A MODERNIST TRADITIONALIST: MIYAGI MICHIO, TRANSCULTURALISM, AND THE MAKING OF A MUSIC TRADITION

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Introduction

As a result of the rapid changes that occurred in Japan during the Meiji era (1868–1912), the nation witnessed a reconfiguration of musical styles in the new political milieu. Japanese music (hōgaku) was dichotomized with Western music (yōgaku), and the latter soon became a predominant musical style (Galliano 2002). Compulsory school education introduced Western music as the starting point for all musical training; the government disestablished the professional performers’ guilds that controlled who could play several types of ‘traditional’ music; and new music and innovation soon flourished in a way that witnessed an array of new musical activity and creativity. This was a cultural response to the far-reaching political reforms, a consequence of Westernization and modernization that resulted in a musical revolution that helped transform the Japanese musical soundscape in lasting and profound ways.

The early twentieth century saw a consolidation of the changes that occurred in the Meiji era, along with a stronger Japan in terms of its military presence in Asia and colonial aspirations. By the 1920s, there was a major shift in many creative, literary, and visual arts that has since become known as a period of Japanese modernism (Gardner 2006; Lippit 2002; Takemura and Suzuki 2008). While the term kindaishugi (modernism) had been known since critic Kaneko Chikusui (1870–1937) first used it in 1911 (Kaneko 1911), the 1920s and 1930s was truly a period of Japanese modernism (the romanized version of ‘modernism’, modanizumu, is nowadays usually used). These few decades were certainly a time of continued Western influence, but they were also a moment in Japanese history that saw a localizing of the global in a particularly Japanese way. There was a reaction against conservatism and a production of new Japanese culture that interconnected with other cultural movements in the Western world, especially the movement now referred to as modernism. Starrs (1998: 71), for instance, comments
on the 1920s and 1930s in connection with Kawabata’s (1899–1972) modernism as a time when ‘modernism and traditionalism are mutually supportive’. Indeed, this is the underpinning argument of this chapter, which focuses on the performer, composer, and educator, Miyagi Michio (1894–1956), as a modernist traditionalist; a pioneer who moved the past into the present. While Japanese modernism could be interpreted as simply adopting the ideas of Western modernism, or perhaps be linked with the notion of Westernization, it was in fact a movement that reflected the social, cultural, and political context of the time, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. Westernization was indeed prevalent, but it was the reaction to that influence that gave Japanese modernism its unique qualities in comparison to other modernisms.

Miyagi Michio (original name: Suga Michio) was at the heart of the transformation of traditional music in the twentieth century (Prescott 1997). Not only did he continue a tradition, but his modified compositional techniques helped popularize a type of Japanese music at a time when Western musical forms were fast becoming the main styles of Japanese music. As a performer, composer, and educator, Miyagi devised new instruments; he was heavily influenced by Western music; and he founded a performance tradition that continues to flourish to this day. What is particularly significant about Miyagi’s influence on so-called traditional music is that in the period of Japanese modernism he both held on to indigenous instruments yet at the same time transformed them as a way of relocating Japanese culture to the new socio-political environment. Miyagi was profoundly influenced by several musical cultures, including various types of Western and Japanese music. In this context, he can be viewed as working across cultures and taking a transcultural approach as a modernist traditionalist.

Miyagi was born 7 April 1894 in Sannomiya, Kobe. He was the son of Wakabe Kunijirō, but given the family name Suga as a child (Kanazawa 2009). His family name was changed to his wife’s family name (Miyagi) at the time of his first marriage. Miyagi became blind by the time he was eight, having suffered eye disease from a very young age. As with many blind people in Japan, he turned to music, and continued a tradition of blind male koto (thirteen-string zither) players dating from the

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1 In English, Prescott (1997) provides a definitive history of Miyagi Michio and his activities and has been an invaluable source for this chapter. Ayer (1997) provides a useful discussion on Miyagi’s compositional style for koto and shakuhachi. In Japanese, see, for example, Kikkawa (1990). See also Kanazawa (2009) for a summary of Miyagi’s life and activities.