

The River Hii flows swiftly in the divine morning glow

The rhythm of the ryuteki rises up to the heavens

Flute master Hino Tatsuo

The infinity of Japanese sound

Hikawa, part of Izumo City in eastern Shimane, is a magnet for students and researchers from all over the world, who make their way to a house near the Hii River. It is the home of Hino Tatsuo, one of Japan's remaining makers of *yokobue*, traverse flutes (held horizontally). Hino works alone, doing everything himself, including performing, where he channels his feelings into improvisations that speak to the gods. As a flute maker, he breathes his soul into his creations, and as a performer he entrusts his feelings not to word or text but to sound. He talked to us about his experience as a flute master, the value of traditional Japanese music, and just what is true music.



1. To talk to God

Music rooted in the land

Gagaku, Japanese court music with a history of over 1,300 years, employs three flutes: *the ryuteki* or dragon flute, *the kagurabue*, and *the komabue*. All three are *yokobue*, and they are also used in local traditional performing arts. My job is to make them. I have been involved in *kagura*, a type of Shinto ritual ceremonial dance, and *shishimai*, the lion dance, for more than 60 years. It's now more than 50 years since I first made a flute, but it has depths that are still unknown to me.

I am from Izumo, home to *Izumo kagura*, a dance largely traditional to eastern Shimane. *Yokobue* are central to *kagura*. *The ryuteki* used by the priests is descended from *Gagaku*, and has seven finger holes. They are made like this throughout the country, with the same musical temperament. However, the average person uses a *kagurabue*, which has one less finger hole; even here in Izumo, their size varies by village and shrine, and so too do the musical temperament and tone.

No two are the same, and this makes possible melodies that are unique to individual villages.



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The world's oldest orchestra

Gagaku reached Japan in 752. Music from continental China and the Korean Peninsula linked to early Japanese music, and from there it developed its own direction. *Gagaku*'s existence precedes western music, and it is recognized as the world's oldest form of ensemble music



"Light and sound pouring down from heaven"

The sho, a Japanese free reed instrument introduced from China during the Nara period

"Dragons soaring in the sky"

The ryuteki, a Japanese free reed instrument called the dragon flute

"Voices of people echoing from the ground"

The hichiriki, a Japanese double-reed instrument used as one of two main melodic instruments in *gagaku*

The Gagaku ensemble is based on these three bamboo instruments in a musical expression that combines the heavens, the sky, and the earth, and that is thought to create the universe as it is.

The sho symbolizes the heavens, *the hichiriki* represents the earth, and *the ryuteki* creates a clever connection between the heavens and the earth. According to Chinese legend, heaven and earth are connected by a dragon, and that's where *the ryuteki*, the dragon flute, gets its name. It was the means for conveying ones' thoughts to the invisible gods; not through words or text, but through honest sounds, without lies.

Entrusting thoughts to sounds

I am interested in the folk music born and passed down in a place and that does not venture further afield but remains only there. The instruments used do not convey the accuracy of pitch and rhythm like Western classical music, so *the fue*, drum and dance have no script and no sheet music. There is no conductor. The more something comes between one man and another, the weaker the connection. The most important part of local performing arts is that everyone gathers in one place and starts doing things.

Communicate thoughts with sound and focus on sound. The musicians gather there, breathing together, feeling the space between them, deepening their connections, the bonds between them.

The way to convey something only through performing arts is to gather skilled people. Folk music is handed down by learning through the body, so sounds aren't reproduced, mistakes are made, and it's like presenting unfinished music. Moreover, you are not performing to an audience, but to invisible gods. The goal isn't for the gods to see you, but the process itself, the hard work.



Silent communication

For about 10 years now, I have been teaching the kids at an elementary school in Izumo how to make Yayoi era *tsuchibue*. They use clay to make an egg-shaped ocarina, which is then dried and fired using wood. We then play them in a giant ensemble of about 100 sixth graders. The music teacher is there to offer guidance, but the sounds from the handmade flutes are all random. Teachers that work with standard, unified instruments often can't handle it.

In the end what I do with the children is to tell them, first, hold down all the finger holes and make a sound. Release your fingers one by one and when you feel the sound going up, make a simple song with the big differences in sound. At this point, one-third of them produce a sound, another third has an incomplete sound, and the rest have nothing. That's when the kids who don't get a sound stop practicing

"What is sound? It's not only clean sound. A piercing tone is also a sound."

That is how I talk to the children. The important thing is that everyone playing has the same awareness. The result is whether or not they produce a sound. If you try to do it correctly, you become more aware of not wanting to make mistakes than doing it wholeheartedly. And then what's the point of blowing in the first place? It's just a question of how to explain that to the listener.

The children played as an ensemble at the Izumo Yayoi-no-Mori Museum, and the manager of the museum shed tears. Why so moved? The sounds are random. It's not the accuracy, quality of melody, or *the fue* skill. But the hard work of the children was conveyed. Indeed, through silent communication that transcends words, the people assembled there were unified as one. That's the way I see it.

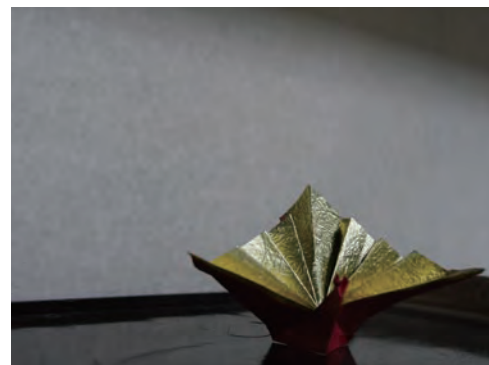


Sound evangelist

I make and play songs, but you cannot do the same songs because it's all improvisation. Instead of chasing a melody, my fingers move freely according to the images in my head. For example, for any sound, there are only about two sounds that lead from it to the next. When the most pleasing sound flow splits one way, there are then two ways to split from that sound. I just connect these. The way the sounds split is different each time, so my performances are never the same.

There is a song called "*Megumi no Taiga*" the river of enlightenment. It conveys an image of lightning striking, and of rain falling on Mt. Sentsu (Mt. Torikami) in the deepest part of Shimane Prefecture, forming streams and flowing into the sea. With your eyes closed, quietly thinking about that scene, you flow through it.

It can be hard to produce sound midway through a performance. The recorder is easier to use if you want a clean sound, but it becomes impossible to express subtle changes in the music, and you cannot increase the intensity, so I cannot render my thoughts into the sounds. Japanese music is about communicating your feelings.





Knowing your roots

One day, a woman visited me who had returned to Japan after studying the violin in Vienna for eight years. An acquaintance told her, "If you are active in Japan, there are people who make instruments, write and play songs, so why not look them up and meet them? And so it seems she reached out to me. The woman had an expensive violin, and so I asked her some things:

"I think the violin changed from something before into this shape. What do you think?"

"I studied from the Baroque era onward, so I don't know what came before that."

"Is it better to play knowing that, or better not knowing?"

"It's better to know."

"It's a living tool that uses a thread. What do you use when shooting prey."

"Ah, a bow ..."

The violin is a stringed instrument that is strung like a bow. By combining stronger and weaker strings the sound changes – that's a harp which is plucked. When bowed, it's a violin. When struck, a piano; when strummed a guitar. They all come from tools we use in life.





The Iwabue, rock flute, discovered by Hino that appears to be from the Jomon period

When I started to make *fue*, I looked back into history. In the Kishu-Tokugawa Family Traditional Musical Instruments Collection there is a *fue* that is used largely in *Gagaku*, and I went to see it several times. *The yokobue* appeared in Japan about 1,300 years ago when *Gagaku* was introduced from China, but in the course of my research I came across a *tsuchibue* from about 2000 years ago. It seems to have been used in Japan from the end of the Jomon period to the Yayoi period, and appears to have its roots in Mongolia. I also discovered an *Iwabue*, a rock flute, that the Jomon people would have used.

Here we have reached an era without music. *The tsuchibue* has finger holes that make it musical, but *the iwabue* I found had only one hole. This was a time before melody. It must have been a tool to signal something to someone or something out of eyesight. If this is from the Jomon period, we cannot help but feel the vitality of the people.

Demons, for example - the charm of HINO- style interpretation

How is performing to a person or to an invisible existence different? *Kagura* is not only divided by the eastern and western parts of Shimane, ideas are different even within the same *Kagura*. *Kagura* is a fight between the gods and the demons, representing good and evil. Good and evil are not different things, they coexist in the human mind. However, evil is covered by good, so evil exists within good. When good weakens, evil does its best to come out.

Strengthening good means that good and evil within the heart fight, good wins, and evil become smaller and return to where it came from. In *Izumo kagura* this does not kill the demon – instead it works by changing minds and converting people. Those who lose, play the role of dancing with money, or paying demons with swords. Not killed, but returned to whence they came. In this way, *Izumo kagura* skilfully expresses the right and wrong that is in the heart. *Iwami kagura*, developed as a popular performing art with enhanced drama and entertainment, takes a different approach and kills evil. The visual expression of this is that *Iwami's* demons have horns, and *Izumo's* demons have no horns.



2. The skills at the heart of culture

Europe's accuracy, Japan's depth

In Japan, we listen to music from numerous countries on a daily basis. If you think about it, classical music has been taught since the Meiji era, based on the principles of European music. Piano, violin and guitar are learned. And this has led to neglect of traditional Japanese musical instruments.

It is important to play the music of Bach and Mozart accurately, but this music was cultivated in the dry climate of Europe. Musical instruments were developed and improved from the perspective of overlaying several sounds to enjoy the harmony of chords. But in places like Japan, with high humidity, sounds are immediately diffused and absorbed. So, what matters in Japan is not accuracy. It is about conveying your thoughts and spirit. I feel like this difference in the humidity of the environment is the difference between Japan and the West.

Western music adjusts pitches with rhythm and speed, but if there were a scale going from 0 to 100, the Japanese style would be to reproduce the 100 in limitless steps. It has a mechanism to connect something with something. The change is not dramatic, like in classical music, but in depth. I think this is a Japanese asset, a global asset.

Pleasant sounds turn into musical instruments

Compared to Japanese music that has a direct and emotional sound expression, Western music expresses itself in melody, chord progressions and rhythms. A melody is made, sounds overlap and combine in the flow, and various instruments come in. Naturally, when combining musical instruments with different sounds, the tendency flows toward a similar musical temperament. In the end, the result of pursuing "better music" is the shape of today's instruments. Musicians around the world play classical music, and there is a world for enjoying music.

Learning by experience

When I made a pan flute, it was interesting to understand the background of Western music. The instrument's name is derived from Pan, the semi-beast god, of Greek mythology, with the legs of a faun. It is composed of tubes made from reeds, all different lengths, that are mounted side by side and blown. Iwata Hidenori, one of Japan's foremost experts in Pan music, commissioned me to produce one. It was my first attempt. I put beeswax inside and adjusted the tones by changing the depths, but when I added the notes—do re mi fa sol la ti do—I found that the do sounds on either end of the octave did not match.

It so happened that a training session for high school music teachers in Shimane prefecture was being held at

my home, so I told the teachers that the sound did not match my senses, and that it seemed as if my sense of sound has deteriorated. But they reassured me, and told me I was correct. It was true that the notes did not match. And they had a theory.

Western music has an equal-tempered scale that divides an octave into 12 semitones, and most songs, not only today's classical music but also pop and rock, are played using this scale. The 12 notes are C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A, A#, and B, and the scale uses a tuning pitch of 442 hertz. On the human sensory scale, as you go up by semitones, the lower C and the C an octave higher do not sound the same. The upper C is slightly higher. The higher the octave, the higher the pitch, and the lower the octave, the lower the pitch. In Europe, that would make it unfit for performance, so the slight highness is forcibly distributed evenly across the octave.

Expressing the melody, chords, and rhythms instead of averaging the sounds is a characteristic of Western music. Music for people to hear. I understand that precisely because I make *fue*.

Converting reduced energy

My experiences and understanding of the differences in culture and climate have led me to notice a number of things. Take technique. Japanese who were born overseas and have studied music have acquired advanced skills, and achieved good results in contests. Technique is important for performing good music—but sometimes I perform, and no matter what, I just cannot get into the mood for it.

When this happens I always cover it with a technique I haven't previously used. It is Japanese style to suppress technique and transmit suppressed energy into something else. To make a sound change while extracting the same sound for a long time, what kind of materials should I use?, how should I make the instrument?, what kind of performance should I do?...I feel Japanese culture in these deep places. Compared to the beautiful and unified European music, Japanese music can be called diverse.





It's OK for each to be different

As I mentioned in the column, even within the same *kagura*, the priests assert that it is not something to show to people, and it is *Izumo kagura* that maintains tradition. However, in *Iwami kagura*, which offers entertainment, there is a focus on attracting customers, so *fue* playing ability should be improved as quickly as possible. As it takes years to become a fully-fledged *ryuteki* player, the recorder was used – all you need to do to make a sound is to blow into it.

The recorder is simple and has no dynamics. It's high if you blow strongly, low if you blow weakly. The simplicity is covered by finger techniques. Playing with your fingers moving at tremendous speed, it looks like you're doing a difficult trick and it sounds good. If you are playing for people to listen then of course you would choose it, but if you do that, Japanese culture fades away, and it is also a kind of deception.



In the world of Japanese music, it is fine for *fue* and the melody to differ from one village to the next. If someone tries to write a score for a piece, the musical temperament will be aligned, which will result in the sounds becoming accurate; but the real image of *kagura* will no longer be revealed, and everyone will be the same.

So in Japanese music you don't have to be the same as your neighbours. That is important.



Reviving life

The other day, someone brought me a *fue* I made about 40 years ago, but that's still being played. The more you use a *fue*, the better, and its sound develops a roundness and depth. It doesn't change shape but the tone changes. That's because by blowing into a *fue* you breathe life into it. Life accumulates little by little and is reborn as a deep tone. The more you use it, the more life you have. Life accumulates little by little. It is reborn as a deep tone.

There are two other things that relate to life. One is the vermillion painted on the inside of *the fue*, a color made by mixing bengala powder. But why vermillion? The bright yellowish red color has been associated with revival since ancient times. When someone dies, paint the inside vermillion, with the hope that their soul will be revived. This belief seems to come from sun worship or from blood as the color of life.





3. A life changing encounter

Takahashi Chikuzan

Looking back now, I am aware of an encounter that changed my life, a visit to my home by the first generation Takahashi Chikuzan, when I was 26. Chikuzan was blind, a master of *the Tsugaru shamisen* who also played *the shakuhachi* and *yokobue*. He was the man who brought *the Tsugaru shamisen* from its home region to the rest of Japan and the wider world, but for some reason that's not the instrument I was drawn to, I was not drawn to *the shamisen*, but to the sound of Chikuzan's *yokobue*. *The fue* itself had nothing to do with it, but a desire to "make that flute" sprung up inside me, and I persistently asked Chikuzan how it was made. He left the place saying, "Okay, I understand. I'll send you a *fue*", and three months later, a *fue* used in Tohoku folk songs arrived from Chikuzan. I researched and studied it, and somehow made my own. From there, my life as a flute master began.

Blowing life in

After I started making *fue*, I was seen as eccentric for about 10 years. Even my grandmother said "I'm so embarrassed, give it up". If you spend your days making and playing *fue*, people don't take you seriously. But after about 10 years, if my grandmother didn't hear the whistle for about three days, she would start to worry, "I haven't heard that *fue* for a while," she would say. "Are you feeling OK?"

I was accepted as a member of *the kagura*, but for about half a year I didn't hear the sounds I expected at all. The old guys often got mad at me. Around that time I was the opening act at one of Chikuzan's performances. I stood on stage in front of the curtain and performed on my *fue* over a narration detailing my encounter with Chikuzan. Then, the curtain rose, and Chikuzan appeared. After the concert, I gave Chikuzan the flute to thank him for the encounter.

I have memories of many activities over the past 50 years. Even though I wasn't good at changing trains in Japan, I went to Vienna and New York and overseas to perform. The other day I pulled out my notebook from my visit to China and recalled arriving at a village 2,000 kilometers from Beijing, where it had not rained for three months. I prayed with my *fue* for rain during my performance, and it really started to rain. I know it was a coincidence – but maybe my thoughts were transmitted to a higher power.



Challenges for the future

How will Japanese traditional music change in the future? *Izumo kagura* protects the tradition, but it may well disappear if there is no one to blow *the fue*. On the other hand, *Iwami kagura*, conscious of its audience, and having the strength of just needing anyone who can play a recorder, may live on.

Looking at Japanese music, in reality new movements contain mixes with other things, such as *shamisen* with rock. The search for Japanese music that expresses modernity while standing on tradition is still a work in progress. I just hope that the original meaning will be handed down, even if the shape changes little by little.

My mission is to continue making *fue* that will last for 100 or 200 years. I want to keep myself alive to connect with those who come to visit.

Biography Hino Tatsuo



Hino Tatsuo lives in Hikawa in Shimane, a prefecture that lies on the Japan Sea coast, near the western tip of Honshu. In 1968, at age 26, he met the first generation Takahashi Chikuzan, and became fascinated by the mysterious sound of *fue*, the Japanese family of flutes. He has long been known as a maker of *fue*, and for his composition and performance. In 1982, he also started production and performance of *the tsuchibue*, an ocarina dating from the Yayoi era. He has performed at Chuguji Convent in Nara, Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto, Itsukushima Shrine (Miyajima 1400 festival), and Yakushiji Temple in Nara (the anniversary of the Tenmu Emperor). He visited New York and Vienna in 1996 and Ningxia in 1998 to lecture and perform. Currently, as a composer for *fue*, he continues to perform and to teach music on the themes of nature, people, climate and culture.

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Web-Site

Izumo: Land of Gods, Myths, and Metals

<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#swordsbellsdragonsmyths>

Appendix / Information

Ryuteki

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryūteki>

Fue

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fue>

Gagaku

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gagaku>

Kagura

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kagura>

Jomon period

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C5%8Dmon_period

Yayoi period

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yayoi_period

Takahashi Chikuzan

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Takahashi_Chikuzan

Tsugaru-Jamisen

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsugaru-jamisen>

Shamisen

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamisen>

Shakuhachi

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakuhachi>