physical differences between the various instruments and discuss why the differences might have arisen. For example, the *erhu* and *gaohu* have snakeskin covering their heads while the head covering for the *banhu* is a thin piece of wood. Is there a geographical or environmental reason that snakeskin is not consistently used?

Musical theater (usually referred to as “opera”—“Peking opera” or “Beijing opera”—in English) is an excellent way to examine regional musical differences, many of which occur because of tonal differences in the spoken language. The sung melody must reflect to some degree the tonal differences in the spoken language in order for lyrics to be understood; if the dialect is used in the song changes, the melody must reflect that to some degree. A map of the regional styles of musical theater could be compared to a map of spoken dialects to learn about the close connection between music and language in China.

### Music and the Visual Arts

We can also examine music making, and thus the culture that surrounds music, through visual arts. Depictions of musicians, as well as the places where music is performed, help us to understand the types of instruments in use at various times throughout history, the context in which music is performed, and the social status of musicians. The following questions might be useful in examining visual representations of musical culture. Where are the musicians performing (stage, open space, home, restaurant, religious site)? What are the people around them doing (listening attentively, eating/drinking, talking)? What are the musicians wearing? The other people? Are there nonperforming people who are assisting the musicians in some way? Are the musicians all adults? Men? Women?

Are there nonmusical things (props) being used by the musicians? Are there any signs in the vicinity of the performers? What might those say (name of performer/group, name of song being performed, name of venue)?

A readily available visual resource for examining music making in China is *The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Tour: Scroll Six*. This scroll features three scenes of musical activities that students can examine. Accompanying maps on the website allow students to identify the location within China where these tours occurred, and students can then match the location to a contemporary map. Students could continue by investigating the kind of musical activities that are taking place in those locations today.



Song Huizong's "Ting Qin Tu" ("Listening to the Qin"), eleventh century.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guqin>.

The Chinese *qin* (long, fretless zither) is also found in Japan and Korea, and visual representations of the *qin* abound in art throughout East Asia. A museum visit, either in person, through books, or online, should result in numerous examples of this literati tradition. The depiction is most often a solitary male performing in a secluded setting, often in the mountains. With a little research, students will be able to relate this image to Confucian traditions, thus opening up a new line of inquiry for them.<sup>2</sup> This leads nicely to discussions about musical diffusion, when it happens, why it happens, and who the actors are who carry out the transfer of music from one culture to another, and finally what has happened to the *qin* (or *qin*-like instrument) in Japan and Korea today.

The book *The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints* is a rich source of visual representations of various kinds of historical musical culture in Japan. This volume is filled with images taken from Japanese woodblock

prints from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of instruments, musical activities, music makers, and musical scenes in literature. The index allows you to search for depictions of specific musical instruments as well as actors and other historical persons who are depicted in the prints, from the sun goddess Amaterasu, to Genji, to the famed kabuki actors Ichikawa Danjūrō V, VI, VII, and VIII. The current Danjūrō is the twelfth generation, and students might enjoy comparing images of Danjūrō XII with earlier generations.

### Music and the State

Music can be entwined with government in many ways; two com-

mon ones are songs with lyrics that express feelings about the state, and music that is in some way influenced by governmental policy, either support or suppression. An excellent approach to introducing the power of the music in relation to the state is found in “Telling the Story with Music: The Internationale at Tiananmen Square.”<sup>3</sup> This implementation plan introduces students to the song “The Internationale,” its history, and use during a critical event in recent Chinese history. Music by the Chinese musician Cui Jian (b. 1961) can also be used as an effective vehicle to teach about the connections between songs and the state. During the Tiananmen Square protests, his hit love song “Nothing to My Name” was interpreted by some as commentary on the government’s actions. “A Piece of Red Cloth” is another Cui Jian classic that he asserts has added meaning in light of the Tiananmen protests. In Cui Jian’s own words: “I performed at Tiananmen Square in 1989, fifteen days before the crackdown. I sang ‘A Piece of Red Cloth,’ a tune about alienation. I covered my eyes with a red cloth to symbolize my feelings. The students were heroes. They needed me, and I needed them. After Tiananmen, however, authorities banned concerts.”<sup>4</sup>

In Japan in the late nineteenth century, the government decided that the school music curriculum would favor Western music over traditional Japanese music. The Ministry of Education commissioned Japanese composers who were trained in the European tradition to compose what are known as *shōka* (school songs) that were then taught to all children to acclimate their ears to Western scales, harmony, phrasing, and other musical characteristics. This decision led to the situation in Japan today where virtually all music taught in schools—from preschool to university—is Western; most Japanese musicians perform in orchestras, opera companies, and choruses (within Japan, in Europe, and the US as well), and performances of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 abound. Many of these *shōka*, which were composed between the 1880s and 1920s, are still taught in Japanese schools. They were also taught in pre-World War II occupied Korea and other parts of Asia, where some are known and sung even today.

In addition to serving as a musical bridge between Japanese and European musical traditions, the lyrics of some of the school songs served to reinforce Japanese moral ideals and sense of nationalism. Overtly nationalistic songs are no longer taught in school classrooms. High school students could analyze the texts of songs such as “*Hi no Maru no Hata*” (“The Rising Sun Flag”), “*Nihon Teikoku*” (“Imperial Japan”), or “*Nyuei o Okuru*” (“Drafted into the Army”) in light of the events between the 1930s



Kitagawa Utamaro, “Flowers of Edo: Young Woman’s Narrative Chanting to the Samisen.” Woodblock print. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utamaro>.

and 1945. Songs that have a moral message include “*Yoku Manabi, Yoku Asobe*” (“Study Hard, Play Hard”), “*Nintai*” (“Patience”), and “*Shinshū*” (“Seek Self-Improvement”). Younger students might enjoy learning to sing some of the songs with less serious lyrics, for example “*Hato*” (“Pigeons”), “*Katatumuri*” (“Snail”), “*Hiyoko*” (“Chicks”), “*Haru ga Kita*” (“Spring Has Come”), “*Usagi*” (“Rabbit”), or “*Koinobori*” (“Carp Streamers”; note that a different version of the song is sung today).

### Conclusion

Music from around the world is increasingly heard around us, and students are intrigued by these sounds. Music the phenomenon goes beyond the sound and includes all aspects of the culture and history in which that music is found. Teachers can take advantage of ethnomusicologists, local performers, YouTube and other resources to help students channel their interest in the music into learning more about East Asia. Creative music teachers will be able to teach basic musical concepts such as meter, tempo, and

melodic direction using examples from any culture, including East Asia. All of the approaches outlined here lend themselves to team-teaching, but individual teachers can also make good use of these ideas to enhance learning. Team-teaching with a music teacher can enhance students’ knowledge not only of music the sound, but also music the phenomenon. With a little effort and planning, even teachers without musical training or special knowledge can use music successfully across the curriculum.

### NOTES

1. Many students in the US are more familiar with a “modern” version of “*Soran Bushi*” and the dance that has been created to accompany it.
2. The Chinese character for qin can mean a slightly different instrument in some contexts in Japan and Korea, so students should look carefully to see if the instrument pictured is the same as the Chinese qin (also sometimes referred to as the guqin) or another type of long zither.
3. Joanna T. Pecore, Ken Schweitzer, and Yang Fan, “Telling the Story with Music: ‘The Internationale’ at Tiananmen Square,” *Education About Asia* 4, no. 1 (1999): 30–36.
4. Cui Jian, “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *Time*, September 27, 1999, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054475,00.html>.

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