



Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures  
Polish Academy of Sciences

ACTA ASIATICA  
VARSOVIENSIA

No. 29

Warszawa 2016

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Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2016  
PL ISSN 0860-6102  
eISSN 2449-8653  
ISBN 978-83-7452-091-1

ACTA ASIATICA VARSOVIENSIA is abstracted in  
*The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,*  
*Index Copernicus, ProQuest Database*

# Contents

## **ARTICLES:**

- MAXIME DANESIN, L'aube des light novels en France ..... 7
- MÁRIA ILDIKÓ FARKAS, Reconstructing Tradition. The Debate on “Invented Tradition” in the Japanese Modernization ..... 31
- VERONICA GASPAR, Reassessing the Premises of the Western Musical Acculturation in Far-East Asia ..... 47
- MARIA GRAJDIAN, Imaginary Nostalgia: The Poetics and Pragmatics of Escapism in Late Modernity as Represented by Satsuki & Mei's House on the EXPO 2005 Site ..... 59
- MAYA KELIYAN, Japanese Local Community as Socio-Structural Resource for Ecological Lifestyle ..... 85
- EKATERINA LEVCHENKO, Rhetorical Devices in Old Japanese Verse: Structural Analysis and Semantics..... 109
- MICHAŁ LUBINA, It's Complicated: United States, Aung San Suu Kyi and U.S.-Burma Relations..... 131
- EWA PAŁASZ-RUTKOWSKA, Difficult Beginnings: The Problem Concerning the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations between Poland and Japan after World War II.... 147
- LIDIA STEZHENSKAYA, The Late-Quing Illustrated Shujing from Sinology Library in Moscow..... 165

AUORE YAMAGATA - MONTAYA , Girls on a Mission  
– Photographs of Japanese Girls in Late Nineteenth Century  
America: The Example of the Iwakura Mission (1871).....177

**BOOK REVIEW:**

Claudia Derichs, Mark R. Thompson (eds.), *Dynasties and  
Female Political Leaders in Asia. Gender, Power and  
Pedigree* – rev. Olga Barbasiewicz.....199

**REPORT:**

KARINA ZALEWSKA , Memory in Poland of the Rescuers  
and the Rescued from the Holocaust. On the 30th Anniversary  
of Granting the Title of the Righteous Among The Nations to  
Sugihara Chiune, Japanese Consul in Lithuania: Conference  
Report.....203

Editorial principles .....207



## Reassessing the Premises of the Western Musical Acculturation in Far-East Asia

### Abstract

The penetration of Western European culture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all over the world and especially in the Far Eastern realm was and still is an interesting topic for debates, comprising a large area, from accurate historical and sociological research until the most fanatical Europhobic scribbles. One of the most significant fields where this process is unfolding is musical culture. It is well-known that Western music was quickly and enthusiastically assimilated in the every-day life of Japanese and Koreans. Starting from the fruitful co-habitation between Western musical culture and Japanese musical tradition, the present essay proposes a discussion on the forms of cultural contamination and also aims at identifying some possible pre-existent features that might or might not facilitate the interpenetration of two distinct musical cultures.

**Key words:** acculturation, cultured/popular music, tradition, musical map, common features, inter-cultural studies

### Introduction

Undeniably, Japan and Korea are major contributors to music of European provenance, even if the special cultural brotherhood promoted by the “Enlightened Rule” occurred less than 150 years ago. For a large majority of Japanese and Korean people, European music naturally belongs to their own culture. Interest for Western art and culture had remained even in the post-Meiji epochs, when European values received no more official encouragement. “As far as taste in Classical art music is concerned, it already seems true to say that there is no great difference between Europe and Japan”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in Taishō and early Shōwa epochs, when the official policy became nationalist and reluctant to Western influences, the majority of the urban population “transferred the interest

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<sup>1</sup> Watanabe Mamoru, ‘Why do the Japanese like European Music?’, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 1982, pp. 657–665.

for the European values at the individual level of the cultural identity”.<sup>2</sup> During this time, the Japanese “had ready access to inexpensive works of virtually all the major works of European philosophy”,<sup>3</sup> hundreds of Japanese went to study in the West and the learning of Western music became part of the average education of children. “Japan, however, had an ingredient Europe lacked. In Japan, the conflict between modern and traditional was also a conflict between alien and Japanese [...]. Accordingly, conservatism was argued not only in terms of political antiquarianism, but also in those of “national essence” and cultural purity”.<sup>4</sup> We think that this assertion needs to be treated with caution at least for two reasons. Firstly, not the whole of Europe “lacked the ingredient” that equated modernity with foreignness. Eastern European lands dealt with a similar process during their explosive Westernization, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, the confrontation between alien (modern) and autochthonous (traditional) can be seen as a “conflict” only from a conservative perception. We must admit that a Fsignificant part of those societies in transformation, especially the youth, might had been attracted by the perspectives of renewal and insertion into the international life.

The quality and the perennality of this intercultural twinning definitely demands more investigation concerning the traditional social structure and cultural behaviour of the host locations, as well as the resumption of numerous issues related to the typology of cultural encounters. Slipping through the multitude of definitions, debates and comments concerning issue of cultural contamination(s), many being nothing but primitive anti-European stereotypes, we will try to point-out a few broad-based taxonomic groups: colonization, acculturation, inter-culturation, enculturation, together with their subsequent mixed forms.

### **Cultural colonization**

It is the most categorical form coming from the outside, meant to impose a new culture and aiming at radically removing the vernacular one. Generally, this kind of cultural transfer follows a military conquest. The colonizers aim not just to obtain a thoroughly informed apprentice,

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<sup>2</sup> Marius Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 548.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 550.

<sup>4</sup> William Gerald Beasley (ed.), *Modern Japan: Aspects of History, Literature and Society*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975, p. 18.

but to forge a completely transformed “new man”. Probably the most successful example of cultural replacement could be illustrated by the Islamic invasion of Northern Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, the former cultural diversity of several millenary civilizations was thrown out and replaced by an exemplary uniformity of religion, language, clothing, crafts, inter-human relationships, leisure, art and the list goes on.

Human history offers countless attempts at colonization, like Christian missions in the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries or, closer to our time, the dictatorships of all kinds in Europe, Asia and Latin America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Remarkably, none of these dictatorships succeeded to produce a fundamental or lasting cultural change. In spite of reprisals, the conquered society always kept their ancient traditions and beliefs alive underground. Moreover, the conquerors were sooner or later forced to make concessions; to adapt new rituals or ceremonies to local specifics and to allow a more or less controlled display of the vernacular ethnicities. Attempts to shatter a tradition by force did not produce a lasting effect, at least in Europe. The cultural history of Eastern Europe is rich in instances when a harsh interdiction led mostly to the opposite result: strengthening of the persecuted tradition, whilst rather milder forms of oppression encompassed a greater power of destruction. There are even cases, not numerous yet significant, when the colonized country was the one who imposed culture, religion, or life style on its conquerors, as was the case of Ancient Greece (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC after the Romans’ victory) and of Medieval China (in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD after the Mongol conquest). We meet here one more astonishing similarity between these two remote cultural centres.

### **Acculturation<sup>5</sup>**

A brief definition of this term, identifies a learning process of a foreign culture, including the adoption of values as cultural behaviour. Acculturation requires dominance – if not exclusivity – of an environment. Besides the sheer appeal of certain cultural forms, persuasion and influence techniques may also be presumed to be part of this development.

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<sup>5</sup> We rephrased in a concise manner the average definitions that can be found in any dictionary.

### **Enculturation**

Is defined as a conditioning process whereby people, mostly children, but also adults, achieve competence in their own culture. The process is comprised of two sources of learning: a guided education and the informal contamination drawn from surrounding contexts. Values, appropriate behaviours, taboos, aspirations etc., are both consciously and unconsciously transmitted.<sup>6</sup> Generally, the issues of informal contamination are pointed out in every discussion on enculturation, but tend to be rather disregarded in the case of acculturation processes.

Two particular combined cases also deserve mention: the first, on the border between colonization and acculturation, refers to USSR politics following post Second World War sovietisation, which aimed to radically change the social and cultural behaviour of Eastern Europe's citizens. A second, less severe one, refers to the recent awkward attempts of the European Union to impose a new value system concerning religion, family, nation, culture etc., including specific guidance for everyday life. Both these endeavours, which try to modify the fundamental core of local cultural tradition, had and still have relatively poor success, plausibly because they lack any spiritual basis, which is replaced by a set of theoretical directives. At the same time, the moulding of the "new man", either *homo sovieticus* or new EU-ropean, implies – to a large extent – enculturation as well, because it was (is) consistently backed by local institutions: political authorities, schools and media. When an important segment of the respective society takes part in its own process of change, it is problematic to consider it as just colonization or just acculturation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Inter-culturation**

Refers to a form of reciprocal cultural influence unguided and naturally developed in time. A salient example is the musical inter-culturalism spread by landless fiddler-bands in Eastern Europe (Moldavia, Ukraine, Southern Poland and Northern Transylvania) between the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> until the first quarter of the last century. These landless fiddlers, Gypsies and Jews (*klezmerim*) played

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<sup>6</sup> Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Mirror for Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc. 2010, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> We believe that even if it might be tempting to develop a further discussion on the power spheres, education or social evolution, free from any ideological restriction, such a topic goes far beyond the framework of this paper.

for any ethnic community and in any kind of festivity; taking in and spreading multiple influences.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they succeeded in permeating those cultural frontiers, which until then, had been confined to their own isolated structures. The Gypsy fiddlers and the *klezmorim* were the principal pathfinders of two important waves of acculturation that occurred in the Romanian Principalities and in the Northern side of the Balkans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first, of smaller size and duration, came from Turkey and Greece and the second was the great Western European acculturation, which took place at about the same time all over the world, including Far Eastern countries as well.

An Asian example of reciprocal intercultural exchange could be found in the Yayoi period when, according to archaeological artefacts, Japan and Korea shared the same cultural realm<sup>9</sup>. The musical culture in the first decades A.D. displays more evidence about this closeness. One, so far rather unchallenged argument, relies on the wide use of musical instruments of Chinese provenance. It is well known that Chinese culture plays a decisive role for both countries. Therefore, it is no wonder that a Chinese pattern influenced the manufacturing of several musical devices too. Yet the fact that both in Japan and Korea the same kind of instruments took root, and that these instruments played analogous roles in both countries, might be seen as a reasonable hint for a similar cultural demand. For instance, in spite of several differences between the Japanese *biwa* and the Korean *bipa*, both originated from an old Chinese instrument – *pipa*, both have similar timbre, both require similar playing techniques and both were used in similar circumstanced context, namely in spiritual music. In the same way, the Japanese *koto* corresponds to the Korean *gayageum*, both originating from the Chinese *zheng* and both being employed in Court ceremonials.

During the centuries to come, the Japanese-Korean cultural brotherhood faded and split into two distinct spiritual entities. The clear-cut cultural division between high and popular culture has been kept in both cultures until present times. In Korea, high culture, comprising rituals, religion and art of the Chinese tradition, was promoted and

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<sup>8</sup> Gaspar Veronica, 'Musical Culture of Minorities in the Romanian Music: Dynamics, Evolution, Role and Interaction in the Surrounding Areas' in *Musical Romania and the Neighbouring Cultures, Eastern European Studies in Musicology*, Vol. 2, Maciej Gołąb (ed.), Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, pp. 175–176.

<sup>9</sup> Eta Harich-Schneider, *A History of Japanese Music*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 4.

taught in institutions under aristocratic or intellectual authorities, while the popular tradition (beliefs, superstitions, rituals, habits, music etc.) continued to survive independently in Shamanism, in spite of official discouragements. In Japan, the popular traditions concerning art, craft and music developed freely, but the spiritual sphere (beliefs, rituals, superstition, representation of life and death etc.) known as *Shinto* was systematized and included in an organized entity, under the direct control of the authorities. Buddhism and Shintoism have shaped an unwonted form of twinning in Japanese spirituality. Anyone can observe that in Japan the majority of the Buddhist temples (*bussatsu*) have their own *Shinto* shrines (*jinja*), which undertake the role of protection of the sacred space. They are adjacent to each other, without contamination, symbolizing the traditional two fold facets of the Japanese spirituality.

The Shamanistic rituals in Korea have preserved more than one of the *Shinto* beliefs. Additionally, one of the denominations of the Shamanic ritual is *shindo* (신도). But the “Way of Gods” influence goes even farther; one can find parts of the *shindo* rituals even in territories beyond the Urals, in several habitats. They are discernible in obscure forms of pagan spirituality in some Eastern European rural areas, as more or less concealed superstitions, particularly auxiliaries for funeral and healing rituals, not to mention a significant presence in myths and fairy tales. For instance, the Shamanistic rituals for death (*ssikkum-gut*), have similarities with some occult practices more or less tolerated by the Christian Church in Eastern Romania and Moldova. The ethnomusicologists discovered more than one similarity between Romanian melodies and the music of some *ssikkum-gut*.<sup>10</sup> The collection of *ssikkum-gut* songs is truly amazing for connoisseurs of Romanian old strata folk music, not only for their important similarities in the melodic profile, but especially for the numerous “small melodic figures, repeated exactly or sequentially”,<sup>11</sup> which play the same role in the musical structure of both cultures. The first study signaling remarkably similar tunes in astonishingly remote locations belongs to Béla Bartók (1910–1912), who built on the hypothesis of a “musical map”, different from

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<sup>10</sup> Veronica Gaspar, ‘Béla Bartók and the Romanian Musical Culture: Intercultural and Intra-Cultural Perspective’ in *Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue II*, Târgu-Mureş: “Petru Maior” University Press, 2014, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Park Mikyung, *Music and Shamanism in Korea: A Study of Selected ssikkum-gut Rituals for the Dead*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of California Press, 1985, p. 215.

the geographical one. “A same melodic type can be found in the Ukraine, Persia, Iraq and Romanian Principalities”.<sup>12</sup> Bartók also discovered quasi-identical tunes linking Hungarian old musical stratum to remote locations in Central Siberia. Nevertheless, such a spread pleads for a primordial cultural unity across the whole of Eurasia, rather than for a form of extended inter-culturalism.

We can easily admit that the cultural twinning of any kind is favoured by the pre-existence of common elements. One can often observe inexplicable correspondences in several art forms or customs, which are considerably distant from each other. These coincidences – while there is no clear reason to classify them otherwise – could be noted in various folk traditions, mostly related to basic human circumstances: death, birth, diseases etc. It should be stated that such similarities refer to the non-elaborated, orally transmitted art forms and folk traditions, assuming that the specific differences loom along with highly structured cultural forms that are stabilized by writing and transmitted through teaching and not through direct contamination.

The scholar Ury Eppstein wrote a thorough study about the acceptance/rejection of Japanese music by the Europeans. He identifies four categories of European visitors throughout the last half-millennium: 1) “those expressed by persons nothing whatsoever to do with Japanese music, 2) those who became scholars of diverse aspects of Japan but not of its music, 3) musicologists and 4) composers”.<sup>13</sup> The first two categories vehemently rejected the Japanese musical style, trying hard not to seem rude. The musicologists’ appreciation was somewhat more nuanced. The benevolent opinions came from the most recent visitors, namely the composers, who were favourable and even interested to study Japanese traditional music. European composers came in contact with Japanese music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when most important European musicians were already open to foreign cultural forms, even neglecting their own academic tradition.<sup>14</sup> We believe that interest or rejection might also be influenced by the commenters’ epoch, taking into account

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<sup>12</sup> Béla Bartók, *Notes on the Folk Songs*, Bucharest: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1956, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ury Eppstein, ‘From Torture to Fascination: Changing Western Attitudes to Japanese Music’ in *Japan Forum* 19 (2), London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 191–192.

<sup>14</sup> Constantin Brăiloiu, *Widening of Musical Sensibility Facing Folk and Non-Western Music in Works II*, Emilia Comișel (ed.), Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1969, p. 236.

that cultural mentality plays a role at least as important as musical expertise does in forming such judgments.

At the same time, Ury Eppstein's study strengthens the premises of a theory which asserts that folk music facilitates cultural compatibility; implying that the elaborated<sup>15</sup> cultural forms of any kind, but especially music – are less easy to be understood by foreigners, principally by those outside said musical domain. The majority of Western non-musician guests who attended official ceremonies qualified Japanese cultured music as “a strange, bizarre, fantastic, atrocious, barbaric noise”, “unqualified and wilful discord”, “something between the squeal of a pig and the wail of a lost soul” etc.<sup>16</sup> Contact with Japanese folk music however, gave rise to different testimonies: “In our culture, the music of the knights usually sounds more pleasant than that of the low people; that of the Japanese knights is unendurable for us, and that of their sailors is pleasant for us” wrote the Portuguese missionary Luis Frois at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Three centuries later, Lafcadio Hearn referred to Japanese folk music as having “a charm indisputable even for Western ears”.<sup>18</sup>

As for Japanese people's reaction towards the Western-style of music, the appreciations are more diverse. A few European observations admitted that it is possible for there to be a corresponding displeasure for foreign music coming from the Japanese as well: “...our music [...] is regarded by them with repugnance”, “I don't believe Japanese singing sounds to us as badly as ours does to them”.<sup>19</sup> But most of the comments refer to the inexplicable fascination of the Japanese with this new style, so distant from their own tradition. Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in late 16<sup>th</sup> century Japan noted, that they could not confirm their concern regarding a possible repulsion of the Japanese for European music. The favourable opening, a fascination with European style and musical instruments led to the conclusion that, paradoxically, it was not the new religion that triggered the acceptance of its implicit music, but the other way around. For these people, whose spirituality seemed to be

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<sup>15</sup> We would like to avoid using the customary term for cultured music that is „classical music”, because – actually – it has a different signification for musicians, denoting a particular style, which occurred in a clearly framed period.

<sup>16</sup> Eppstein, ‘From torture...’, pp. 197, 200 and 201.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193 and 197.

dominated by music,<sup>20</sup> this art was the principal enticement that aroused their interest for other aspects of European culture.

The Japanese demonstrated more openness towards foreign music than the Europeans did towards theirs, although it is plausible to suppose there were some reluctant reactions also. Thus it is possible, even if there is no written evidence about it, that the first Japanese audiences could find the European manner of combining sounds weird. Even though, their subsequent behaviour proved a significant affinity for Western music in both historical epochs, when they were confronted with it (16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century). It is no wonder that this music has come to dominate the audience's preferences. In recent statistics, "the concerts of traditional music are rare, accounting for about 7% of all concerts organized in Japan; it is played on only a tiny proportion of radio programmes; and there is little demand for recordings".<sup>21</sup>

How could such an affinity ever be explained? To play the role of *advocatus diaboli*, we can identify more than one feature that could hamper the penetration of European music wherever the tradition had no harmonic superposition, rhythmic regularity and temperate tuning. Nevertheless, we identified some compatible pre-existent features between these apparently remote styles, which suggest that Western European music is more compatible with Japanese music than it is with Middle-Eastern or even South-Eastern European musical structures.<sup>22</sup> We must also take into account a major characteristic of the Japanese people, which was- and still is- to be educated and learn about western music. Another reason comes from the intrinsic structure of European music, based on the natural resonance of sound. This peculiarity might probably be the most plausible argument for the power of its penetration, not just in Far-Eastern countries, but in many other locations, no matter the structure of the vernacular culture.

Eta Harich-Schneider brings into discussion another interesting fact. It seems that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the positive impact of European music was higher than during the first stage of the Meiji Era 18 three centuries later, at least when the first reaction is concerned.<sup>23</sup> Harich-Schneider's assertion (not yet contradicted by any document) thus raises the

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<sup>20</sup> Harich-Schneider, *A History...*, p. 548.

<sup>21</sup> Watanabe, 'Why do the Japanese like...?', p. 659.

<sup>22</sup> Veronica Gaspar, 'History of a Cultural Conquest: The Piano in Japan', *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, No. 27, 2014, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Harich-Schneider, *A History...*, p. 546.

question, whether cultural timing might be relevant for a fruitful cultural meeting or not. Why was Western musical acculturation more accessible in the 16<sup>th</sup> century than in the 19<sup>th</sup>? The argument of three centuries of isolation under the Edo Era is not convincing, because there had been no European presence of any kind, before the arrival of the Jesuits. Of course, the difference due to three centuries standing between the two sociological inquiries, must not be neglected. Besides, the accuracy of information was superior in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the documentation is insufficient and comes from an unilateral source, the presumption that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century cultural shock was not as major as expected, might be plausible, especially confirmed by the subsequent assimilation.

One of the possible causes might be the type of 16<sup>th</sup> century European music, notably different compared to the 19<sup>th</sup>'s. Early European music had a different timbre, a different kind of melodic and – above all – it used non-tempered tunings, which means that broadly, the instrumental sonority was – to some extent – similar to Japanese music's. On the Japanese side, the dominant type of musical culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the popular one: orally transmitted, more flexible and more inclined toward variation. The cultured music, which was already fixed in solid and perennial structures, was confined then to a thin layer of experts, and it was publicly shared just in ceremonials and official events. When the Tokugawa Shōgunate started campaigning for the destruction of Western influence, they paid a keen attention to music; nullifying harmonic instruments such as organs and harpsichords<sup>24</sup> and zealously promoting the “music of Gods”,<sup>25</sup> namely the genuine tradition, as it was kept in monasteries and ceremony schools. Thus after three centuries, the Europeans met a musical environment which had already undergone a thorough process of enculturation.

The fact that European acculturation was easier in an older epoch, although at that time the government had not been involved (as it was the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), led to the logical assertion that the premises of a favourable or unfavourable cultural meeting are related to the specific types of cultures involved in the encounter. There is a strong foundation to presume that a structured (cultured) form of art is less

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<sup>24</sup> Gaspar, ‘History of a Cultural Conquest...’, p. 93.

<sup>25</sup> Harich-Schneider, *A History...*, p. 490 and following.

inclined to change and that the predominance of popular structure for at least one of the subjects is conducive to a successful inter-cultural connection. The arrival of European musicians in Japan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century found a musical culture structured to a large extent; hence came the necessity of the involvement of the Meiji Era authorities and their subsequent educational policies during the acculturation process.

If we look at the musical world map of the beginning of the A.D. era, we perceive a demarcation line between North and South. The Southern part is the realm of strong, structured musical cultures: India, China and Greece. The musical culture of each of these countries was characterized by writing, school education and, especially, by a fundamentally analytical approach to all musical and symbolic parameters. Even if any music of that time was related to a fastidious system of significations, the Greek (and also the Chinese) musical culture still had some degree of autonomy, which might be seen as an indicative of a professional approach. For instance, the Chinese musical culture offered the first example of a “classical” (cultured) music, entirely forged by specialists. Daniélou convincingly demonstrates that their musical system (even the pentatonic one) assumed a school and not an adaptation of popular forms.<sup>26</sup> “The Chinese, as well as the Greeks had the belief that music is the perceptual representation of those imperceptible ratios, which are unifying the elements of the manifest world”.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, in the northern part of Eurasia the Scythians, Celts, Germanic or Siberian tribes as well as the Three Kingdoms Koreans and the Yayoi Japanese shared a similar musical culture-type, which was pre-eminently oral, synthetic, meant for direct communication and related to feasts and rituals. Among them, only the Celts and the Far-Eastern countries left more consistent information behind, especially because of the testimonies of Greek or Chinese sources.<sup>28</sup> Besides these testimonies, there remain just some few archaeological vestiges and some reminiscences in living songs, still persisting in isolated areas. The Far-Eastern part has retained much more of their ancient dowry, partly because of the Asiatic structure, more inclined towards preservation than change, unlike the Europeans. We could presume that the island-

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Daniélou, *Treaty of Comparative Musicology*, Paris: Hermann, 1959, pp. 69–70.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Older or more recent works have tried to identify a comprehensive list of the first sources regarding the Celts (Markale 1993, Sawyers 2000) and the early historical periods in Japan (Harich-Schneider 1973, Henshall 1999).

structure of Japanese territory as well as the abstract “island” of cultural isolation self-created in Korea under the Silla Royalty, also played a role in this regard. However – above all – the specific differences between ethnic spiritualities notwithstanding (the northern part of Eurasia) stems from a common structure of tradition based on direct, living musical communication, which in all likelihood is favourably inclined towards both acculturation and inter-culturation.

A contemporary striking example of penetrating power of the oral type of music is given by the spread of Folk, Rock etc. genres all over the world, even in those areas where “classical” (cultured) genres made just a few followers. The episode of a fruitful meeting between two structured cultures, as it happened in the Far East a century and a half ago, remains a blessed exception – yet insufficiently clarified. Nevertheless, neither the official contribution, nor those basic common peculiarities of both Western and Japanese music we already pointed out, are sufficient to explain the depth and durability of assimilation in Japan and Korea, which is not comparable with any other acculturated locations. The traditional communication style, or the prevalence of the oral-folk music etc., are just preliminary arguments for a more consistent discussion about the most spectacular twining between musical cultures.