

Shiotaka's Space: Social and Musical Interaction in a Tokyo Live House¹

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Introduction

Imagine Tokyo with its tradition: temples run for centuries by the one family, old graves of famous authors and the cherry blossoms in the spring. Now imagine the energy of Tokyo: the skyscrapers, bright lights and people moving all the time. This is Nippori, part of downtown Tokyo. West of Nippori station is the tradition; east is modern Tokyo. A tiny performance venue used exclusively for *hōgaku* [traditional Japanese music] is housed within one inconspicuous six-storey building in Nippori. An adult entertainment business in the basement boasts higher quality “companions” for seven thousand yen. The second floor bar advertised all you can drink whisky and *shōchū* for 3,900 yen. Over the past year it has been renovated into private video boxes where the customers can enjoy adult videos. The third floor is a salsa studio and bar. The fourth floor was a hostess bar, which was actually a front for a *yakuza* office, but recently, the *yakuza* moved out and the fourth floor is now a *manga* café also with private rooms. The sixth floor is an esthetic salon in which an “all service” massage costs ten thousand yen. Sandwiched between these floors on level five is “Waon”, the *hōgaku* performance space.

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This paper² examines Waon, the place, and introduces one musician, Shiotaka Kazuyuki³, who performs regularly at this venue. The paper then concentrates on the “musicking” which occurs during Shiotaka’s performances and investigates the interaction of the people, the place and the performance as expressed through his concerts.

Waon

Hôgaku is commonly performed in concert halls but it can now be heard in small intimate spaces which are known as “live houses”. In Tokyo alone, there are over two hundred live houses in which all genres of music are explored. From the late 1990’s, *hōgaku* became an integral part of many of these venues. Not only is music from the Noh or *kabuki* theatre performed in these small spaces but also new forms of *hōgaku* have emerged as musicians break away from tradition. This new music is labelled as “new wave *hōgaku*” by the record industry.

With the popularity of new wave *hōgaku* increasing, the first specialist *hōgaku* live house opened in April 1999. Named “Waon” [Japanese Sounds], this venue was established by a *shakuhachi* [vertical bamboo flute] performer and a *hōgaku* specialist. Their vision was to create a non-hierarchical atmosphere in which professionals and amateurs could perform any type of *hōgaku*. Waon was designed as a venue where musicians could come, eat and drink whilst jamming, a pub where you could play music. This was not financially viable and performances were subsequently incorporated. In May 2001, there were approximately ten concerts per month and this live house opened as a bar on other evenings. Due to the venue’s increasing popularity, in late 2002, there were at least twenty performances a month and Waon closed on other nights.

Shiotaka Kazuyuki

The majority of performances at Waon are by *shakuhachi*, *koto* [thirteen-stringed zither] or *shamisen* [three-stringed plucked lute] artists. One instrument performed rarely at this venue and at *hōgaku* concerts in general is the *biwa*, [four or five-stringed pear-shaped lute] even though this instrument gained worldwide attention with Takemitsu Tōru’s *November Steps*. The only *biwa* musician who performs regularly at Waon is Shiotaka Kazuyuki (see Photograph 1). Shiotaka started his music industry career as a jazz guitarist. He wanted to find his “Japanese” identity so at thirty-five years of age, Shiotaka started learning Tsuruta-style *biwa*.

² This paper is primarily based on fifteen months of fieldwork conducted at Waon from May 2001 to July 2002 funded by The Japan Foundation Fellowship and The University of Adelaide Research Abroad Scholarship.

³ The Japanese names in this text follow the established conventions of the family name preceding the given name.

Three years later in 2000, he performed at Waon for the first time thereafter using this venue as a regular performance space. During the fifteen month period⁴, Shiotaka lead eight concerts collaborating with various artists⁵ and presented not only traditional works, but also contemporary pieces for the *biwa*.

Photograph 1: Shiotaka Kazuyuki



Musicking

Musicking is defined by Small as “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (1998: 9). Therefore, it

⁴ From May 2001 to July 2002.

⁵ Dates of concerts and instruments used by other performers are as follows:
 21 July 2001 with percussion and *fue* [horizontal bamboo flute]
 1 September 2001 with *biwa*
 7 December 2001 with *shakuhachi*
 21 March 2002 with cello, flute and *shakuhachi*
 11 May 2002 with *biwa*
 28 June 2002 with *fue*
 9 July 2002 with *koto* and *fue*
 19 July 2002 with *fue* and *biwa*

can be said that the performers, audience members and staff at Waon are all musicking. Using this underlying concept, this paper focuses on how these people are musicking and highlights some musicking activities which are unique to Shiotaka's performances.

Shiotaka's instrument, the *biwa*, is central to and affects the musicking within Waon. It is not unusual for traditional Japanese instruments to be modified, most often to broaden the range of repertoire that can be performed on that instrument. From the time of the earliest *biwa*, the *gagakubiwa*⁶, this instrument has been adapted. At present, most performers use one of the six standard *biwa*⁷. Shiotaka, on the other hand, has constantly adapted his *biwa* (see Photograph 1) to suit his particular performance style and needs. Modelling the *nishikibiwa*⁸, a few of Shiotaka's modifications include a *biwa* with a larger body and a longer and thicker neck. In doing so, the strings were lengthened and thickened with an extra fret added thereby lowering the sound and increasing the range of the *biwa*. Due to the heavier weight of the instrument, Shiotaka plays his *biwa* seated on a chair regardless of the repertoire⁹. This in turn affects the staging within the venue.

At Waon, the performers determine the staging. The chairs, tables and stage itself can be rearranged and moved allowing the musicians to create varied atmospheres for their concerts. Shiotaka performs at the front of the venue (see Photograph 2) and chooses a low stage and chair so that the sight lines are only a little higher than the audience. Small commented that every building "is designed and built to house some aspect of human behavior and relationships, and its design reflects its builders' assumptions about that behavior and those relationships" (1998: 20). The design of the building, obviously, also comprises of the staging. Consequently, the musicians, in this case Shiotaka, can also actively determine these relationships. Shiotaka's staging does not emphasise the separation of the performance and audience areas and this produces a warmer, less-formal atmosphere within the venue. The audience sit close to the stage, only a couple metres away from the musicians, making the performance intimate and personal. This allows the audience to experience more than the "system of one-way communication" (Small 1998: 26) which Small attributes to the concert hall experience. The performance itself is still structured with a program and interval, however, in

⁶ The *gagakubiwa* was imported from West Asia via China during the early Nara period (710-784) as an instrument in the court music ensemble (Komoda 2004: 3).

⁷ The six types of *biwa* in Japan are the *gagakubiwa*, *heikebiwa*, *môsôbiwa*, *satsumabiwa*, *chikuzenbiwa* and *nishikibiwa* (Komoda 2004: 2).

⁸ A five-stringed five-fretted *biwa* created by Suitô Kinjô (1911-1973) in 1926 and is known for its ability to perform melodic lines due to the experimentation with the tuning of the instrument (Komoda 2004: 4).

this relaxed environment the audience feel that they are participating in the concert. With the average audience size of fifteen, they commonly make eye-contact with the performers and the cosy surroundings promote the feeling that the performance is a private concert. Moreover, the audience is able to interact with the musician before and after the performance as well as during the interval. At such times, the guest performers and their students relax the *shishô-deshi* [teacher-student] relationship, prevalent in Japanese traditional arts due to the hierarchical *iemoto* [head of school] system¹⁰. During Shiotaka's performances, the *deshi* find that they are able to approach their *shishô* on a social level due to the casual approach taken by the performers and often, the cultural norm of using formal language toward the *shishô* is also relaxed. Shiotaka's staging therefore does not create a system of one-way communication, rather, the musicians and audience communicate with one another creating a system of two-way communication.

Photograph 2: Front Staging at Waon Viewed from the Audience Area



⁹ The norm for *hōgaku* works is to perform seated on the stage floor and for new wave *hōgaku* works to be performed while seated on a chair. As the *biwa* repertoire is predominantly *hōgaku* with little new wave *hōgaku* composed, most *biwa* musicians perform all *hōgaku* works seated on the stage floor.

¹⁰ This relationship establishes “attitudes to status, defines specific behaviour such as duty [*on*] and obligation [*giri*]” (Coaldrake 1997: 79). As defined by Benedict in 1946, *on* is normatively from superior to subordinate as opposed to *giri* which is from subordinate to superior. In this *on-giri* relationship, the *shishô* is obliged to help, support and protect the *deshi* and in turn the *deshi* are expected to express their loyalty and devotion. Hsu (1975: 59-68) noted four major structural features of the *iemoto* system:

- (1) The master-disciple relationship is achieved in two stages from apprentice to accredited teacher in which “any change in the interpretation of the content of the arts by the disciple is forbidden. Analysis and organization of the basic technique and the style are determined and controlled by the master” (63).
- (2) An interlinking hierarchy is created with the disciples linked to each other through their master and the masters linked to one another through their master, forming a pyramid shaped hierarchy with the *iemoto* at the top.
- (3) The supreme authority over the whole school rests with the *iemoto* who controls the style, the standard of excellence and the students who are accepted or ostracised by the school.
- (4) The *iemoto* system is a fictional family system with the *iemoto* as the head of the family and the disciples as children.

The interaction between the performer and staff of the venue provides another form of musicking at Waon. Shiotaka considers this important and unique to this particular performance space. As a regular musician at Waon, both Shiotaka and the staff have formed a friendly relationship with one another. Shiotaka particularly appreciates comments from Haga Keiko, the cook who is considered to be the mother figure of Waon. She has often been described as an *Edokko*, a Tokyoite, who speaks her mind rather than conforming to the tradition of separating true feelings [*honne*] from the socially acceptable formal feelings [*tatemaie*] (Sugimoto 1997: 26). Haga's opinion is based on her experience in the *hōgaku* industry after studying the *koto* for over twenty years as well as listening to performances and working at Waon for over two years. Waon is not regarded as a prestigious venue within the *hōgaku* industry and therefore, Haga is not considered to be part of this hierarchical and structured world even though she is employed in a *hōgaku* performance venue. Consequently, she is able to offer her truthful opinion to the performers without being ostracised from the *hōgaku* community. Haga's detailed assessment of Shiotaka's concerts commonly includes advice on Shiotaka's compositions, the quality of his guest performers and a critique of his performance including his technique and the timbre of his *biwa* and his voice. Thus, musicking for Shiotaka not only includes the performance itself, but also the advice and contribution from Haga. Small interestingly notes that there is a need for critics to be a consumer guide for the audience telling them "what they should and should not buy - and to give them confidence in the rightness of their choice" (Small 1998: 34). Haga, the critic, does not fulfil this role for the audience nevertheless she is the critic who is approached directly by the performer. Through her role as a critic, she influences the performance not only within Waon but also at other venues as Shiotaka uses her comments to improve his subsequent performances.

Conclusion

Even this brief discussion reveals complex interactions at Waon. Shiotaka has stated that this venue has been important in his development as a musician as he is able to trial new works freely and is able to receive critical feedback from the staff. Waon also provides him with the opportunity to meet other musicians and to extend his musicality in performances. The people, place and performance interact during Shiotaka's concerts outside the normal constraints of Japanese society. The relationships of the performers, audience and staff are not those of the Western concert hall which, by many Japanese, would be the norm. Rather, musicking in Waon creates bonds and friendships not available at other performance venues. Additionally, these relationships are not contained within the walls of Waon, but are also developed at other

performance venues. Therefore, Waon expands the understanding of what it is to music in Tokyo.

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