RR-14

INFLUENCE

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28 Uguisudani-machi
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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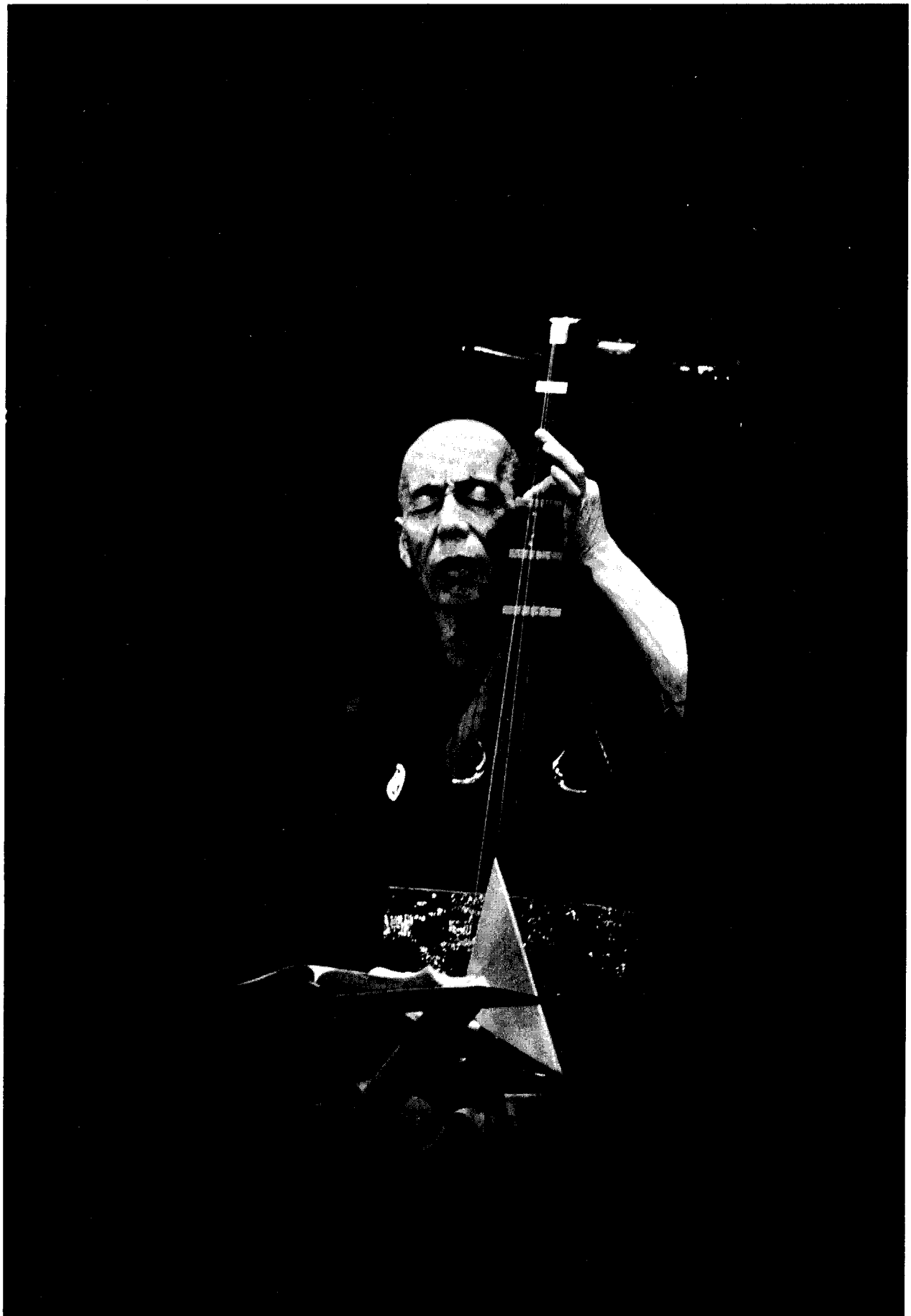
Dear Dick:

With over two years of residency in Japan, we are thought of as "knowledgeable" on a broad range of Japanese phenomena. This only by virtue of the fact that we have slightly more experience than those who have not visited this contradictory land of urgency and restraint. The most frequent question addressed to me, as a composer, during our recent travel in the United States was "how has your work been influenced by Japanese music?" It was an irritating and difficult question for several reasons, foremost of which was my aversion for the practice of deliberately "adopting" influences (as opposed to the conviction that diverse influences naturally assimilated are an honorable resource that ought to be more regularly drawn upon). My response to the question usually began something like, "what do you mean, 'influence'?" - as though the questioner suspected something intentional on my part. There are at least three or four composers whose economic positions have been enhanced by exotic materials that they adopted in calculated fashion during an artificially brief acquaintance. My instinct is to avoid the implication, however remote, and, in any case, I am inhibited from such practices by a musical style that does not depend on melodies or rhythms of any sort.

There are, of course, other less obvious materials, "influences," that one might commandeer: exotic instruments, unfamiliar instrumental or vocal styles; esthetic attitudes; forms; and so on. These are subjects not really suited to casual questions and answers, however, and were generally passed over in the wake of surprise over the admission that I found the sounds of Japanese traditional music essentially uninteresting in themselves. The shakuhachi and the gagaku ensemble are exceptions, but I feel that sonority (by which I do not mean dynamic power) is at the root of the growing Japanese preference for Western music (classical or rock), and the corresponding atrophying of traditional musical forms and skills.

The visual excellence of things Japanese may stem from calligraphy - which has an orchestral diversity and richness even in black and white. Musical sound here, however, seems to me to have a seriously limited range. In contrast to the visual diverseness and subtlety of calligraphy, the spoken language is aurally restrictive. The normal pattern of consonant-vowel alternation dictates a highly fragmented, quick-tempoed result. Vowels can be extended, but there are no diphthongs,



and a slight pitch inflection takes the place of the primary and secondary accents by means of which the flow of English words is differentiated. It is not surprising that broadly distended, theatrical styles of narrative singing have developed in Japan. These are performed, incidentally, with a visceral intensity, which shows how much more can be projected by the conflict of generation and restraint than is by the opera singer's uniformly indulgent bellow.

The sparseness of sumi ink painting, ikebana, or of a rock garden becomes an esthetic asset to some extent because of the quality of the materials treated. In the case of the more common Japanese instruments - the biwa, shamisen, koto, Noh flute - the inherent quality of the sound will not, in my opinion, sustain the same esthetic approach. The event itself - a twang, rattle, shriek, thump - is more important than its aural character. One places events, awaits them, reacts to them; they tend in one of two directions: toward the discontinuity (a sudden attack or accent without apparent aural preparation), or, toward the background texture (a generally simple pattern of repeated and not strongly differentiated sounds). Because of this feeling, I have found the Japanese sense of spacing of considerable interest, while remaining little attracted to the sounds themselves.* Although my response is, at this point, almost entirely intuitive, I feel sure that the Japanese sense of spacing has had and will continue to have impact on my work.

The photo opposite is of Shuo Odate narrating the tale of Kage Kijo, and accompanying himself on a satsuma-biwa (a relatively modern form of the instrument). Odate was one of four solo performers on a program of biwa narrative and music organized by Kinshi Tsuruta as the government sponsored National Theater in Tokyo. The story is representative:

> Kage Kijo, a samurai of the Heike family, was captured by the rival Genji family and exiled to Kyushu Island. While in prison he became blind. His daughter, Hitomaru, discovered that he was still alive and traveled from Kamakura to see her father though he was ashamed of his condition and at first refused. While they are together, he tells of courageous fighting between the families. His captors do likewise, and the girl leaves.

Any occasion for descriptions of battles and heroics is welcomed since a considerable portion of the audience response

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* I am talking about formal music here, and am not suggesting that Japanese are insensitive to the sounds in their environment. One of our first notable experiences in Tokyo consisted in being lectured on the impossibility of pairing the cups with the saucers we had selected. No Japanese, it seems, would tolerate the sound of one against the other.

is to the content of the story rather than to the excellence of performance. The general decline in import of biwa recitals has led to a growing concentration on the more popular and dramatic stories. A horseman's dash up a long flight of temple stairs was greeted with vigorous applause, while a woman's absurd sacrifice - sung with poignancy and delicate inflection - gained no special attention.

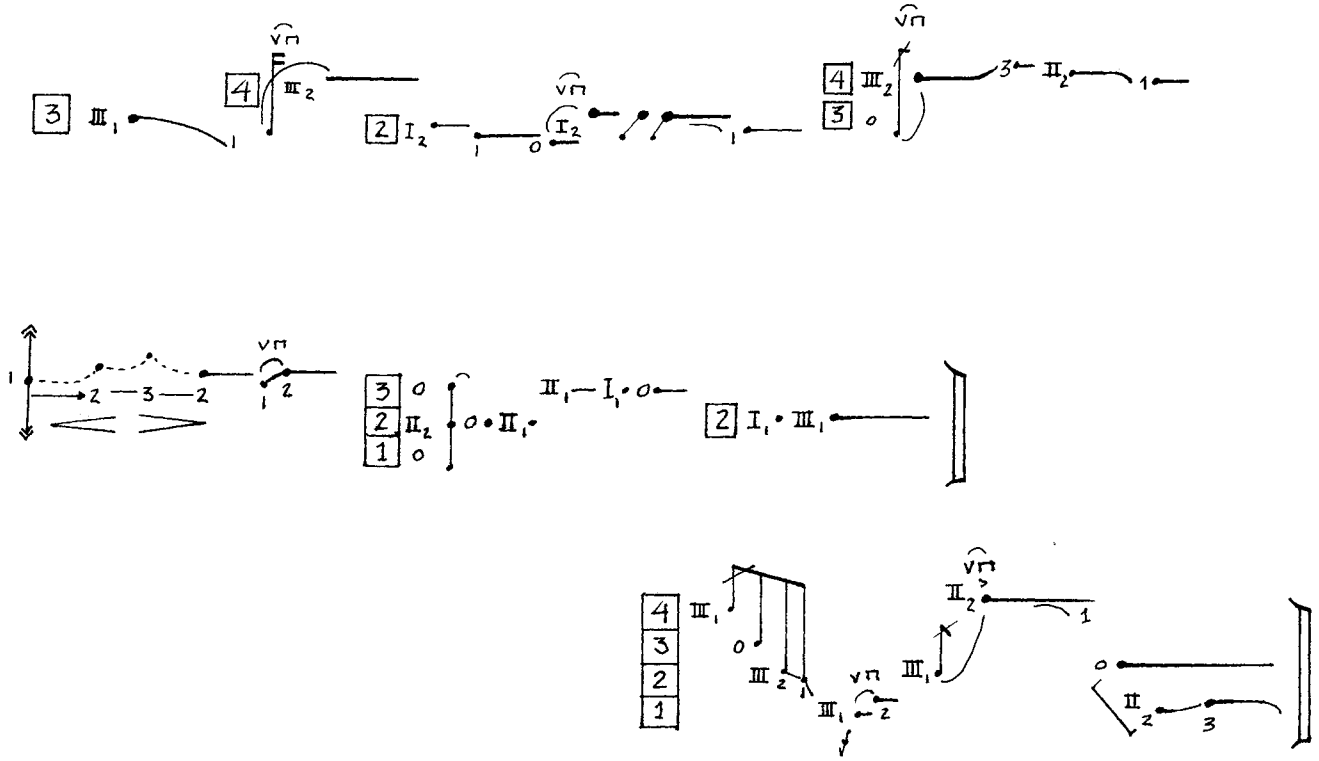
Th audience was made up of older persons, and we were the only foreigners. Younger artists and musicians think such recitals quaint, we were told, while the youthful lay public finds it simply boring. The vocal style connected with the setsuma-biwa is far less intense than the narratives that accompany the kabuki or bunraku theaters, and this is in keeping with the difference in scale. Biwa narrative is a chamber activity, not in the least theatrical. Performers dress in traditional dark kimonos, though each performer's dress here was distinctive. They kneel on small pillows with their instruments held vertically and face the "score," which is laid on a small folding table. There is deep involvement mirrored in the performer's face, though one suspects that the involvement - the commitment - is more to the role of biwa-playing narrator than it is to the content of the stories. There is room for vocal and instrumental elaboration and ornamentation within the traditional framework of tale-telling, but, at least in this concert, instrumental and vocal passages were strictly segregated and non-melismatic.

As a perhaps too practical Westerner, I was struck with the relatively slight use of the biwa's instrumental potential. The pace, even in instrumental interludes was very deliberate. Characteristic techniques include the kuzure, and extended tremolo played accelerando and crescendo with the wide, flat plectrum cracking against the biwa's body; the hooking, lengthwise rasp of the string; the reiterated inflected pitch. Rarely, except in the kuzure (which has all the deliciously transparent excitement of the Rossini crescendo), does one hear anything remotely resembling what we might call instrumental virtuosity. The voice range is very wide, and characterized by an almost constantly changing pitch, as well as a repressed, half-strangled keening full of apparent emotion. Though the biwa is traditionally not a solo instrument, and its plectrum is somewhat cumbersome, the microtonal potential (raised frets make it impossible for the stopping finger to press the strings all the way down to the neck), and the freely percussive use of the instrument would seem to make it useful in a wider context.

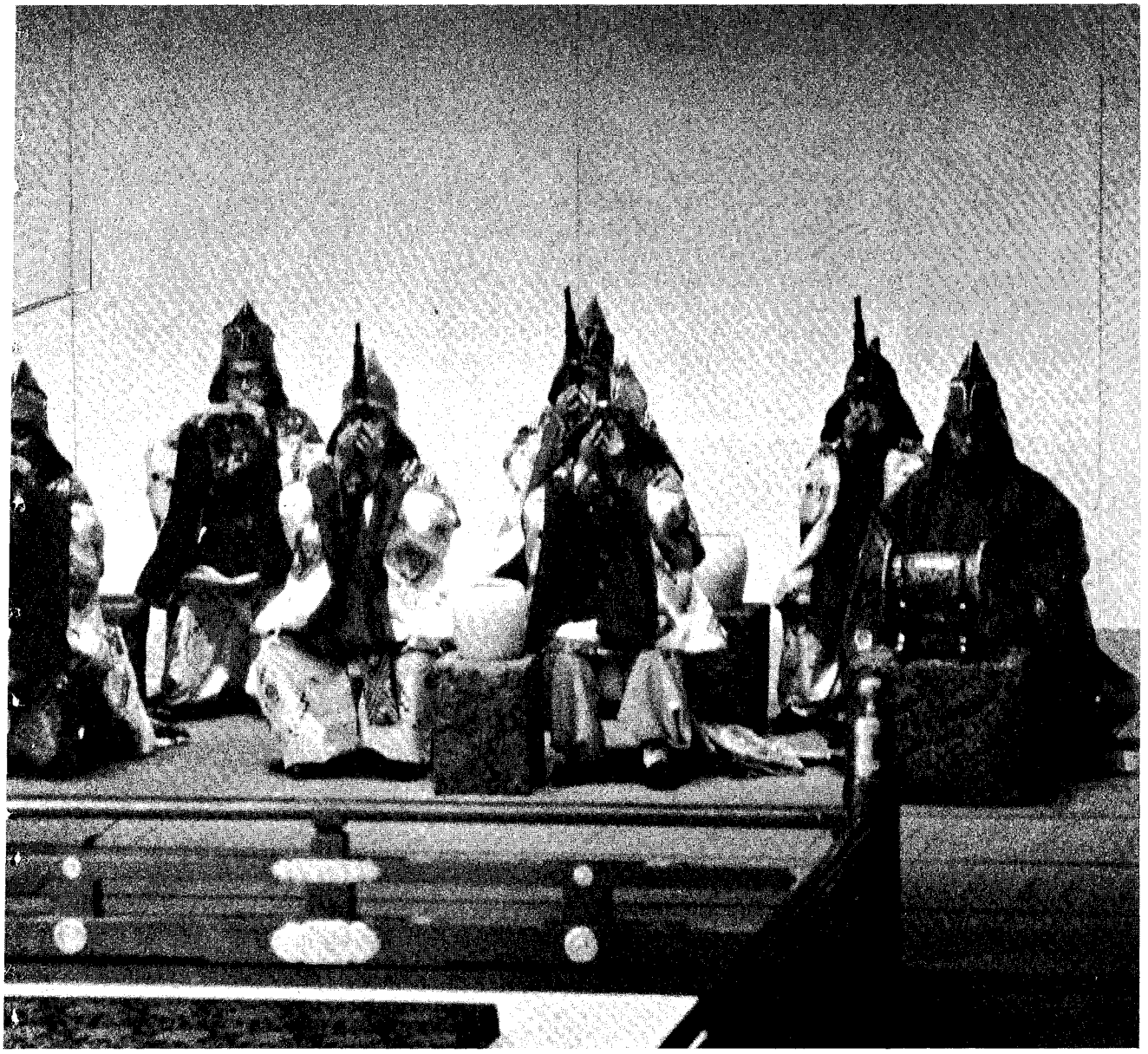
Composer Toru Takemitsu, with whom we attended this concert, has used the biwa as well as the shakuhachi in several chamber works, movie scores, and, most recently, in November Steps (commissioned by the New York Philharmonic for its 125th anniversary). He was credited in the program with having stimulated a new wave of interest in these instruments with his contemporary applications. Takemitsu was, in fact, active in persuading

Tsuruta to perform again in public after an absence reaching from before the war until 1961, and she has herself taken up the challenge as was evidenced in the final work on the program. This was a traditional melody which she had orchestrated for solo, electronically amplified biwa accompanied by eight others.

Below is a short excerpt from the notated biwa part for Takemitsu's November Steps. This is, of course, not at all like the traditional notation which consists of no more than a number designating one of the limited body of melodies available. Takemitsu's notation indicates the string, fret, accent, pitch inflection, and approximate spacing in time, as well as required plectrum technique.



The Imperial Court Musicians in a bugaku performance.



The National Theater presented one of the most dignified of the gagaku masterpieces, "Shunnoden Ichigu," together with the comic "Kotokuraku," during the Spring of 1967. Gagaku (literally, elegant and authorized music) is performed only by the Imperial Court Musicians, and very rarely in public. The two works presented on this occasion were bugaku (music with dance), as opposed to the independently performed instrumental music, kangen (literally, wind and string). The serious work which opened the program was about an hour long, while the comic piece - the humor was excrutiatingly subtle and understated - consumed twenty-five minutes. Each represented a larger class for which characteristics are specified. The first was from a class of slow and gently moving dances, samai, originating from China, Indo-China, and India. Costumes for these are always reddish in color. The second is classified umai, referring to dances of Korean importation. These are lively and humorous and the performers are costumed in greens.

Highly stylized, the dance employed no steps or motions that might be interpreted as gymnastic or daring in the slightest. Symmetrical to a point that bordered on oppressiveness, the ceremonial activity continued, without story, without obvious development or variety. The music of the gagaku ensemble is certainly the richest, most orchestral sound within the Japanese tradition. Woodwinds included in the orchestra are the sho, a small pipe organ with 17 bamboo pipes that is played with breath alone; the hichiriki, a small, raucous oboe-like double-reed instrument; the ryuteki, a long transverse flute with 7 holes; and the komabue, a shorter flute of Korean origin with six finger holes. The percussion instruments include taiko, a large bass drum; shogo, a small gong; kakko, a small kettle drum; and sanno tsuzumi, a kind of side drum. As commentator William Malm has pointed out, the large drum, which is several meters high, has a relatively small membrane surface, and a sound that is disappointing to say the least. Its tremendous psychological effect is put to use only in the bugaku.

The structure of the music, as one would expect, is specified completely by tradition: kyusei, floating voice; jo, preface; satto, warming up; juha, the entrance and breaking up; tessho, bird's voice; and the kissho, or rapid voice. Without going into detail, one can report that the effect is of a gradual accumulation of instrumental sound seemingly analogous to the way thin rivulets of water randomly combine to produce a substantial stream. No individual instrument is powerful enough in itself, but together they achieve a pungent, incessant sonority which is deeply moving.

The sho is particularly unprecedented and appealing to the Western ear, though there are few opportunities in a bugaku performance to hear it clearly. The overall ensemble sound is itself unique: a complex cable of intense individual sounds, following, in groups, similar paths, but diverging, keeping to their own individual inflections. Something resembling counterpoint (or rather "counterbend" since there are very few "points" in the sense of discrete separate events) almost emerges. The sound has a primal, image-making capacity like the Indian sitar. One is unlikely to forget its incessence, its seeming unconcern for humane variety or Western standards of drama. It is clearly not geared to the normal public taste.

During the comic dance composition, masks were worn, and these were the subject of an essay in the program by painter Taro Okamoto. He stressed that in order to vitalize the organic nature of human drama, an inorganic factor - the mask - must be interposed between actor and audience. "It is only by means of unrealistic expressions that one can convey the deepest and most broad human emotions. Art lies not in the skillful expression of the joys and sorrows of individual lives, but should be more general. In order to express such broad emotion, one must efface normal expressions." He argues that the usefulness of the mask depends on its potential for integration. A part is "extensive" and suggests relations, but once it becomes integrated into a whole it is no longer suggestive, but rather complete. "A 'part'," Okamoto says, "penetrates into the deep crevices of existence."


古徳楽


腫面

"Kotokuraku" has as its subject a drinking party, though it is again highly stylized (the only real sight-gag is the Chaplinesque, delicately tipsy exit of the servant who has been surreptitiously sampling). The masks underline the still formal nature of the work, and only at the end are we allowed the excess of the masks' moving parts - slightly bobbing drunken noses.

Left: Two masks - above, the guests' with bobbable noses, below, the servant's swollen face

Avant garde dramatist Shuji Terayama has in recent years taken on such subjects as the hunchback, a boy taught to believe he is a dog, a monstrously fat girl, and, most recently, convoluted transvestite tangles. Decor for his plays has included urinals, a live python, nudes of all (not only both) sexes, a transvestite chorus line which put on a really rousing spectacle complete with riotously animate solos, and so on. His work is superbly theatrical, whether or not one catches all of the generally campy dialogue. Color, movement, sensational events sweep across the stage with satisfying regularity. The pictures included here were taken at the production of Terayama's "La Marie-Vision" at the Bunka Theater in Shinjuku (Tokyo's most lively entertainment center, filled with cinema clubs, underground theater, coffee shops, discotheques, and bookstores).

The roles, all but one either female or transvestite in plot terms, were played by male actors exclusively, including what one reviewer called an "astonishing" performance by Akihiko Maruyama in the lead as Mari, a transvestite. The plot revolves around Mari's efforts to convert her "son" - obtained through an arranged and forcibly accomplished pregnancy inflicted on a former (genuinely) female friend - to her own set of values. As can be seen from the final tableau, where Mari lovingly applies mascara and lipstick, there is every reason to believe that she will have her way, particularly since she has done away with the neighbor girl who was unwise enough to value the son in his natural state. Reviewer Donald Richie noted wryly that "the entertainment is a fairy tale in every sense of the word."

The calm, personable Terayama remains apparently untainted by any of the gross elements in his work. Transvestitism is

admittedly only an embellishment on the homosexual theme already so widely in use as a convenient allegory for alienation and the individual's insufficient sense of personal identity. Though the theme might seem very much in opposition to traditional values, there are precedents. Female roles in Japanese theater were generally performed by men, as for example in the kabuki, as ordered by the shogun who feared contamination of the emotions and bodies of their samurai by the women of loose habits who had previously done the feminine parts. One of the most popular theaters in Tokyo, Takarazuka, is situated across from the staid (and now, sadly, decimated) Imperial Hotel in Hibiya. It is patronized exclusively by young girls and housewives who come in enormous crowds to the matinees of hit musicals like "Oklahoma!" performed with all female casts. There are four Takarazuka troupes which rotate constantly between their school just outside Osaka, the Tokyo and the Osaka Theaters. Ambiguity is not confined in Japan.

Which of these diverse spectacles - at times garishly theatrical and at other times stiffly ceremonial - will eventually show results in our work, I have no idea (though I have preferences). That some will, there is no doubt.

Sincerely,

Roger Reynolds

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January 6, 1969.

An astonishing performance