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LOOKING AND LISTENING

Music and Sound as Visual Trope in Ukiyo-e¹

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The word *ukiyo-e* comes from a combination of “Ukiyo” (浮世), which means “floating world,” and “e” (絵), which means picture or image. So, *ukiyo-e* offer both a description of the world of Edo (present-day Tokyo)—in particular the pleasures, foods, daily life, and culture on offer there—and the heavy bustle of the city, at that stage the largest and most densely populated in the world (with over a million inhabitants by the eighteenth century). These prints present fantastical exaggerations of life and often insert historical and mythical characters into contemporary contexts. *Ukiyo* conjures up a sense of the cultural pursuits, pastimes, and pleasures that grew up to serve a growing merchant class. Furthermore, *ukiyo* contains within it the idea of a carefree existence; of living for the moment and relishing the aesthetic aspects of life. This attitude, prevalent in the urbane richness of Edo, is encapsulated in the dominant aesthetic known as “iki” (粋). It was hedonistic and largely indifferent to status or rank, though the city itself was governed elsewhere by strict hierarchy. The “floating world” was also a world of the theater and of music, but, crucially, this was a world accessible though money. This aesthetic, then, and the ways in which it was embedded within daily life and attitudes to nature, is central to the identity of the pictures that imagined *ukiyo*. Referring to a set of new fashions and voguish practices—urbane and cultured—*ukiyo-e* thus characterize the ways in which music, among many other themes, figured in Edo life.

The imagined space of *ukiyo* was a kind of conjured domain in which the distinctions between art and life and music were blurred or even concatenated, so that the pleasure one experienced was *through* music or required the presence of music. Thus, many *ukiyo-e* prints imagine scenes in which music justifies or completes other activities. A sense of this effect can be gained through the documents that survive—writings, maps, and of course the *ukiyo-e* themselves, describing events, individuals, scenes, and journeys.

Music in *ukiyo-e* figured in many ways: through the act of listening or playing, or through music’s place in relation to a depicted character (perhaps an actor or a geisha), or to plays, or to nature; sometimes, however, the very idea of music

gave embodiment to the image's narrative. In most of these instances, however, it is important to avoid considering music, and especially listening to music, as an isolated act. Music was always embedded within some other activity in Japan and only rarely appears for its own sake, even in the case of performances with shamisen. Therefore, the sight of music can tell us something interesting about its identity in Edo-period Japan.

Music's role as a widespread and culturally important activity in Japan is made clear by Hiroshige, in a print entitled "Matching the World and Music" (音曲世界合) (1849–50). Music here is not the central focus—this would defy the aesthetic of its place within nature. Instead, it seems to emerge organically from the scene; to be a natural activity in and among whatever else is taking place. This illustrates a kind of sensuous mixture of music making, in the so-called *jōruri* style (a style associated primarily with the shamisen, and with the chanted style of singing that accompanies it). Music is implicated in the notion of nature itself. Although, in broad terms, this idea is not confined to *ukiyo-e*—it can also be found in Western art contexts—*ukiyo-e* avoid associating nature with the sublime. In fact, the Japanese had not always made a distinction between natural sounds and musical sounds, and a merging of these types of listening occurs in literature as well as in visual culture. In a famous scene from *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*), there is a description of what the writer Kikkawa Eishi has referred to as "an ideal fusion or harmony between the sounds of nature and the sounds of music (or musical instruments),"² in a passage that outlines the ritual court dance:

Under the tall autumn trees breath from a circle forty strong roused from the instruments an indescribable music that mingled with the wind's roaring and sighing as it swept, galelike, down the mountain, while through the flutter of bright falling leaves "Blue Sea Waves" shone forth with an awesome beauty.³

Clearly, then, it is the way in which sound is *experienced* that is central; it is regarded as natural or, at any rate, a fluid partner to nature, because it appears to emerge from nature, coalescing seamlessly with the experienced surroundings. Thus, to listen to music is to listen to nature. A sense of what is conveyed in *Genji Monogatari* in the form of written texts is also found in *ukiyo-e*, where, once again, listening to nature is presented as akin to listening to music. As a result, the distinction between musical instruments and the sounds of nature itself is not always made clear. Sounds, musical (from instruments) or not, are seen as emergent within the setting. What is clear, however, is the importance given to listening to nature. The construction and practice of listening to classical music in Western contexts often took the form of a composed seriousness, requiring earnest endeavor on the part of the listener as well as a type of structural connection to the artwork, also imbued with the context of the concert hall. It was implicitly understood that the artwork required such attention precisely because it was of human endeavor, in spite of what critics might have asserted. Nature did not demand or require this kind of culture-bound attention, for it was aesthetically separate. Participating in or merely observing the "performance" of nature is part of the aesthetic of Edo-period Japan.

This practice of listening to nature as though it were music, or even the idea that music collapses nature and humanity, is found in Japanese culture more widely. It

can be witnessed in the frenzy and pleasure of *hanami*, the cherry blossom viewing, the period in March and April when people gather to enjoy the transient blossoms. The pleasure in *hanami*—one that is widely thematized in *ukiyo-e*—is that of both human contact *and* nature together, as can be seen in a print from 1765 by Suzuki Harunobu, *Girl Viewing Plum Blossoms at Night* (夜の梅).

The experience of listening seriously to nature also emerges from Hiroshige's famous "Listening to Insects on Dokan Hill" (道灌山虫聞之図), from the *Series of Illustrations of Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* (東都名所) (c. 1840). In this image, a couple of men and a woman sit on a mat toward the top right, in and among the trees on a slightly elevated outcrop. The scene is a stylized construction of listening. That they sit and listen intently together is made clear not only by the title of the print, but also by the figures' lack of interaction, in spite of the drinks and food they have. Instead, they concentrate on the sounds that nature is making, as though they were listening to a concert, but without a human/musical focus. Although this scene contrasts with the carnivalesque invocation of group pleasure during *hanami*, it nonetheless illustrates the same fundamental importance of nature, and the sound of nature, in art. The incorporation of nature and music appears also in Kitagawa Utamaro's "Brocade Prints of Beauties Performing as Jōrurihime" (c. 1800). Here the ideas of history and music are blended. We see a small garden with a gate, next to which a man is playing a flute. He is the twelfth-century figure Minamoto Yoshitsune. To his right is Reizei, the woman who (according to the legend) was instructed by Princess Jōruri to find the flautist. In the fantasy that emerges, history and music blend in a kind of aesthetic allegory.

This approach to understanding listening within Japanese visual culture has been commented on more widely in the context of pillow books—collections of notes or tales, often written in a scholarly classical style, that recounted certain periods in an individual's life—and even more generally as a way of suggesting that Japanese auditory sensibilities, extending beyond music, account for the visual and literary tropes of music so often encountered. However, the presentation of music in later *ukiyo-e* scenes from kabuki theater suggests that its field of influence expanded beyond capturing the aesthetics of nature.

Actors' Performances

Music plays a significant part in *ukiyo-e* actor portraits. Here, music—in particular through these individuals' stylized poses—is captured within a tradition of presenting famous actors of Edo in a deliberately exaggerated, almost caricatured way. The figuring of music in these images seems to trace its changing role in kabuki more widely. Such prints depicted a wide range of people, including kabuki actors, geisha, and so-called *bijin*—beauties, famed for their looks, who would also entertain with dance and usually music, mostly on the shamisen or koto. Indeed, in prints, music often authorized their beauty, completing their identity as *bijin* and marking them out as important.

Kabuki theater is not narrative in any continuous way. Instead, it focuses on captured moments, which take the form of sumptuous, ritualized performances—usually dances—often by star actors, who play out key episodes in the play. The actor's way of performing these scenes, or vignettes, captivates the audience, making them the most highly anticipated scenes. Part of this stylized action is the rhetorical pose

(or *mie*) that actors adopt at various points and which usually lasts for a couple of seconds. At these moments, the actor freezes and squints with one eye. This produces the so-called “Mona Lisa Effect,” in which each member of the audience assumes that the actor is looking specifically at him or her, and it is very often this pose (the most characteristic and individual) that is captured in *ukiyo-e* of kabuki actors. It is the dramatic high point of a scene, and the tension is further accentuated through the use of *tsuke*, wooden clap boards struck repeatedly together to mark the moment.

Reproducing this stylized pose in prints created a kind of “brand” for the actor in question, capturing what was considered to be his unique performance feature. *Ukiyo-e* of actors were generally sold as a way of enhancing their popularity, increasing their fame and income. It was thus important that the captured pose should remind kabuki audiences of the play and of the actor more specifically, with the print serving as a form of both memorabilia and promotion. These *ukiyo-e*, then, were not aimed at aesthetic contemplation in quite the same way as with the Hiroshige example above. Instead, they sought to recall scenes that the audience had experienced. In many prints, especially after the end of the eighteenth century, part of this recall of the actor was also the music, the singing, and the acting associated with that moment, or with a particular character’s disposition. Mutō Junko has argued that these *ukiyo-e* could be enjoyed as much for the sound as for the image, and that they were designed to evoke (rather than invoke) the music that was part of a given character’s identity.

The emphasis, therefore, was not so much on remembering the plot, as on remembering what the play felt like and sounded like. Each actor’s performance is accompanied by onstage music, broadly divided as *nagauta* (lyrical) and *jōruri* (narrative) music. The songs performed by these onstage ensembles are known collectively as *degatari*, and the *ukiyo-e* that depict actors try to capture a sense of these musical aspects as an important part of how a scene is understood. In that sense, music is constructed as part of the actor’s identity, and listening is presumed even within the highly stylized visual presentation.

It is also possible to trace these attitudes through the presentation or exaggeration, within certain *ukiyo-e*, of music that is normally hidden from the audience. Two such types of prints, in particular—so-called *degatari-zu* and *gekijō-ga*—deal with these subjects and offer interesting commentaries on the figuring of music. *Degatari-zu* refers to a type of *ukiyo-e* that depicts kabuki dance scenes featuring onstage musical ensembles.

Kabuki, richly dramatic, uses music as a central and consistent feature of its *mise-en-scène*. Broadly speaking, there are two types of music in kabuki: onstage and offstage. Their respective functions are very different, as is the instrumental make-up of each—though the shamisen is usually central to both types. The onstage music, called *jōruri*, tells a story: it is a sustained music that supplements the stage drama while the characters dance or perform. These onstage musicians, with shamisen as the centerpiece, accompany the dance scenes and play a type of music known as *shosa*. Offstage ensembles are known as *geza ongaku* (*geza* can be translated as “accompaniment”). These musicians are usually hidden from the audience behind a black screen, often made of bamboo (they are also known as *kuromisu-ongaku*, therefore). They provide musical fragments and sound effects that are not self-supporting outside the drama. The musical effects are richly symbolic rather than diegetic. The

position on stage of these musicians also varies over time—it shifted from stage left to stage right when the so-called *hanamichi*, which is a walkway on the left-hand side for actors to enter the stage, started to assume greater importance.

Interestingly, very few prints depict music and musicians in this way before the end of the eighteenth century. Even though music was central to kabuki, it remained absent from *ukiyo-e* until Torii Kiyonaga began to include musicians in *degatari-zu*; his first print of this type was published in 1782. Many subgenres of *degatari-zu* appeared subsequently, but while music was an important feature in all of them, musicians were not represented until only a few years before these prints emerged. It is not clear what prompted the sudden foregrounding of musicians. A print from 1784 showing the kabuki actors Sawamura Sōjūrō and Iwai Hanshirō, again by Torii Kiyonaga, features a shamisen player to the right and two chanters sitting to the left, all of whom are identified because they are famous musicians. The shamisen player is Namisaki Tokuji, and the chanters are Tomimoto Buzendayū and Tomimoto Itsukidayū. This would suggest that the presentation of musicians in general, and even the identification of increasingly famous musicians, was becoming important in promoting kabuki. This makes sense, given that an important aspect of *ukiyo-e* depicting kabuki was to advertise the forthcoming plays and actors. Here, we know the name of the play (*Amijima*) and even the scene (“Nobe no kakioki”) [field of letters left on the way to suicide], as well as the type of scene (*Michiyuki*, a dance interlude comprising two characters who usually commit suicide, as is the case here).

A further image by Kiyonaga frames a subgenre of the onstage musical ensembles known as *tokiwazu*, but it gives the impression that the musician and actor are placed almost together on stage. In fact, however, *tokiwazu* musicians are usually in the far stage right, with actors in the center. Given that the main purpose of these prints was the presentation of musicians (as the very name of the print type suggests), it is possible that the images reflect the increasing influence of musicians in kabuki plays and their ability to stand as emblems for kabuki’s attractive dramatic character. One print by Toyokuni III even shows musicians more prominently than the actors, suggesting—perhaps—that kabuki is fundamentally a musical experience. Similarly, but with a different musical focus, the presence of offstage musicians or *geza* music in prints that depict the whole theater, including the audience (known as *gekijōga*), also suggests musicians’ exaggerated importance in *ukiyo-e*. These musicians are never normally seen by the audience in kabuki, unlike onstage narrative ensembles, and yet from the 1790s onward, an increasing number of prints in this genre start to hint at the musicians’ varied presence behind the bamboo curtain. As before, it is conceivable that the practice of depicting musical instruments and identifying particular musicians (there was quite often a large ensemble of *geza* musicians) was intended to underscore the lavish visual and musical features of kabuki, and in turn to reinforce its dramatic and spectacular identity—to which the range and variety of the *geza* contributed enormously.

Music and/as Beauty

Music in Japanese visual culture also functioned as an important accompaniment or endorsement of beauty. Mentioned above in connection with *ukiyo-e* of *bijin*, it can further be regarded as a type of companion to allegorical love, as a still-life

ukiyo-e by Ryūryūkyō Shinai suggests. In this image, the Seven Gods of Fortune figure symbolically. The biwa (or lute) is associated with the goddess of love and music—Benten-sama. By virtue of the biwa's central position in the print, the symbolic presence of music fills the scene, and in other situations acts as the symbolic authority of love. We can see many examples of this. The *ukiyo-e* from 1886 “Ariko” (有子) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Figure 14.1), from the series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* (月百姿), furthermore, is made more poignant by the inclusion of the biwa as a symbol of the power of love and, in this case, of its absence—evident in Ariko's weeping. At the upper right-hand side of the *ukiyo-e*, a poem reads:

はかなしや波の下にも
入ぬへし つきの都の
人やみるとて 有子

(How hopeless it is, it would be better for me to sink beneath the waves;
perhaps then I could see my man from the Moon Capital—Ariko)⁴

We see a young woman sitting in a small boat on a lake, weeping. Her right hand, wiping tears from her eyes, holds a plectrum with which she has been strumming the strings of her lute. She is dressed in a richly decorated kimono, and her hair is loose in the courtly Heian manner. Hopelessly in love, she is preparing to jump from the boat to drown herself, and music seems to frame this moment. In fact, it seems as though she is singing the poem before committing suicide. It is not uncommon for ritualistic suicide to be associated with music in these types of scenes. The use of the shamisen—most often associated with *geisha* in *ukiyo-e*—is part of what gives this *ukiyo-e* print its sense of beauty. Since *geiko* and *geisha* were regarded as the epitome of art and beauty, the presence of music seems to reinforce this way of understanding it. As such, beauty is not only visual, but also requires music to play out and complete the *geisha*'s role. Witness Kitagawa Utamaro's famous image from 1800, “Flowers of Edo: young woman's narrative chanting to the shamisen” (江戸の花娘浄瑠璃), depicting a *geisha* and shamisen.

The musical allusions, however, did not always take the explicit form of instruments. Others were implied, by either the context or the individual. Another print by Utamaro, “Tomimoto Toyohina” (富本豊雛), depicts the famous musician of the same name, though she has no instrument. However, this *ukiyo-e* is a *surimono* (a more lavishly produced, often privately printed, version of the standard *ukiyo-e*), frequently used to announce musical performances. Thus the allusions to music would have been clear. In the image, she looks intently at the material she is holding with embossed green chrysanthemums, which appears to suggest the contemplation that music invites, just as it did in the Hiroshige example at the outset. Achieving this condition is regarded as beautiful, as an aesthetic achievement.

In 1766, Suzuki Harunobu, in a scene from “The Bridges of a Zither—Geese Alighting” (琴路の落雁) part of the parody series *Eight Parlor Views* (座敷八景), incorporates aspects of beauty, music, and nature more directly. Two women prepare to play the koto in a room whose door to the garden is open, thus allowing us to see the encroaching branch of a tree. It refers not only to music, by locating instruments and music-making within the space, but also to the preparation for music, to a state of listening required, and to music's visual place among nature and humans.

Both the koto and the plant seem to engender the kind of serenity and anticipation experienced by those listening to the insects in the Hiroshige print mentioned earlier. It is almost as though the plant and the instrument are connected: in so assuming, we are returned to the central premise of Japanese aesthetics in the Edo period: music is a branch of nature and thus inseparable from it.

Notes

- 1 I wish to record my gratitude to the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, which provided funding that enabled the completion of this article.
- 2 Kikkawa Eishi, "The Musical Sense of the Japanese," in *Contemporary Music Review* 1, no. 2 (1987): 86.
- 3 Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 137.
- 4 John Stevenson, *Yoshitoshi's One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* (Redmond, WA: San Francisco Graphic Society, 1992), 146.

Further Reading

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