

JAPANESE RIDDLE—EAST BY WEST

ADELAIDE F. HOOKER

IN the course of a recent four weeks' visit to Japan, devoted to very remote subjects, I tried to gather a few impressions of what was going on there musically. It was baffling. My first evening in Tokyo was spent at one of those beautiful traditional restaurants where the Japanese men entertain other Japanese men or foreign ladies with *geisha* and hot *sake*. The walls were sliding screens of white paper and polished unstained wood—an apotheosis of that Metropolitan Second Act set with the poked-out panes. After ceremonious speeches of greeting from our host, who spoke no English, we seated ourselves on our creaking knees in a U-shape and the end screens parted to show us seven entrancing *geisha* bearing lacquer trays of exquisite delicacy. Various forms of entertainment were supplied, beginning with a strange little man who produced live wriggling gold fish from behind our ears, and ending with dances to the *shamisen* (a three-stringed, long-handled guitar) and separate musical numbers for voice and other instruments.

This traditional music was quite unintelligible to me on first hearing. The quality of voice used can only be described to our untrained Western ears as a yipping falsetto whine with an occasional gurgling *coup-de-glotte*. The most used instruments are the bamboo flute, the *shamisen*, and the *koto*—a seven foot hollow board of paulownia wood with thirteen evenly stretched strings, tuned by separate bridges to an Aeolian pentatonic scale. But as one listens to it repeatedly it assumes expressive qualities, and the monotonous maze of unassimilable rhythms eventually takes definite form.

Most surprising of all my experiences was a concert performance of *Fidelio*. After endless preparation, Viscount Hide-maro Konoye, a pupil of Franz Schreker, presented the New Symphony Orchestra, the Jiyugakuyen Chorus, the Tokyo Chorus

Society, and several local soloists in this work. Leonora and Rocco were sung by Germans. The rest of the protagonists were Japanese. The performance and interpretation were excellent, the German diction impeccable. With the exception of a little rockiness in the brass (this type of instrument is totally foreign to the Japanese) and an unusually whitish but not unpleasant quality in the upper range of the chorus, the performance might have been that in any secondary symphonic town of America. I could only picture a large ensemble of my compatriots giving *their all at Carnegie Hall, using Japanese idiom and instruments*, to appreciate the virtuosity of this performance.

Japanese music comes essentially out of the theatre. The classic Noh Drama and the later Kabuki Theatre have an elaborate musical accompaniment, ranking them with opera or at any rate with *singspiel*. The actors speak in a stylized manner or croon with either a monodic accompaniment on one *shamisen* or with a tutti of *shamisens, tsuzumi* (lacquer drums shaped like double egg cups with hide heads laced to each other from end to end—the pitch is varied by squeezing the laces), whistling flutes, miscellaneous wooden percussion and occasional fog horn whoops from the throats of the orchestra. And with all there is restraint! Quite a different matter from the Chinese theatre where the din of cymbals in a military comedy finally drove me out of the play house. A Manchu princess told me that the Japanese theatre had been borrowed from the Chinese during the great period of the latter, and had been preserved in Japan as diversion for the cultivated, whereas the Chinese has become essentially proletarian.

That the Japanese can copy anything is a bromide. Their naive disregard of copyrights is proverbial, culminating in the arrival not long ago at one of our Western ports of a cargo of their manufactured goods, carefully marked with the Blue Eagle NRA. This desire to imitate the Western world is very deep within them. Some unkindly people think of it as undisciplined ambition. Others attribute it to a quite unjustifiable inferiority complex, originating from their smallness of stature. At any rate it is immediately obvious to any visitor, who, at the same time, wonders why they *want* to imitate our civilization when they have such an attractive one of their own.

I continued to observe proficiency in our foreign musical idiom, at a private recital at the Peers' Club, where the *jeunesse dorée*, dressed in Western organdy and crepe, played Chopin nocturnes and Beethoven sonatas for its parents and grandparents in formal kimonos. At a reception given by Prince Takamatsu, the Emperor's brother, the Symphony Orchestra of the Imperial Household, under the direction of the Emperor's private conductor, Comelli, played Henry Hadley, and Japanese melodies with strikingly Milanese underpinnings. At a restaurant party of the strictest Japanese style, one little *geisha*, feeling that the novelty of paper flowers, fan tricks, and *shamisen* ballads had worn off, rushed out and bore back a box victrola. She played a record called the "Tokyoundo," a "play-party" song, which found us all chirping and dancing about the room in snake formation, trying desperately to imitate the adept *geisha* with their deft twists and turns to five-four rhythm. This tune with its Japanese melody and Western treatment is a link between the *geisha* house and the modern dance hall, where the emancipated Japanese young dance in Western style to jazz music. Japanese jazz—it is so awful it is fascinating! There are rumbas, tangos, fox trots and sentimental ballads. The treatment of Western harmony is appallingly limited and when it doesn't fit a melody of Japanese character the two are forced on each other to their mutual detriment.

My curiosity led me to the Tokyo Academy of Music where I found a Western conservatory. The orchestra was grinding creditably at the *Leonora Overture*, while practice room walls burst with Opus 110 and *Ich grolle nicht*. German influence easily predominates. But a significant passage in the English catalogue interested me. "Quite recently there was established a compulsory Course of Japanese Music. Unfortunately there has been too much running after things European and American; as in every other walk of life in Japan we have copied and imitated Western music to the detriment of our own. Slowly but irresistibly we have awakened to a sense of our own value and a new era is dawning upon Japanese music."

The most amusing musical evening I ferreted out for myself was the initial concert of the Hacsoh-ha, a sort of League of Com-

posers recently organized in Tokyo. The following ambitious program was presented and I think my sister and I were the only foreigners present to avail ourselves of the enlightening English translation.

HACSOH-HA

Compser's Society

21st June, Freiday, 6: 30, p.m.

PROGRAM

1. a. M. YOKOTA • *Noctun*.....Piano Solo K. NAKANE
- b. T. GOH *Etube No. 27* Cello Solo T. HAMADATE
2. a. A. NAKANO • "*Autumn*" Poem-K. Hada } Soprano Solo T. KATOHDA
- b. T. GOH • "*Back to the village*" Poem-T. Fujii } Piano Accom. M. KASAHARA
3. M. YOKOTA • *4 Tone Poems* Piano Solo K. NAKANE
4. a. M. YOKOTA • "*Birdo Hunter*" Poem-H. Danjok } Soprano Solo K. SAKAGAMI
- b. T. GOH • "*Raiy Night*" Poem-S. Nakajima } Piano Accom. T. GOH
5. T. GOH • *Invention Clarric* Piano Solo C. TSUNODA
6. a. A. NAKANO • "*Moonbeam*" Poem-H. Kitahvra } Soprano Solo S. KASAHARA
- b. M. YOKOTA • "*Pole Sentimentality*" Poem-A. Shino } Piano Accom. M. KASAHARA
- c. T. GOH • "*Winter*" Poem-T. Asoh }
7. T. GOH • *Symphonic Poem "Flying Clouds"* Piano Solo N. FUKUDA
- Interval (five minutes)
8. a. Y. HIRAI • "*Nvrayama*" Poem-S. Kitami } Baritone Solo T. ITOH
- "*Song of YAMAME*" Poem-S. Kitauui } Piano Accom. S. NAGAI
- "*Kujuhknri-Heme*," Poem-S. Kitami } Piano Accom. S. NAGAI
- b. T. GOH • "*Noeu*" Poem T. Asoh } Piano Accom. S. NAGAI
- "*Calling of the Pea*," Poem-A. Ishizuka }
9. T. GOH • *Violin Concert (Aminar)* Violin Solo H. OHNO
- Interval (five minutes)
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10. Y. HIRAI • *Cantata "Great Buddka!"* } Soprano Solo K. SAKAGAMI
- K. HAYASHI } Alto Solo S. KUMASHIRO
- } Baritone Solo T. ITOH
- } Chorus
- } Conduct Y. HIRAI
- } Piano S. NAGAI
11. T. GOH • *Fminor Variation*..... Piano Solo A. KUROSAWA

The music was often a slavish imitation of Bach or Beethoven with a random Japanese phrase thrown in on occasion. On the whole the Japanese melodies when developed in Western style by Japanese minds, did not "come off." In general there was no emotional drive in the music. But the three songs by Mr. Y. Hirai (No. 8 on the program) showed an assimilation of both mediums, a true artistic sensitiveness and a lead which may be a valid one for future Japanese composers.

The irresistible artistic strength of the T'ang period swept through Japan from China a thousand years ago, and was absorbed, leaving at present an individual Japanese style. There is now the possibility of a similar musical procedure.