



*Bunraku Performance at National Theatre, Tokyo, 2017 ©National Theatre (Japan Arts Council)*

## **Music in Bunraku and Kabuki**

Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

**Alison Tokita**, Japan/Australia

# Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

## Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

**Motivation** Japanese theatre provides a brilliant and extravagant spectacle through its stylized movement and dance, its costumes and exaggerated speech – and its music. Understanding the storyline is of course important, but Japanese theatre can also be appreciated for its visual and sonic impact. Music plays a vital role in two of Japan's most famous forms of theatre: the *Bunraku* puppet theatre, and the live *Kabuki* theatre. Sung narrative is an intrinsic part of the dramatic and dramaturgical texture of both, and at its heart is voice and shamisen.

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**Objective** As a musicologist, I was drawn to the music of Kabuki, and took lessons in kiyomoto singing and shamisen. I spent many hours in the theatre listening again and again to the music I was studying. I gradually started to understand that this was not simply music, but story-singing. This led me to explore the origins of story-singing in Japanese theatre, so different from both theatre and opera in the West. I would like to take you on a virtual visit to the Bunraku and Kabuki theatres, two of Japan's significant theatres, and then dip into the history of Japanese theatre and the ancient tradition of story-singing that fed the development of Bunraku and Kabuki. Starting from the contemporary versions of these two forms, we look at the centrality of music in both, and explore their roots in ritual, dance, and story-telling.

**Context** One of the distinctive features of Japanese culture is the capacity to innovate and at the same time preserve old traditions. Gagaku, the music of the imperial court, was introduced to Japan from China in the 8th century, and has been transmitted faithfully to the present day. Noh, an amalgam of acting, dance, song, and narrative, is Japan's oldest form of drama, deriving its content from literary, religious, and folk sources; it has been performed continuously from the 14th century to now. The same is true of Bunraku and Kabuki which date from the 17th century. Of course, these forms change and develop, and adapt to changing circumstances, most notably the severe challenges presented by rapid westernization in the modern era.

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The National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka  
©Japan Arts Council



Scene from *Kumagai Jinya* in the popular play *Ichi-no-tani Futaba Gunki*  
©National Theatre (Japan Arts Council)

The National Bunraku Theatre is a modern ferro-concrete building in the old entertainment district of Dotonbori in Osaka. It offers bi-monthly seasons of Bunraku with two sessions a day, presenting selections from famous plays. The program I am taking you to see today is the morning session from 11:00-15:00, featuring the popular play *Ichi-no-tani Futaba Gunki* – Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi-no-tani, that premiered in Osaka in 1751. It is a fanciful re-imagination of incidents from the largely historical *Heike Monogatari* – The Tale of the Heike – about cataclysmic battles between the Heike and Genji warrior clans in the 12th century. We need to realize that plays of the Edo Period (1603-1867), both puppet and live theatres, are noted for their fantastic plot development. While usually set in a traditional narrative *sekai* (world) drawn from earlier plots, there is always a quirky twist or *shuko* (invention) to give it novelty. In the scene *Kumagai Jinya* – Kumagai's Camp, the warrior Kumagai Jiro Naozane returns to his camp and confronts his wife, and the mother of Taira no Atsumori, the young teenage warrior he has just killed in the battle of Ichi-no-tani. Unlike the account in *Heike Monogatari*, the novelty here is that, feeling pity for Atsumori, Kumagai killed his own son as a substitute. This bizarre twist provides complex psychological interest. The highlight is a section called *monogatari* (story), rapidly alternating sung and spoken lines, in which Kumagai narrates and re-enacts the scene of the battle, with a complex mixture of bravado and painful emotions, because he needs to keep the substitution secret from his wife, and from the world at large.

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Scene from *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*  
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Another scene on the program is the *michiyuki* (poetic journey) from the play *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* – *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, premiered in Osaka in 1747. This scene, titled *Hatsune no tabi* – *Journey with the drum Hatsune*, is an episode based on the romantic legendary *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Yoshitsune) about the flight of the samurai hero Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) from his half-brother, soon to be shogun, Yoritomo. Yoshitsune's lover Shizuka is commanded to flee in a different direction, accompanied by Sato Tadanobu (1161-1186), one of Yoshitsune's retainers. The bizarre twist in this plot is that Tadanobu is really a fox in disguise, who yearns for Shizuka's drum, the skin of which is that of his father. As the two journey in the Yoshino mountains, full of blooming cherry trees, they rest and amuse themselves talking about Yoshitsune. Shizuka laments their separation, while Tadanobu reenacts the scene of a battle in which his brother fought and was killed – another powerful monogatari section.

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*In Bunraku, stories are performed by the energetic vocalisation of the Tayu (narrator), the shamisen player, and the Ningyotsukai (puppeteers). The musicians are seated on a dais on the right side of the stage*

*©National Bunraku Theatre (Japan Arts Council)*



*Bunraku stage ©National Theatre (Japan Arts Council)*

# Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

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Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)  
Courtesy of The University of Tokyo,  
Komaba Library



Gidayu-bushi futozao shamisen; the shamisen entered Japan from China via the Ryukyu Islands, now Okinawa Prefecture, in the 15th century; it is of West Asian provenance and related to Western lutes, including the guitar  
©Shamisen Shop Sansuien



Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725)  
Courtesy of The Tsubouchi Memorial  
Theatre Museum, Waseda University

The music during the drama is called *yoruri*. There are many different *yoruri* styles, and the one in Bunraku is *gidayu-bushi*, after its founder, Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714), who developed his personal style of story-singing in collaboration with playwright, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725). In *gidayu-bushi*, not only does the narrator declaim realistic dramatic dialogue for the puppets, he also uses music to narrate the story with all its dramatic action, its excitement and pathos, and its comedy and mundaneness, accompanied by the shamisen. In delivering the third-person narrative he calls on an array of melody types ranging from quasi-speech, straight narrative, and special styles, such as soft passionate narrative and hard martial narrative; some parts are metric and syllabic; others are in free rhythm, and highly melismatic. All these musical variants work to powerfully convey the meaning and emotion of the narrative.

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*Example of a puppet head that transforms a beautiful female character into a fox in an instant*  
©National Theatre (Japan Arts Council)

*In the play Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura Shizuka playfully throws a fan that is then caught by Tadanobu*  
©National Bunraku Theatre (Japan Arts Council)



Two thirds the size of a person, the Bunraku dolls are manipulated by three puppeteers. They are exquisitely costumed, with beautifully carved heads. Naturally, the expression on those wooden faces is unchanging, although the angle of the head can convey subtle mood changes, and some puppet heads are convertible from princess to demon by manipulation of strings and other amazing transformations. They can realistically perform intricate actions: for example, Shizuka playfully throws a fan caught by Tadanobu as part of his battle enactment.

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*Kuromisu, a small room at the left side of the stage behind black bamboo blinds is for offstage musicians*  
©National Theatre (Japan Arts Council)



*Kabuki-za Theatre in Tokyo* ©Shochiku/Kabuki-za



*Stage at the Kabuki-za Theatre* ©Shochiku

Another time, we visit the Kabuki-za theatre in Tokyo. Rebuilt in 2013, it retains the traditional atmosphere of Edo theatre although the remake of the old facade now fronts a multi-storey office block. The inside of the theatre seems unchanged, but behind the stage are state-of-the-art facilities, and in front patrons can enjoy a shopping mall-like space linked directly to the Higashi Ginza subway station on the Hibiya Line.

Kabuki is very much an aural as well as a visual experience. It exploits the off-stage ensemble as background music to denote dramatic and situational meaning: for example, different drum patterns denote snow, or rain, or a mountain echo; certain shamisen motives or sung phrases denote a scene by the river, a street of the entertainment district, or a royal palace. An enormous repertoire of signature tunes and motives is recognized by Kabuki connoisseurs and enhances the theatrical experience. For the modern theatre-goer, the earphone guide, the aural equivalent of program notes, kindly points these out and explains each one.

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Performance of *Kumagai Jinya*, Kabuki-za Theatre ©Shochiku

At least half of all Kabuki plays are straight dramas, and half again are adaptations from Bunraku, but the drama is enacted by live actors instead of dolls. Strangely, the singer-narrator and the shamisen player are still there seated on the stage, telling the story in the same musical joruri style, coordinating with the movements of the actors, who deliver the spoken dialogue.

In the Kabuki version of *Kumagai Jinya*, the extended monogatari battle narrative, where Kumagai relates his grappling with and killing of the young Heike warrior Atsumori, is more gruesome and chilling than in Bunraku; the actor delivers short spoken bits, alternating with sung bits by the tayu, while the actor mimes. Kumagai's fierceness and conflicting emotions are larger than life, heightened by stylized *kumadori* makeup. The michiyuki scene, *Hatsune no tabi*, is more colourful than in Bunraku. Two sets of joruri musicians sit on the stage. The monogatari of the fox-warrior Tadanobu is narrated gruffly by the gidayu musicians, but Shizuka's lament is musically expanded into a section called *kudoki*, sung by the more lyrical kiyomoto musicians.

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*Kabuki started as a show of female singers and dancers, Okuni Kabuki, a part of the picture scroll Kitano-sha to Okuni Kabuki zu, 18th Century, Courtesy of Fukuno Shinmei sha, Toyama Prefecture*

Why does the story-teller need to tell the story when it is acted out by live actors? To solve this puzzle, we need to look at the antecedents of Kabuki and Bunraku.

When both theatres were in their formative stage as commercial entertainments in the 17th century, there was strong competition between them. Kabuki, which started as a show of women singers and dancers, became a theatre of men who had to play both male and female roles, leading to the art of the *onnagata* female impersonator. Early Kabuki traded on the physical attraction of actors and dancers, but was weak in drama. The puppet theatre with its *joruri* narrative was weak in visual appeal, but developed dramatic scripts, building on the narrative singing tradition.

With the partnership of *joruri* narrator Takemoto Gidayu and playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon from the 1680s, puppet plays started to outdo Kabuki in popularity, so they were adapted for Kabuki performance. The dramatic authority and appeal of the complex musical delivery of puppet plays was so great that the musicians retained their position as the narrators of the drama, while the actors were in reality subservient to the narrative couple.

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Heike biwa. The biwa is a pear-shaped lute with four, sometimes five strings, plucked with a large plectrum. It originated in Western Asia and is a relative of the Western lute. Introduced from China as one of the instruments of the gagaku ensemble in the 8th century, it came into the hands of the blind minstrels (*biwa hoshi*) who modified it to suit their itinerant lifestyle, so it became known as the *heike biwa*  
©Suzuki Madoka, Heikyoku Laboratory



*Biwa hoshi*, the blind minstrels depicted in *Shokunin-zukushi Uta-awase*, vol.3, 1657, Higashi Bojo Kazunaga with illustration by Tosa Mitsunobu  
©National Diet Library

Joruri first combined with puppets around 1600, and the new entertainment of *ningyo joruri* developed exponentially in the 17th century. Joruri derived from a story-telling practice of women, and was taken over by visually impaired minstrels, called *biwa hoshi* or lute priests, who recited the Heike narrative, accompanied by the biwa. The biwa hoshi developed Joruri into a musical genre as they took up the newly arrived shamisen as their preferred instrument instead of the biwa.

Many varieties of puppet performance are documented from the medieval period, often originating in religious rituals. As puppet joruri with shamisen became popular and widespread in the 17th century, local versions of the urban art of Osaka and Kyoto sprang up across the country. They functioned as a medium for conveying gossip and scandal, as well as tales of legendary heroes and battles and some local lore. With modernization, while the sophisticated theatrical genres of Kabuki and Bunraku continued to flourish as traditional arts, many local forms withered away. Yet, it is possible to find puppet theatres that have continued for hundreds of years in many regions of Japan – some sharing commonalities with central classical Bunraku, and others with unique local flavours.

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*Bunya ningyo and sekkyo ningyo are both accompanied by joruri narrative and shamisen, performed by one person; each doll is manipulated by one puppeteer*  
©Sado Performing Arts Archive



*Noroma ningyo is a slapstick style of puppet play with crude and sometimes scatological humour*  
©Sado Performing Arts Archive



*Awaji Puppet Theatre, Awaji Island*  
©Awaji Ningyo-za

A prominent case is the Awaji Puppet Theatre on Awaji Island in Hyogo Prefecture, whose puppets, plays, and music are quite similar to what we can experience in the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka. A very different example is still practised on Sado Island, Niigata Prefecture, where three puppet traditions have been preserved: *Bunya ningyo*, *sekkyo ningyo*, and *noroma ningyo*. Such regional traditions are recognized by the Agency of Cultural Affairs as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties.

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**Closing** In Japanese theatre, story-singing has always been a vital ingredient for the creation of fully developed performances, in vivid contrast to Western theatre and opera.

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In a very real sense, Japanese theatre of the Edo Period grew from the musical story-telling tradition of joruri on the one hand, and from the song and dance of Kabuki on the other. Kabuki originated in women's performance, as did joruri, a tale sung by itinerant women entertainers, and was appropriated by visually impaired male minstrels. Joruri narrative with its puppets subsequently diversified into numerous strands, each taking the name of its founder, such as gidayu-bushi after Takemoto Gidayu. Many other Japanese story-singing traditions survived into the modern era, including the blind women called *Goze*, and the mythical story-singing of the Ainu indigenous people.

New narrative musical styles emerged in Japan's modern age: *Satsuma-Biwa*, *Chikuzen-Biwa*, and the shamisen accompanied *naniwa-bushi* or *rokyoku*, confirming that musical story-telling remains a vital musical heritage, without which Japanese theatre might have been very different.

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Alison Tokita is a musicologist and Japanologist. She taught Japanese Studies and Japanese language at Monash University for many years. From 2010 to 2018 she had positions at Tokyo Institute of Technology, Doshisha University, and Kyoto City University of Arts, where from 2014 to 2018 she was Director of the Research Centre for Japanese Traditional Music.

Her primary research focus is Japanese story-singing traditions. She also researches musical modernity in Japan in a comparative context. She is the recipient of the 33rd Tanabe Hisao Prize (2015), the 28th Koizumi Fumio Music Prize (2016), and the Kyoto Newspaper Prize (Academic) (2016).

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# Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

## Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

**Places**    **Awaji Puppet Theatre Company**

Local puppet plays were usually performed outdoors until the 1960s. In 2012, the Awaji Puppet Theatre found a permanent place for its daily performances in the specially built Awaji Ningyo-za Hall.

656-0501, Hyogo, Minamiawaji shi, Fukura-kou 1528-1

[web-site](#)

**Kabuki-Za Theatre**

Located in Higashi Ginza, Tokyo, this is the best place to see Kabuki. A commercial theatre managed by entertainment giant Shochiku, which also manages other Kabuki venues, such as the nearby Shinbashi Enbujo, the Osaka Shochiku-za, and the Minami-za in Kyoto.

104-0061, Tokyo, Chuo ku, Ginza 4-12-15

[web-site](#)

**National Bunraku Theatre**

Located in Dotonbori near Nipponbashi, in downtown Osaka, the traditional home of puppet theatre, an extensive Resource Centre, and a Research Institute. The National Bunraku Theater holds regular exhibitions and runs a training programme for professional Bunraku manipulators, narrators, and musicians.

542-0073, Osaka, Chuo ku, Nipponbashi 1-12-10

[web-site](#)

**National Noh Theatre**

Opened in 1983 in Tokyo's central Sendagaya area, it has Japan's largest auditorium with over 500 seats, a rehearsal stage, an exhibition area, a library, and lecture rooms; programs with female performers began in 2007.

151-0051, Tokyo, Shibuya ku, Sendagaya 4-18-1

[web-site](#)

**National Theatre of Japan**

Located near the Imperial Palace in Tokyo's Chiyoda ward. As the headquarters of the Traditional Performing Arts Information Centre it houses a large resource centre and research institute. It offers a wide range of genres and also conducts vocational programs for professional Kabuki actors and musicians, outside of the traditional training that takes place within the established Kabuki families; exhibitions of its important collections are held regularly.

102-8656, Tokyo, Chiyoda ku, Hayabusa cho 4-1

[web-site](#)

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### Places **Shinbashi Enbujo Theatre**

Conveniently located at the heart of Tokyo, Shinbashi Enbujo Theatre was originally built in 1925 to show Azuma-odori, a traditional dance with music performed by the geisha of the district. The current building was reconstructed in 1982 to present Kabuki, straight plays, and modern *Super Kabuki*.

104-0061, Tokyo, Chuo ku, Ginza 6-18-2

[web-site](#)

### **Traditional Performing Arts Information Centre**

Standing adjacent to the National Theatre is a small facility that has an exhibition space on the Ground floor, a library on the 2nd floor, and a lecture room on the 3rd floor. The library collection includes archives and manuscripts related to traditional theatre performances of Japan, as well as photographs and ukiyoe. The items are accessible upon request.

102-8656, Tokyo, Chiyoda ku, Hayabusa cho 4-1

[web-site](#)

### Publications **A History of Japanese Theatre**

Jonah Salz (Ed.); 2016; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Includes *Bunraku: Puppet Theatre* by Goto, Shizuo and Cummings, Alan; pp 155-183

### **Early Modern Japanese Literature**

Shirane, Haruo; 2002; New York: Columbia University Press

Includes *Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi-no-tani*; pp 410-434

### **The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music**

Tokita, Alison.; Hughes, David W. (Eds.); 2008; Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate

Includes *Gidayu-bushi: music of the Bunraku puppet theatre*; Yamada, Chieko; pp 197-228; *Music in Kabuki: more than meets the eye*; Tokita, Alison, pp 229-260

### **Goze: Blind Women and Musical Performance in Japan**

Groemer, Gerald; 2016; London: Oxford University Press

### **Japanese Singers of Tales: Ten Centuries of Performed Narrative**

Tokita, Alison; 2015; Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate

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- Publications** **A History of Japanese Theatre** 17|32  
Salz, Jonah (Ed.); 2016; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press  
Includes *Kabuki: Superheroes and femmes fatales*; Iezzi, Julie; pp 102-140
- Kiyomoto-bushi: Narrative Music of the Kabuki Theatre. Studien Zur Traditionellen Musik Japans**  
Tokita, Alison; 1999; Kassel: Bärenreiter
- Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees: A Masterpiece of the Eighteenth-Century Japanese Puppet Theater**  
Jones Jr, Stanleigh H.; 1993; New York: Columbia University Press  
Includes *Michiyuki: The journey with the drum (Act Four, Scene 1)*;  
Takeda, Izumo; Jones Jr, Stanleigh H.; pp197-208
- Progressive Traditions: An Illustrated Study of Plot Repetition in Traditional Japanese Theatre**  
Parker, Helen S.E.; 2006; Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill's Japanese Studies Library; Brill
- Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyo Tradition**  
Law, Jane Marie; 1997; Princeton: Princeton University Press
- The Tale of the Heike**  
Tyler, Royall (Trans.); 2012; London: Viking
- Theater as Music: The Bunraku Play *Mt. Imo and Mt. Se: An Exemplary Tale of Womanly Virtue***  
Gerstle, C. Andrew, et al.; 1990; Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan
- Yoshitsune: A 15th Century Japanese Chronicle**  
McCullough, Helen Craig (Trans.); 1966; Stanford, California: Stanford University Press  
UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Japanese Series

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**WWW-Sites**    **Bunraku Puppet Theater: Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura**

A concise introduction to the *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees* play

[web-site](#)

**Contemporary Tradition – Japanese Performance Genre Today**

Three-day conference held in 2016 at the National University of Singapore; an attempt to illustrate the diversity and potential of traditional performances of Japan

[web-site](#)

**Kabuki Playguide**

Concise introduction to the Kabuki version of *Kumagai's Camp: Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi-no-tani*

[web-site](#)

**Invitation to Bunraku**

Guidance for Japanese Puppet Theatre Appreciation with plenty of information on history and popular performances

[web-site](#)

**Invitation to Kabuki**

Guidance for Japanese Traditional Performing Arts – its history, unique stage setting, and popular plays; extensive list of videos

[web-site](#)

**Kabuki A to Z**

Visual dictionary covering technical terms, characters in plays, and Kabuki actor genealogies

[web-site](#)

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### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Awaji Island**

Island in Hyogo Prefecture, located between Honshu and Shikoku at the eastern end of the Seto Inland Sea. The Akashi Kaikyo Bridge, the longest suspension bridge in the world, connects the island with Kobe. It was the epicentre of the catastrophic Kobe earthquake in 1995.

►Awaji Puppet Theatre

[web-site](#)

#### **Awaji Puppet Theatre**

A UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, it is closely related to the Bunraku puppet theatre of Osaka in form and content, but differs in having a number of female performers; plays are staged daily in the Awaji Puppet Theatre Company hall in the south of the island

►Awaji Island

►Bunraku

►Sado Ningyo Shibai

[web-site](#)

#### **Biwa**

The pear-shaped short-necked lute with four or five strings, plucked with a large plectrum, originally comes from Western Asia and is a relative of the lute. Introduced from China in the 8th century as one of the instruments of the gagaku court music ensemble, it came into the hands of the *biwa hoshi* who adapted it as *heike biwa* to their travelling lifestyle. In Kyushu, in the late 19th century, two popular modern genres of biwa story-singing, *Satsuma-Biwa* and *Chikuzen-Biwa*, emerged.

►Biwa Hoshi

►Gagaku

►Shamisen

[web-site](#)

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### Glossary

#### Biwa Hoshi

Literally *lute priests*, these visually impaired minstrels have been documented as entertainers and ritualists since the 10th century. From the 13th century they became the principal carriers of the tradition of musically reciting *The Tale of the Heike*. In the 15th century they took up the three-string shamisen and adapted it to their purposes. In the Edo Period (1603-1867) the biwa hoshi developed new vocal and instrumental genres, using both shamisen and koto (13-stringed board zither) while maintaining the tradition of the Heike tale singing.

► Biwa

[web-site](#)

#### Bunraku

The principal puppet theatre in Japan, designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage under its official name *Ningyo-Joruri-Bunraku*. *Ningyo* is doll or puppet, *Joruri* is shamisen accompanied story-singing, and *Bunraku* became synonymous with puppet theatre after the Bunraku-za theatre, founded in 1805 by Uemura Bunrakuken (1751-1810), a resident of Awaji Island. Bunraku puppet theatre is characterized by intricately structured dolls, two-thirds life-size, each manipulated by three puppeteers who in synchronized movements convey the impression of living beings. The puppets perform realistic actions such as cooking, cutting vegetables, playing musical instruments, as well as vigorous fighting and dancing. Plays feature not only actions and dialogue, but also the *tayu* reciter and shamisen player who tell the whole story musically, narrating setting, characters, and emotions; by calling on many styles of singing they bring colour to the unfolding drama. Dialogue is delivered in heightened speech expressing the status, personality, and emotions of each character.

► Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725)

► Dotonbori

► Edo Period (1600-1867)

► Joruri

► Kabuki

► Shamisen

► Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)

► Tayu

[web-site](#)

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### Glossary **Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725)**

Chikamatsu, often referred to as the *Shakespeare of Japan*, began his career as a playwright for the Kabuki theatre. As actors did not stick to his scripts, he began writing for the Bunraku puppet theatre, where performances are based on the narration of written texts. His partnership with Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714) was foundational for the later development of *joruri*. Chikamatsu is said to have written seventy *jidaimono* (historical plays) and twenty-four *sewamono* (contemporary or love suicide plays that deal with socially compromised lovers).

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Edo Period (1600-1867)
- ▶ Gidayu-Bushi
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)

[web-site](#)

### **Dotonbori**

One of the entertainment districts in the centre of Osaka, named after the Dotonbori Canal that runs through it between Nipponbashi Bridge and Sennichimae Subway Station; since 1984, the site of the National Bunraku Theatre Complex, it was already the quarter for a large number of theatres in the Edo Period (1603-1867); its countless restaurants and nightspots are a major tourist attraction.

- ▶ Bunraku

[web-site](#)

### **Edo Period (1603-1867)**

After a series of civil wars, the Edo Period was a time of peace and prosperity; it was ruled by the Tokugawa shoguns and is also known as the Tokugawa Period. Samurai warriors became salaried bureaucrats, but remained the most privileged social class. Merchants accumulated capital in an economy that was still based on rice, and became significant patrons of the arts, including literature, music, and theatre. Leisured samurai and merchants were amateur practitioners of various art genres. The *iemoto* (family-head) system financially supported professional musicians by collecting lesson fees from students and charging them to become licensed performers.

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### Glossary **Gagaku**

The ceremonial music of the Imperial Court, a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, was introduced to Japan from Tang Dynasty China in the eighth century. Performed continuously ever since, it has undergone various changes during its transmission through many centuries. It is an instrumental ensemble consisting of woodwinds, strings, and percussion, whose repertoire comprises instrumental works, dance pieces, and songs. Japanese and international contemporary composers have been attracted to gagaku and created new works for the ensemble.

►Bunraku

[web-site](#)

### **Gidayu-Bushi**

Genre of joruri story-singing accompanied by shamisen. It bears the name of its founder, Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714), with the word *fushi* or *bushi*, meaning vocal music. It was developed in the puppet theatre in the 1680s, in collaboration with playwright, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725). As the musical narration of puppet plays, gidayu-bushi comprises sung narrative and spoken dialogue. Performed by the *tayu* narrator and shamisen player it contains a number of musical substyles: plain accompaniment of the narration and expressive interpretations of distraught emotions, violent actions, or dramatic chases. The shamisen has a large repertoire for interludes and scenes performed without voice.

►Bunraku

►Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725)

►Shamisen

►Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)

►Tayu

[web-site](#)

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#### Glossary

#### Goze

Blind women balladeers who from the medieval period onward performed narratives accompanied by the three-stringed shamisen lute, many of several hours duration. Later, in the Edo Period (1600-1867), they formed autonomous groups, mostly in rural areas where they wandered from village to village, depending on locals for food and lodging. They performed on the streets, but also at parties in private houses. A few goze maintained this lifestyle well into the 20th century.

- ▶ Biwa, Biwa Hoshi
- ▶ Edo Period (1600-1867)
- ▶ Shamisen

[web-site](#)

#### Hatsune no Tabi

Literally *The Journey with the Drum*, *Hatsune*, this is one of many *michiyuki* (poetic journey) scenes in the play *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), in which Lady Shizuka, Yoshitsune's lover, a professional dancer, is accompanied by Yoshitsune's retainer Sato Tadanobu (1161-1186) through the Yoshino mountains. Tadanobu is actually a fox in disguise; he yearns for Shizuka's drum, which is covered with the skin of his parents; he appears alternatively as a fox and as Tadanobu, to Shizuka's bemusement.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Michiyuki
- ▶ Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura

[web-site](#)

#### Heike Monogatari

Account of the wars between the Heike (or Taira) and Genji (or Minamoto) clans in the late 12th century, known as *The Tale of the Heike*; it has many versions, differing in length, linguistic style, and focus; there is no single identifiable author; all versions combine aspects of historical events, romance, and Buddhist preaching. Much of the material comes from both oral traditions and written texts. It also exists as a performance tradition: the *biwa hoshi* minstrels, playing the biwa lute, created a story-singing tradition of the Heike Monogatari that has lasted into the 21st century.

- ▶ Biwa Hoshi

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary

#### Ichi-no-Tani Futaba Gunki

Popular five-act Bunraku puppet play, known as the *Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani*, written by Namiki Sosuke, Asaka Itcho, and Namioka Geiji. It premiered in the Toyotake-za theatre, Osaka in 1751. The fanciful rewriting of events from *The Tale of the Heike* includes some purely fictional episodes. The plot revolves around the slaying of a young warrior, Taira no Atsumori (1169-1184) by the mature Genji warrior, Kumagai no Jiro Naozane (1141-1207). Kumagai takes pity on Atsumori, and sacrifices his own son to save Atsumori; as atonement for this, he takes holy orders to pray for his son's salvation.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Kumagai Jinya

[web-site](#)

#### Joruri

Generic term for a whole group of story-singing genres, all accompanied by shamisen. It originated as a story-telling practice of women in the medieval period, focusing on a series of tales about the legendary princess *Joruri*, who for one night entertained the young Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189), hero of *The Tale of the Heike*. The story was taken up by the biwa hoshi minstrels, who adapted it to their style of story-singing with biwa lute. The Joruri tale evolved in their hands into a new genre with varied subject matter; they accompanied it with the newly arrived shamisen instead of the biwa. They then collaborated with puppeteers, realizing the new puppet joruri play. The form developed exponentially over the 17th century, diversifying into numerous separate genres, each named after its first proponent, such as the gidayu-bushi of Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714).

- ▶ Biwa Hoshi
- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Gidayu-Bushi
- ▶ Goze
- ▶ Hatsune no Tabi
- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)
- ▶ Monogatari
- ▶ Shamisen
- ▶ Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Kabuki**

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This quintessential Japanese theatre, a designated UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, first appeared in 1603 when the shrine maiden Izumo no Okuni and her all-female troupe of dancers began performing in the dry riverbed of the Kamo River in Kyoto. Kabuki, literally *the art of song and dance*, quickly became very popular and was copied by many other women's troupes. While the early performances had no specific plot, they were enjoyed for their colorful eccentric staging and for their erotic innuendo.

In 1629, out of concern for public morals, the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651) banned women from the stage; since then, Kabuki has become a theatre of all-male actors, playing both male and female roles; this established the art of the cross-dressing female impersonator, the *onnagata*. From the 1680s onwards, Kabuki was rivalled by the puppet joruri of Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714) and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725). Kabuki began to appropriate and adapt puppet plays, thus stimulating the development of drama in Kabuki.

Kabuki drama was particularly innovative from the early 19th century with the plays of Tsuruya Nanboku (1755-1829), which were noted for their supernatural themes and grotesque persona. Later, Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893), became the lead playwright of the Kawarazaki-za theatre in Edo; with over 150 plays of both historical and contemporary genres, he is considered one of the greatest Kabuki authors; he created many innovative plays that include joruri dance scenes.

Kabuki is a hereditary family business, in which actors are known by their stage names, which are passed down over several generations; they are often associated with famed roles or acting styles.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Chikamatsu Monzaemon
- ▶ Edo Period (1600-1867)
- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Ichi-no-Tani Futaba Gunki
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Takemoto Gidayu

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## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Kiyomoto-Bushi**

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Named after its founder, Kiyomoto Enjudayu (1777-1825); one of many genres of *yoruri* story-singing accompanied by the three-stringed shamisen lute. It developed in the Kabuki theatre as dance music, first appearing in 1812. Compared with *gidayu-bushi*, the music of the puppet theatre, kiyomoto-bushi is higher in musical register, uses the medium-weight shamisen, and generally is more lyrical. It is famous for its sensuous *kudoki* lament sections.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Gidayu-Bushi
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Kudoki
- ▶ Shamisen

[web-site](#)

#### **Kudoki**

Vocal passage in *yoruri* story-singing expressing the lament or passionate frustration of a female character towards a loved one; an inner monologue of a dramatic character, delivered entirely by the musicians not the actors. Sung in a high pitch register, it is a dramatic and musical highlight.

- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Kiyomoto-Bushi

[web-site](#)

#### **Kumagai Jinya**

Translated as *Kumagai's Camp*, this is one of the five acts of the popular Bunraku puppet play *Ichi-no-Tani Futaba Gunki* (Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani). Based on *The Tale of the Heike* it dramatizes the outcome of a confrontation between Genji warrior Kumagai no Jiro Naozane and Heike warrior Taira no Atsumori; Kumagai, returning from the battlefield, recounts his killing of the young warrior Atsumori; a highly popular play in Bunraku and Kabuki, full of emotions, loyalties, loves, deceptions and sacrifices among warrior clans

- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Ichi-no-Tani Futaba Gunki
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Taira no Atsumori (1169-1184)

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Michiyuki**

27/32

Literally *journey/travel* but often translated as *poetic journey*, a lyrical description and enactment of a journey forming a scene or act of a play. In historical dramas such as *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*, *michiyuki* are light-hearted scenes that offer relief from the more serious events of the plot. In contemporary plays that deal with socially compromised lovers who resort to double suicide, the *michiyuki* scene is a poignant staging of the last journey of both protagonists to their deaths. *Michiyuki* scenes are performed by six or more *tayu* narrators and six shamisen players, with only sparse dramatic dialogue.

- ▶Hatsune no Tabi
- ▶Kabuki
- ▶Shamisen
- ▶Tayu
- ▶Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura

#### **Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)**

Warrior whose bravery as a military commander led to the decisive victory of the Genji or Minamoto clan over the Heike clan in the *Genpei* wars from 1180 to 1185. After a tumultuous career, Yoshitsune was finally hunted down by his half-brother and Genji clan leader Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199), who saw of him as a dangerous rival and wanted to eliminate him during the siege of Koromogawa near Hiraizumi. He was then forced to commit suicide.

His early life and his time as a fugitive after 1185 are detailed in the semi-fictional *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Yoshitsune), which became the inspiration for numerous narratives and theatrical depictions of this legendary hero in Noh, Bunraku, and Kabuki.

- ▶Bunraku
- ▶Heike Monogatari
- ▶Joruri
- ▶Kabuki
- ▶Michiyuki
- ▶Noh

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Monogatari**

Literally *story* or *narrative*, this formulaic section in a joruri play is a monologue in which a warrior narrates a past battle, while the doll or actor re-enacts the battle for another character in the play. It forms the climax of the scene. The music is rhythmic and energetic; the battle scene is portrayed sonically by off-stage instruments: cymbals, conch horn, and drum. Sung sections alternate rapidly with lines spoken in time to a vigorous shamisen accompaniment.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Shamisen

#### **Naniwa-Bushi**

Also known as *rokyoku*, it is a genre of traditional Japanese story-singing that emerged in the later 19th century; often performed in small, intimate theatres by a *rokyoku-shi* reciter and a shamisen player; the only props are the singer's fan and towel; the format allows for rich improvisations

- ▶ Rokyoku

#### **Noh**

A theatre of male actors and instrumental ensemble, comprising acting, dance, singing and narration. It was brought to its current form by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) in the 14th century. It gained samurai patronage, and many prominent samurai enjoyed performing it alongside professionals. It is still performed today by many professional and semi-professional troupes, and by amateurs. Over its long history the movements and music of noh became highly codified, which facilitated its continued transmission. Noh plays freely adapted literary and oral sources, such as *The Tale of the Heike*, and noh plays were in turn adapted by later theatrical and literary forms. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

- ▶ Heike Monogatari
- ▶ Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)
- ▶ Sado Island
- [web-site](#)

#### **Rokyoku**

Synonym for Naniwa-Bushi

- ▶ Naniwa-Bushi

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Sado Island**

Japan's sixth largest island, located in the Sea of Japan, about 50km off the coast of Niigata Prefecture. Its remoteness made it a place of exile for political or otherwise defamed figures; the most prominent among them were the Buddhist monk Nichiren (1222-1282) from 1271 to 1274 and the founder of Noh, the dramatist Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), who was exiled in 1434 under unspecified charges. The island experienced an economic upturn during the Edo Period (1600-1867), when gold was discovered in 1601; the last mine was closed in 1989.

►Sado Ningyo Shibai

[web-site](#)

#### **Sado Ningyo Shibai**

On the island of Sado in the Sea of Japan, three puppetry traditions have been preserved - all of them designated as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property: *bunya ningyo*, *sekkyo ningyo*, and *noroma ningyo* (*ningyo* means puppet). *Bunya ningyo* and *sekkyo ningyo* puppets are operated by one puppeteer and the play is accompanied by *joruri* narrative and the three-stringed shamisen lute.

*Bunya ningyo*, named after the *joruri* singer Okamoto Bunya (1633-1694) from the Kansai area of western Japan dates back to the late 19th century. The artists are curtained from the view of the audience. *Sekkyo ningyo* is a dramatization of *sekkyo-bushi*, a genre of story-singing associated with Buddhist teaching through miracle tales. Its musical style is simpler than *bunya ningyo*. *Noroma ningyo* is a slapstick style of puppetry with crude and sometimes scatological humour. Currently there are about five or six performing troupes on the island.

►Bunraku

►Joruri

►Sado Island

[web-site](#)

# Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

## Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

### Glossary

#### Shamisen

Literally *three strings*, a relative of the Western lute, introduced from China via the Ryukyu Islands, today's Okinawa Prefecture, in the 16th century. Its long unfretted neck allows nuanced melodic shading of tones. The *biwa hoshi*, visually impaired minstrels, adapted it by applying some features of the biwa lute, notably the use of the large plectrum. It soon became the most popular instrument of the Edo Period (1600-1867), and is used to accompany *joruri* story-singing, in *nagauta* Kabuki dance music, in *jiuta* chamber music, and in folk song.

- ▶ Biwa
  - ▶ Biwa Hoshi
  - ▶ Edo Period (1600-1867)
  - ▶ Goze
  - ▶ Joruri
  - ▶ Kabuki
  - ▶ Rokyoku
- [web-site](#)

#### Taira no Atsumori (1169-1184)

Samurai of the Heike or Taira clan whose death at the age of 15 in the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani was chronicled in *The Tale of the Heike*. His tragic engagement in single combat with Kumagai no Jiro Naozane, an ally of the Genji or Minamoto clan, has long captured the popular imagination and has been frequently retold in literature, theatre, and in contemporary popular culture.

- ▶ Bunraku
  - ▶ Heike Monogatari
  - ▶ Ichi-no-Tani Futaba Gunki
  - ▶ Kabuki
  - ▶ Kumagai Jinya
  - ▶ Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)
- [web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### **Glossary** **Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)**

Author, theorist, and *tayu* reciter of the traditional Japanese *joruri* puppet theatre. He collaborated with former Kabuki playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) to develop the genre that became known as *gidayu-bushi* and later a more literary form of ningyo joruri which evolved into the Bunraku puppet theatre we know today. He was founder and manager of the Takemoto-za puppet theatre in Osaka's Dotonbori district.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Chikamatsu
- ▶ Monzaemon (1653-1725)
- ▶ Dotonbori
- ▶ Edo Period (1600-1867)
- ▶ Gidayu-Bushi
- ▶ Joruri

[web-site](#)

#### **Tayu**

The story-singer (chanter or reciter) in Japanese puppet theatre. Together with the shamisen player, his task is not only to narrate the background of the plot, but also to embody the voice of each character. Tayu are considered the most important actors in puppetry, as they have to dramatise the emotions of male and female characters and their wide range of ages, personalities and roles.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Gidayu-Bushi
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Michiyuki
- ▶ Rokyoku
- ▶ Shamisen
- ▶ Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714)

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

### Why Singing Stories Makes Japanese Theatre Unique

#### Glossary **Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura**

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This classic seven-act play, known as *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, premiered as a Bunraku puppet play at the Takemoto-za theatre in Osaka's Dotonbori district in 1747; co-authored by Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shoraku, and Namiki Senryu. It was soon afterwards adapted for Kabuki. It is a fanciful recreation of episodes, recorded in the semi-fictional *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Yoshitsune), where the fugitive samurai Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) is in flight from vassals of the Shogun, his half-brother Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199). One of the most frequently performed scenes is *Hatsune no Tabi* (The Journey with the Drum, Hatsune), a *michiyuki* (poetic journey) in which Lady Shizuka, Yoshitsune's lover, is accompanied by Yoshitsune's retainer Sato Tadanobu (1161-1186) through the Yoshino mountains.

- ▶ Bunraku
- ▶ Dotonbori
- ▶ Hatsune no Tabi
- ▶ Joruri
- ▶ Kabuki
- ▶ Michiyuki
- ▶ Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)

[web-site](#)

## Music in Bunraku and Kabuki

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