

TSUGARU SHAMISEN AND MODERN JAPANESE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The *shamisen*, a Japanese plucked lute dating back to the seventeenth century, began to be played by blind itinerant male performers known as *bosama* in the late nineteenth century in the Tsugaru region, part of present-day Aomori prefecture in northern Japan. By the early twentieth century it was used by sighted players to accompany local folk songs, and from the 1940s entirely instrumental versions of a few of the folk songs were being performed. In the late 1950s the term *Tsugaru shamisen* was coined and the genre began to get national attention. This culminated in a revival in the 1970s centred on Takahashi Chikuzan, who had made a living as a *bosama* in the prewar period. In the wake of the 70s boom a contest began to be held annually in Hirosaki, the cultural capital of the Tsugaru region. This contest nurtured a new generation of young players from all over Japan, eventually spawning other national contests in every corner of the country. Chikuzan's death in 1998 was widely reported in the media, and Yoshida Ryōichirō and Yoshida Kenichi, brothers who had stood out at the contests, were cast as the new face of *Tsugaru shamisen*. From about 2000 a new *Tsugaru shamisen* revival was under way, and the music could be heard as background music on Television programs and commercials representing a modern Japan that had not lost its traditions.

Through discourse analysis of primary materials, and informed by the author's twenty-five years of direct experience with the *Tsugaru shamisen* community, this dissertation examines how since the millennial revival the music has come to index a Japanese identity that is modern but still essentially Japanese. It explores ideas developed in the 1930s by thinkers like Watsuji Tetsurō and Yanagita Kunio that continue to influence popular conceptions of modernity and tradition in Japan. It traces the one-hundred-year recording history of the music and the proliferation of national contests in recent decades and compares the revivals of the 1970s and the millennium to demonstrate how a genre that previously indexed rural, traditional Japan has come to represent the modern nation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Opening

The term *Tsugaru shamisen*¹ refers to both a specific type of *shamisen* (a three-stringed banjo-like traditional Japanese instrument) and the lively, percussive genre of folk – and more recently, folk-based – music played on it. This dissertation focuses on how this genre and the ways in which it is represented have changed over its history. *Tsugaru shamisen* experienced a resurgence at the turn of the millennium, enjoying a mainstream profile in Japan unlike any other traditional musical genre in the post-war period. This was due partly to a shift in the representation of the music and, to a much lesser degree, to changes in the music itself. When Takahashi Chikuzan – the national face of the genre since the mid-1960s – died in 1998, the baton was publicly passed to the Yoshida Brothers, a young and at the time unknown duo who went on to become household names in the revival that began in the year 2000.

While the early history of the genre has received some scholarly attention, very little has been written about the recent revival. In this dissertation I explore a shift that occurred in the way that *Tsugaru shamisen* is perceived in Japan: where it once represented rural, traditional Japan, to many it now represents Japanese modernity. More specifically, I consider the ways in which it has been used to represent the Tsugaru region, both as a particular place and as a stand-in for a generalized, imagined rural and traditional Japan, and how it has been used more recently to represent a new Japanese identity that incorporates tradition to stand apart from, or “overcome” modernity (Harootunian, 2000).

¹In my MA thesis I argued for the transliteration “*Tsugaru-jamisen*,” however since that time the alternate transliteration “*Tsugaru shamisen*” has appeared frequently enough in Japanese sources that I have adopted this as the accepted spelling when writing in English. Further, the pronunciation “*Tsugaru shamisen*” seemed to gain some currency in Japan during the genre’s resurgence in the early 2000s as a wider audience began to use the term. I continue to use “*Tsugaru-jamisen*” when transliterating Japanese titles into the Roman alphabet.

In this introduction I will present the aims of this dissertation, situate myself within the research, describe the methods I have used to conduct my research, and introduce the theoretical framework I have adopted. I will then present a literature review of the main topics I deal with including the Tsugaru region, *Tsugaru shamisen*, modernity and national identity, music revivals, and traditional music competitions. This is followed by an introduction to the Tsugaru region and a brief summary of the history and music of *Tsugaru shamisen*. Lastly I will summarize the contents of each of the chapters for an overview of the dissertation.

Aims

The central argument of this dissertation is that *Tsugaru shamisen* has gone from indexing traditional, rural Japan to indexing a modernized, twenty-first century Japan. Tied to this argument are the dissertation's four main aims. The first is to examine the general concept of Japanese modernity, which I assert *Tsugaru shamisen* has come to represent. The second aim is to present an account of the audio recording history of *Tsugaru shamisen* from the early twentieth century to the present day. This functions both to flesh out this largely ignored part of the history of what is after all a commercial genre, and to highlight the abrupt change in recorded repertoire from the beginning of the twenty-first century, which accompanied the above-mentioned indexical shift. The third is to examine the national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests that played such a large role in the shift at the center of this dissertation. The fourth aim is to explore this shift that *Tsugaru shamisen* underwent in the early twenty-first century by comparing the mass-mediated *Tsugaru shamisen* revival that occurred in the 1970s with the millennial *Tsugaru shamisen* revival.

Personal Perspective

A brief chronology of my connection with *Tsugaru shamisen* will be useful to situate myself with respect to the topic. In January of 1990, on my first weekend in Japan, I was befriended by a Japanese player of pre-war American blues in Tokyo who mentioned in passing that Japan had its own kind of blues that originated among poor blind men in the rural north of the country, and it was called the *Tsugaru-jamisen*. I was not able to remember the jumble of syllables that constituted the genre's name, nor locate any of this music for myself, but his colourful description stuck with me. Three years later, while still living in Tokyo, I happened to make a trip to Hirosaki City, in Aomori Prefecture, and was taken to a folk song pub that featured live *Tsugaru shamisen* music, where I was finally able to hear the “Japanese blues” my friend had told me about. After a virtuosic performance, Yamada Chisato, the owner of the pub, let me try to play the instrument, and I resolved to find a teacher when I returned to Tokyo. Unable to find a *Tsugaru shamisen* teacher, I ended up studying *nagauta shamisen*, an art music genre connected to the kabuki theatre, from 1993 to 1995 with Makoto Nishimura, while continuing to make trips to Aomori and learning about *Tsugaru shamisen* and *min'yō* (Japanese folk music) on my own. In 1995 I moved to Kyoto, briefly studying another *shamisen* art music tradition known as *jiuta* with Hayashi Kimiko, but focusing on *Tsugaru shamisen* and *min'yō shamisen*, drum, and vocal lessons with Nishikawa Shinobu and Nishikawa Misao until the fall of 2001. During my seven years of study in Kyoto I made at least one trip each year to Aomori, and travelled all over Japan performing on the street, at festivals, and on stages in ensembles. I collected books and recordings on *min'yō* and *Tsugaru shamisen* and got to know this subculture and a number of its adherents.

In the fall of 2001 I began an MA degree in Ethnomusicology at York University in Toronto, and through the study of Ethnomusicology and teaching *shamisen* to non-Japanese students, began to see my musical experiences from a different perspective. In January of 2005 I defended my thesis, “The *Tsugaru-jamisen*: Its Origins, Construction, and Music,” and returned to Japan to work and continue my research, armed with a host of new analytical tools. I returned to York University in the fall of 2006 to begin a PhD, making one last field trip to Japan in the summer of 2010 where I attended a number of national competitions and concerts, reconnected with old friends and met many new people in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world. All of these experiences inform my understanding of *Tsugaru shamisen* and its place in modern Japan.

Methods and Theories

My dissertation relies heavily on field research; my understanding of this topic is built on more than twenty years of interaction with people from the Tsugaru region, as well as people in other parts of Japan with varying degrees of connection to, and interest in, *Tsugaru shamisen*. Discussions in bars and coffee shops, and at concerts, contests, symposia, and during lessons as well as the formal interviews carried out during my Masters research, all of this inform my views on *Tsugaru shamisen*.

I also rely on discourse analysis; while few scholarly sources exist in Japanese, there are a number of monographs on the origins of the genre and several biographies of key players. Newspapers, traditional music magazines and journals, regional studies periodicals, concert programs, LP, cassette, and CD liner notes, television and radio programs, and a great variety of websites have also proved useful sources for research. Added to this is a small body of literature in English on the subject: a few scholarly monographs, Masters theses and articles.

The theoretical foundation of my dissertation is centered on the ways in which Japan constructs its modern identity. Using the ideas of modernity, and national identity laid out by Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm (1983), Bayly (2004) and Punter (2007) as a starting point, I focus on how they are expressed in modern Japan. In chapter two I show that Japan has largely defined itself in contrast to the modern West, constructing a prescriptive ideal based on traditions that were already disappearing in the late nineteenth century. Intellectuals like Watsuji Tetsurō worked to create the idea of Japan as a unified nation, and one uniquely qualified to “overcome modernity,” that is, to exist in the modern world without giving up its essential Japaneseness. Though development of this image of Japan began before the Second World War, and was used during that war to bolster morale, a version of it still exists to this day.

The Japanese tend to locate this essential, or “authentic” Japaneseness in the countryside, setting a nexus of ideas – rural, traditional, authentic, non-Western – against another, contrasting set of ideas – urban, modern, inauthentic, Westernized – which results in a situation where the “true Japan” is paradoxically an Other for most of the population. Most Japanese, then, only sporadically connect with what they believe to be true Japaneseness by, for example, traveling to historic sites, attending traditional events, participating in traditional activities, and listening to traditional music like the *Tsugaru shamisen* (Ivy, 1995; Clammer, 2001; Kikuchi, 2004). Northern Japan is strongly associated with the nexus of ideas (rural, traditional, authentic, non-Western) mentioned above, and the Tsugaru region in particular, with its impenetrable dialect, harsh climate, and perceived backwardness, has long been an *other* for urban Japanese (Guo et al, 2005; Brown, 2006). Listening to the *Tsugaru shamisen*, therefore, is one way some Japanese people have chosen to connect with this “real Japan.”

Literature Review

The Tsugaru region

As is the case in most parts of Japan, there is a healthy regional studies literature in the area, both popular and scholarly, that covers local history and folklore, poetry written in the local dialect, and works of fiction set in Tsugaru. There is also a small body of work on Tsugaru in English, including translations of literature from area authors, and scholarly essays and monographs. Dazai Osamu's *Tsugaru* (1944) first appeared in English in 1985; a translation of Ishizaka Yōjirō's *My Days, My Dreams: Stories from a Boyhood in Northern Japan* (1946) was published in 2007, and a collection of the writings of Hideo Osabe and Kyōzō Takagi appeared in 2009. Anthony Rausch, besides taking part in the translation and reworking of Daijō Kazuo's *The Birth of Tsugaru shamisen Music* (1998) discussed elsewhere, has published two monographs on local newspapers (2001, 2012) and another entitled *Cultural Commodities in Japanese Rural Revitalization: Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware and Tsugaru shamisen* (2010) that contrasts the strong governmental support of the former with the lack of governmental support for the latter. There is a collection of essays entitled *Tsugaru: Regional Identity on Japan's Northern Periphery* (Guo et al. 2005) dealing with various cultural aspects of the region, and a bilingual work intended for foreign exchange students in Aomori's universities entitled *An Introduction to Tsugaru Studies in Japanese and English* (Sawada and Kitahara 2008).

Tsugaru shamisen

As noted by other English language researchers of Japanese folk music (Groemer, 1994; Hughes, 2008), Japanese scholars of the subject have largely preferred to document rather than theorize about Japanese folk music. Extensive collections of folk song lyrics, some accompanied

by recordings, present raw data, but little analysis has been carried out. Several monographs on the *Tsugaru shamisen* have come out in the last thirty years. Daijō Kazuo has been the most prolific writer on the *Tsugaru shamisen*, though his work, particularly on the early history of the genre, lacks scholarly rigor. *Genkon Tsugaru-jamisen* (The spirit of *Tsugaru shamisen*) (1984) presents the history of the *shamisen*, starting with Akimoto Nitarō, whom Daijō puts forward as the originator of the genre.² *Na, nadaba: tataki-jamisen Kida Rinshōei* (“Take it or leave it”: the percussive *shamisen* of Kida Rinshōei) (1986) is a biography of Kida Rinshōei, one of the giants of the early recording era. *Tsugaru shamisen no rekishi* (The history of the *Tsugaru shamisen*) (1993) gives an abbreviated history, focusing mainly on key figures up until the 1970s. *Tsugaru-jamisen koborebanashi* (*Tsugaru shamisen* ramblings) (1998) is a collection of columns that appeared in the magazine *Min'yō bunka* (*Min'yō* culture) between 1985 and 1995 and range from opinion pieces to historical research to contemporary descriptions of the developing *Tsugaru shamisen* contest scene in the 1990s.

In 2002 Takeuchi Tsutomu, a noted *min'yō* scholar, published *Jongara to Echigo goze*³ (*Jongara* and the *goze* of Echigo Province), which attempts to connect the *goze* and *Tsugaru shamisen* with the spread of a particular song from the *goze*'s repertoire that may have been the basis for the song “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*.” In the multi-authored *Marugoto shamisen no hon* (The complete book of *shamisen*) (2009), Oda Mayusa and Tanaka Yumiko report on various aspects of *Tsugaru shamisen*, including its early history, its continuing changes over the last fifty years, and the millennial revival. A recent addition to this body of literature is Matsuki Hiroyasu's *Tsugaru-jamisen Mandala* (2012) which, while not academic, is the most detailed and

² The English titles of Japanese works are presented in “down” style, which capitalizes only the first word and proper nouns, as suggested in *The Japan Style Sheet* (Society of Writers, Editors and Translators 1998, 47).

³ *Goze* were itinerant female *shamisen* players, and are discussed further in the section on *Tsugaru shamisen* later in this chapter.

up-to-date Japanese-language source on the history of *Tsugaru shamisen*. Matsuki focusses on the personalities that shaped the genre's history, creating the sort of vibrant narrative impossible in more traditionally scholarly work.

There are also a number of general interest, non-scholarly works on specific players including Takahashi Chikuzan (Kuramitsu, 1976; Matsubayashi, 2000; Sato, 2000; Takahashi, 1975; Yamada, 1976), Kida Rinshōei (Daijō, 1986), Shindō Shōtarō (Midorikawa, 1994), Agatsuma Hiroyasu (Honma, 2001), and the Yoshida Brothers (Shiozawa, 2005). There are several monthly magazines that include occasional articles on the *Tsugaru shamisen*, including *Hōgaku journal* (*Traditional Japanese music journal*), *Min'yō bunka* (*Folk song culture*), *Gekkan min'yō* (*Folk song monthly*), and *Min'yō shunjō* (*Folk song times*). The monthly magazine *Bachi-Bachi*, which ran from July of 2004 to September of 2007, was dedicated to *Tsugaru shamisen* and *taiko* drumming (the title refers to plectrums and drumsticks, which are both called *bachi* in Japanese) and featured interviews of prominent players, coverage of contests and other events, and illuminating and detailed articles on the 'gear' (bridges, plectrums, strings, and so on) of particular players. LP, cassette, and CD liner notes have also proven useful sources of information on the histories of specific players, and are part of the genre's evolving discourse. Articles on *Tsugaru shamisen* appear periodically in non-scholarly journals like *Tsugaru bunka ima* (*Tsugaru culture now*), and *Tsugarugaku* (*Tsugaru studies*), and scholarly journals like *Chīkigaku* (*Regional studies*).

The literature in English, as might be expected with a genre almost unknown outside of Japan, is limited to scholarly writing. Suda, Daijō and Rausch's *The Birth of Tsugaru shamisen Music* (1998) consists of an abridged translation of Daijō's book *Genkon Tsugaru-jamisen* (*The spirit of Tsugaru shamisen*) (1984), and an extended essay on the role of shamanism and marginality in

the creation of the *Tsugaru shamisen*. Gerald Groemer's *The Spirit of Tsugaru* (1999, 2012) also consists of two parts: the first half deals with the early history of the genre in a more rigorous and scholarly manner than the Daijō translation, and traces the development of *Tsugaru shamisen* from folk song accompaniment to solo improvisational genre, and the second half is a translation of Takahashi Chikuzan's autobiography, *Tsugaru-jamisen hitoritabi* (*Tsugaru shamisen*, solitary travels). The revised edition adds a considerable amount of detail to the already impressive original work, and is to date the best book on the subject in any language. Henry Johnson has written three articles (2005, 2006, and 2009) that begin to address *Tsugaru shamisen*'s move from a local to a national and international music.

There have been a few MA theses on the subject. Luciellen Diane Dunsmoor's 1983 thesis from the University of Washington "*Tsugaru Jamisen: The Development of a Solo Shamisen Genre In Japan*," transcribes and compares accompaniment and solo versions of four pieces by Takahashi Chikuzan in an early attempt to explain how solo *Tsugaru shamisen* developed. Michael S. Peluse's 2002 MA thesis "Folk Revival or Pop Sensation? The Latest *Tsugaru shamisen* Boom" looks at the heightened profile of the *Tsugaru-jamisen* following the release of the album *Ibuki* by the Yoshida Brothers. Relying largely on English sources which are themselves based on inaccurate Japanese media reports, Peluse asks why (rather than whether or not) *Tsugaru shamisen* is enjoying widespread popularity among Japan's youth, which necessarily leads to some unfounded conclusions. His 2005 article in *Asian Music* summarizes the argument of his problematic thesis. My own MA thesis, "The *Tsugaru-jamisen*: Its Origins, Construction and Music" (2005), is divided into three sections. In the first part I suggest a connection between the *shamisen* and the earliest known spike-lutes of Mesopotamia, and in the second part I present a detailed description of the construction of the main types of *shamisen*

used today. In the third part I consider the contribution of earlier Japanese art musics in the development of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, and explain the basic principles of solo *Tsugaru shamisen* composition and improvisation.

Modernity and national identity

Ernest Gellner was already writing about the artificiality of the concept of nationhood in 1965, an idea which Benedict Anderson took up again and developed more fully almost twenty years later in the influential *Imagined Communities* (1983). C.A. Bayly, in *Birth of the Modern World* (2004), points out that Anderson's theory describes the situation in certain European countries, but that nationalism emerged differently in different nations. Bayly's nuanced explanation of the alternate ways that nationalism can emerge applies usefully to the case of Japan.

There is a large body of literature on the topic of Japanese modernity and national identity. Stephan Tanaka's *Japan's Orient: Rendering Past into History* (1993) and Marcia Yonemoto's *Mapping Early Modern Japan: Space, Place and Culture in the Tokugawa Period* (2003) both deal with Japan's pre-modern national identity, when it defined itself in contrast to China. This method of defining itself by the ways it differed from an outside power was repeated in the modern era, as it replaced China with first Europe, then America. Harry Harootunian's *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (2000) surveys the work of Japanese philosophers, writers and scholars of the 1920s and 1930s that shaped the modern concept of Japaneseness. Iida Yumiko traces the changes of this concept from the early twentieth century, through the post-war period and Japan's economic recovery to the recession of the 1990s in *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism and Aesthetics* (2002). In *Hegemony of*

Homogeneity: an Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron (2001) Befu Harumi presents the history of *nihonjinron* (the “discourse on Japanese uniqueness”), critiquing both the Japanese discourse and the subsequent non-Japanese discourse *about* this discourse, providing an illuminating and balanced discussion on how it has influenced the average Japanese person's idea of Japaneseness. Kikuchi Yuko in *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (2004) and Kim Brandt in *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art In Imperial Japan* (2007) look at how folk art has been used to define what is authentically Japanese in ways that can be extended to folklore in general, and more particularly to folk music.

Music revivals

The literature on revivals is extensive, as the literature reviews in some of the works mentioned below make clear (Baumann 1996; Bithell and Hill 2014; Ronström 1996). Some recent studies are particularly relevant. Philip Bohlman's *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* has a useful discussion on shifts in context that necessarily occur in revivals (Bohlman 1988, 124-134). *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (1993), a collection of essays edited by Neil V. Rosenberg, is largely focused on North American revivals, but what contributors Sheldon Posen, Burt Feintuch, and Richard Blaustein have to say about the essentially transformative (rather than preservative) nature of musical revival is widely applicable. In 1996 an issue of *The World of Music* focussed on folk music revival in Europe, and Owe Ronström's and Max Peter Baumann's articles deal with a number of themes that are taken up again two decades later in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, discussed below. Tamara Livingston's article “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory” (1999) lists six “basic

ingredients” in any music revival (Livingston 1999, 69). Some of the themes in Livingston's essay, like those Ronström's and Baumann's, are picked up again in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (2014). This voluminous, thirty-chapter handbook features case studies from all over the world and covers a diverse range of topics from general theories of music revival to governmental preservation policies, revival's role in war and disaster recovery, and revival in postcolonial cultures and among diaspora. Of particular interest here is the identification by editors Bithell and Hill of six “core themes” that run through the volume, namely “activism and the desire for change, the valuation and reinterpretation of history, recontextualization and transformation, legitimacy and authenticity, transmission and dissemination, and post revival out-growths and ramifications” (Bithell and Hill 2014, 4). I will consider these six themes further in chapter five.

Traditional music competitions

David Hughes pointed out in his own writing on *min'yō* competitions in Japan that the body of literature specifically focused on traditional music competitions was relatively small; it has not grown appreciably larger in the meantime (Hughes 2008, 202). Chris Goertzen has been writing articles on American fiddling competitions for the last thirty years that culminated in an excellent 2008 monograph on the subject. Irish music and Scottish bagpipe competitions have also been the subject of research (Henry 1989; Loten 1995; Gibson 1998). There is a 2003 issue of *The World of Music* devoted entirely to the topic, with articles on traditional music competitions in Trinidad, Burma, Grenada, Indonesia, Uganda, and the United States (Baumann 2003). Sherry Johnson's 2006 PhD dissertation, “Negotiating Tradition in Ontario Fiddle Contests,” regrettably, came to my attention too late to be incorporated into this dissertation, but

it should be a model for any future study of contests.

The Tsugaru Region

The Tsugaru district is the specifically northwestern section of present-day Aomori Prefecture; the southeastern part of the prefecture is known as the Nambu district, and the northeastern part is known as the Shimokita district. The people of the three areas consider themselves culturally distinct, though Japanese in general tend to conflate Tsugaru with Aomori prefecture. The area is named after Tsugaru Tamenobu (1550-1607), who was recognized as the ruler of the area by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1590 and established the castle town of Hirosaki (Guo et al. 2005, 12). At this time Tsugaru was seen more as a “domestic colony at the edge of the nation” than as a part of Japan proper, and there were still Ainu, the indigenous people who were eventually displaced by the Japanese, in the northernmost parts of the district (Kawanishi 2005, 52). Successive lords founded the port of Aomori to the North and continued to develop the area, and the fourth lord in particular, Tsugaru Nobumasa (1646-1710), is remembered for his support of intellectual and cultural activities in which the people of the area still hold pride (Guo et al. 2005, 12). The area's severe winters and relatively short summers left it vulnerable to famine even into the nineteenth century, and infanticide, particularly of girls, was not unheard of. *Kokeshi* dolls, a simple wooden folk craft that the whole Tōhoku region is known for, are thought by many to be connected with this practice (McDowell 2011, 171-2). The less than ideal growing conditions meant that historically Tsugaru was one of the poorest regions in Japan. This prompted the practice of *dekasegi*, which sees men spend part of the year working in the larger urban centres to the south, particularly Tokyo. It was very common in the post-war period, and continues to a lesser degree to this day (Guo et al. 2005, 18).

With the political reorganization that accompanied the opening of Japan to the world in the Meiji era (1868-1912), the three districts of Tsugaru, Shimokita, and Nambu were consolidated into present-day Aomori Prefecture. The area's national reputation as a primitive hinterland, populated by people who spoke an unintelligible Japanese dialect, continued into the modern era, and the Meiji emperor declined an invitation to tour the prefecture in 1874 (Kawanishi 2005, 53). This reputation was internalized as an inferiority complex that Kawanishi suggests lasted until the end of World War Two, but in my experience is still alive today (Kawanishi 2005, 56).⁴ At the same time, a sort of stubborn pride in the traditional character of the area was fostered, as can be seen in the insistence of local writer and poet Fukushi Kūjirō (1889-1946) prior to World War Two that “local people should proudly protect local dialects”(ibid., 59). During the war years regionalism was downplayed all over Japan in favour of a strong national identity, but this sense of inferiority returned after the war. Dazai Osamu (1909-1948), the district's most nationally famous writer, felt this sense of inferiority keenly, and wrote about it, expressing “not only an anger felt by the people of Tsugaru, but an anger felt by all rural people who had been scorned, controlled and discriminated against in the process of modernization and centralization of Japan's nation-state” (ibid., 63-63).

Today the Tsugaru region is perhaps best known nationally for its apple production; the first orchards were planted in the late nineteenth century and today Aomori is responsible for the production of over half of Japan's apples (Aomori Prefectural Government 2011; Kawanishi 2005, 17). It is also known for the Cherry Blossom Festival in Hirosaki city in early May, and the *Nebuta* Festival in Aomori City in August, both of which draw tourists from all over the country. The area prides itself on the distinctive style of its *Tsugaru-nuri* lacquerware, and the folk craft

⁴ On several occasions, people from Aomori have bitterly recalled to me incidents when they were “made fools of” (*baka ni sareta*) for their accent.

of *koginzashi*, patterned embroidery work that was originally created to reinforce peasant work clothes, though neither of these could be said to be nationally well known. The *Tsugaru shamisen* is perhaps the one piece of local culture that has enjoyed periods of national attention since the late 1950s.

Tsugaru shamisen

History

Tsugaru shamisen refers to both a genre of music, and the instrument on which the music is played. It is a specific type of *shamisen*, an instrument that was introduced to Japan in the sixteenth century from China, through Okinawa. The *shamisen*, the Okinawan *sanshin*, and the Chinese *sanxian* are all three-stringed spike lutes which use a skin sound table. The *shamisen* was originally adopted by itinerant players of the *biwa* – a short-necked lute derived from the Chinese *pipa* – probably because this lighter and louder alternative was more portable and could be more easily heard on the street (Malm 2001, 214). The large triangular plectrum or *bachi* used on the *biwa* was transferred to the *shamisen* by these players, which in turn necessitated the replacement of the snakeskin sound table with more durable dog or cat skin. Other changes made to suit these first players include an increase in the size of the body and length of the neck, an altering of the pegbox that more closely resembles the *biwa*, and the addition of a *sawari* buzzing mechanism for the first string (Kikkawa 1997, 6). With this, the basic form of the *shamisen* was set, and minor variations developed to suit various genres that were subsequently established. The modern *Tsugaru shamisen* is distinguished by its thick neck, large body, and heavy dogskin sound table, as well as a sturdy plectrum with a relatively narrow blade (See Illustration 1.01).

The first players of *Tsugaru shamisen* are said to have been blind itinerant male musicians known as *bosama*. One of the few professions open to a blind man in pre-modern Japan was musician, and while this changed in the modern era, these traditions held on in the far north much longer. Typically young blind boys apprenticed under *bosama* for a time before striking out on their own to travel seasonal routes through fishing and farming villages playing at the gates of homes in a practice known as *kadozuke* (Suda et al. 1998, 42). They also played at festivals and extremely lucrative horse-trading fairs, and it is thought that the competitive atmosphere at these events spurred the development of the genre's loud, fast style (ibid., 79).

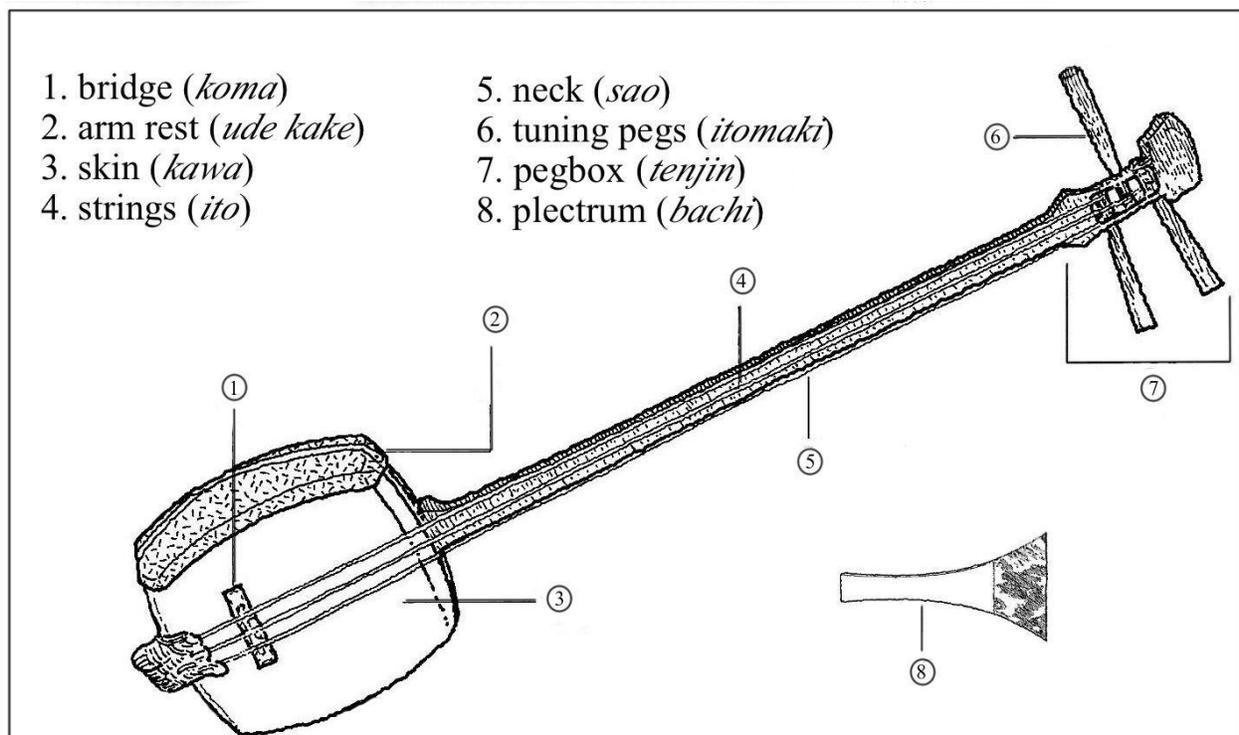


Illustration 1.01: *Tsugaru shamisen* (adapted from Honma 2001, 222)

The earliest of these that we have much information on is Akimoto Nitarō, more commonly

referred to as Nitabō (1857-1928).⁵ Daijō Kazuo has promoted the idea of Nitabō as the sole creator of *Tsugaru shamisen*, and this has become part of the popular mythology being advanced in his birthplace of Kanagi town by the *Tsugaru shamisen* museum and several stone memorials, and in the movie *Nitaboh* (2004), an animated and heavily fictionalized account of his life. Nitabō was certainly an important early figure, and many subsequent players can trace their musical lineage back to him, but it is exceedingly unlikely that he was the first *bosama*. Gerald Groemer makes a convincing argument against Daijō's claims for Nitabō as the genre's originator (Groemer 2012, 66-68).

There is a long-held belief in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world that *goze*, blind itinerant women belonging to guilds that predate the *Tsugaru shamisen* and were previously found all over Japan, played some role in the creation of the genre. This has continued to be argued as recently as 2002, with Takeuchi Tsutomu's *Jongara to Echigo goze* (Jongara and the *goze* of Echigo Province). In Daijō Kazuo's Nitabō myth, Nitabō's mother, who dies shortly after he is born, is a *goze*, and he learns *shamisen* directly from another *goze* (Suda et al. 1998, 28-29). It seems that just as Daijō collapsed all of the early players into the person of Nitabō, he also made the *goze*'s purported role in the creation of the genre more literal. Groemer points out how unlikely Daijō's story is, and notes that an earlier source contradicts its key points (Groemer 2012, 60-68).

The relatively thick neck of the *Tsugaru shamisen* is one of the distinguishing physical features of the modern instrument, but it seems that this is a more recent development. Sato Sadaki suggests that even into the 1920s thick-necked instruments were not generally used due to their weight and expense, but may have become common when sighted players began to take up the instrument, specifically young village boys who considered the thicker necks to be more

⁵ Historically, *bosama* had nicknames derived by adding the suffix “*bō*” to part of their given name, so Akimoto Nitarō became Nitabō, Ōta Chōsaku became Chōsakubō, and so on.

masculine (Sadaki 1989, 1-2).

From the 1930s Tsugaru *min'yō* began to be widely recorded, and in the same period a large number of troupes of singers, dancers, and *shamisen* accompanists toured northern Japan performing this repertoire. It was during this period that certain *shamisen* players, most notably Nitabō's last student Shirakawa Gumpachirō (1909-1962), began to develop longer introductions to their accompaniment of songs, which eventually led to the solo instrumental style that we recognize as *Tsugaru shamisen* today (Matsuki 2011, 141).

In the late 1950s Mihashi Michiya (1930-1996), a singer of popular music with many hits under his belt, began recording *min'yō*, igniting the first post-war *min'yō* boom. Mihashi had originally trained as a *min'yō* singer before moving on to popular song, and had in fact studied *Tsugaru shamisen* with Shirakawa Gumpachirō. He invited Shirakawa and Kida Rinshōei (1911-1979) to appear with him in Tokyo, thus introducing *Tsugaru shamisen* to mainstream Japan (Midorigawa 1995, 5). The particular percussive style that Shirakawa and Kida play is known as *tataki-shamisen* (striking *shamisen*), and is contrasted with *hiki-shamisen* (plucking *shamisen*), also known as *nejimi* (clear sound) style of which Takahashi Chikuzan (1910-1998) is a representative player.⁶ Unlike contemporaries Shirakawa and Kida, Takahashi Chikuzan was a *bosama* in the prewar period and due to this and his playing and story-telling abilities, he became the media focus of a *Tsugaru shamisen* boom that peaked in the mid-70s with multiple recordings and media appearances, constant touring, a best-selling autobiography, and a full-length motion picture about his life. Thanks to his high media profile, for most Japanese of that time period, Takahashi Chikuzan was synonymous with *Tsugaru shamisen*.

⁶ This is transliterated as *nezumi* in Suda et al., but I have been assured by older players that the correct pronunciation is *nejimi*. The confusion may have come about due to the Tsugaru dialect which frequently substitutes “zu” for other syllables (Suda et al. 1998, 70).

Most *Tsugaru shamisen* players, on the other hand, favoured the *tataki-shamisen* style made popular by Shirakawa and Kida, and found Chikuzan's *hiki-shamisen* lacking in percussiveness. It was this *tataki* style that came to predominate at the contests that began in the early 1980s, which are described in detail in chapter four. These contests nurtured young players and helped to gradually increase the number of *Tsugaru shamisen* players across Japan.

In about the year 2000 what many refer to as the “second *Tsugaru shamisen* boom” occurred (Tanaka 2009, 12). It seems to have been partially ignited by the death of Takahashi Chikuzan in 1998, and the subsequent mass media promotion of Ryōichirō and Kenichi Yoshida, who perform as *Yoshida kyōdai*, or the Yoshida Brothers, as the representatives of the new generation of *Tsugaru shamisen* players. While this millennial revival did make the Yoshida Brothers a household name, the popularity of *Tsugaru shamisen*, particularly among young people, has been overstated in recent writings by some Western researchers (Peluse 2005; Johnson 2005, 2006, 2009). The Yoshida Brothers' first two albums sold over 100,000 copies each: a lot for a traditional Japanese music genre, but not nearly enough to get on the popular music charts in Japan. Following the Yoshida Brothers success, a large number of young players released recordings with major record labels, but by the late 2000s the general consensus was that the boom was over. At its height, the millennial revival found its way into mainstream Japanese culture in a number of ways, including two *Tsugaru shamisen*-themed movies and two comic books, a Guitar Hero-style arcade video game, commercials for beer, cars, and cell phones featuring *Tsugaru shamisen* music, and a large number of television programmes that used it as background music.

Musical Parameters

In this section I will briefly discuss the general musical parameters of traditional solo *Tsugaru shamisen*, considering the tuning system, the repertoire, the use of modes in improvisation, the conception of melody, the standard form that these pieces take, and the genre's openness to change. For a more thorough discussion of this topic, please see my MA thesis (McGoldrick 2005).

The *shamisen's* three strings can be tuned in a number of ways, but the three main tunings are: *honchōshi* (“base tuning”), with strings a fourth and a fifth apart (for example: e-a-e’); *niagari* (“second-string raised”), with strings a fifth and a fourth apart (e-b-e’) and; *sansagari* (“third-string lowered”) with strings a fourth and a fourth apart (e-a-d’).⁷ While *honchōshi* is the most common tuning for *shamisen* used in various traditional art musics, *niagari* is by far the most common tuning for *shamisen* used in folk song.

Kyokubiki, which translates literally as “playing a piece,” is a term that generally refers to instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* playing, particularly improvisatory playing. There are about twenty pieces that are commonly performed instrumentally, and all are derived from pre-existing *min'yō*. These are discussed in detail in chapter three, and listed in Appendices B and C, but a few points are worth mentioning here. First, there is a group of pieces – “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*,” “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*,” and “*Tsugaru sansagari*” – which are collectively known as “the big five *Tsugaru min'yō*” and make up the core repertoire of traditional *Tsugaru shamisen*. With the repertoire outside of the big five, the player is restricted to adding embellishments to a fixed melody, but these five have come to behave something like modes that allow for a great degree of improvisation. Similar to *raga* in

⁷ Traditionally, there is no fixed pitch to which the *shamisen* is tuned, but contemporary *Tsugaru shamisen* players tend to tune the low string between c and d.

India and *maqam* in West Asia, the big five are easily distinguished from each other by a particular combination of tuning, scale and meter, and by a collection of distinctive riffs and embellishments that have come to adhere to each of them. Many of these riffs and embellishments are borrowed from the songs on which they are based, and others were developed by players in the process of improvisation. *Tsugaru shamisen* developed among musicians with little or no training in other musical systems, so while they do not refer to these as modes, that is essentially what they are. Kinoshita Shinichi, in his *Tsugaru shamisen Style Book* (2004), outlines the system of tunings, tonalities, meters, and scales that I used to create the chart in Figure 1.01 in my MA thesis.

piece	tuning	tonality	meter	scale
<i>Jonkara</i>	E-B-E	“minor”	2/4	E-G-A-B-D-E
<i>Yosare</i>	E-B-E	“minor”	3/8	E-G-A-B-D-E
<i>Ohara</i>	E-A-E	“minor”	3/8 and 2/4	E-G-A-B-D-E
<i>Aiya</i>	E-B-E	“major”	3/8	E-F#-A-B-C#-E
<i>Sansagari</i>	E-A-D	“minor”	3/8	E-F#-A-B-D-E

Fig. 1.01: *Tsugaru shamisen* modes (McGoldrick 2005, 89)

It should be noted that Kinoshita’s use of the English terms major (“*meijaa*”) and minor (“*mainaa*”) differs from the standard western use. Likewise, the meters listed in the chart above are from Kinoshita's book and reflect emic ideas of meter in the tablature used to notate *Tsugaru shamisen* music, but do not accurately describe the meter in western terms. *Kyokubiki* based on “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” do not have a regular meter, though they tend to be notated in duple meter for convenience. They are more accurately described as pulsatile, with occasional sections of duple meter. Similarly, “3/8” above actually refers to groups of one long and two short beats of unequal lengths that create a distinctive three-beat rhythm. This is not, strictly speaking, conventional triple meter, but it would be even less accurate to describe it as duple meter.

Melodically, *kyokubiki* based on the above modes do not have a fixed melody. Kinoshita writes that “In the *kyokubiki* there is usually no melodic theme which is returned to... Of course, there are typical *Tsugaru* phrases, but basically we don’t have a melody or a theme to fall back on...” (Kinoshita 2003, 46 and 50).⁸ Bonnie Wade uses the phrase “flowing ongoingness” to describe the motion in traditional *koto* music in which, she adds, “there is nothing like a tune,” and this description works well for *kyokubiki* as well (Wade 2005, 72).

In terms of form, *kyokubiki* tend to be clearly divided into sections of anywhere from one to two minutes in length. Each section starts on a low note, often the lowest note on the lowest-tuned string, then gradually moves to a very high note, typically the highest note on the highest-tuned string, before moving back down to the lowest note and striking all three strings in one of a few fixed cadence patterns. An entire piece will consist of a number of these sections, sometimes referred to as *dan*, or steps, each of which accomplishes this journey from low to high and back again showcasing different riffs and techniques and dynamics to distinguish itself from the other sections.

This focus on improvisation sets *Tsugaru Shamisen* apart from most other traditional Japanese musics, and perhaps opens the door to another important aspect of the music that is equally absent from other Japanese traditions: innovation. Daijō Kazuo often quotes Nitabō as saying that imitation is something that even a monkey can do, and that each player must play his own *Tsugaru shamisen* (Daijō 1998, 57). This sentiment is widely held in the *Tsugaru shamisen* community, and has allowed for the genre to openly continue evolving, which is very rare in traditional Japanese music.

⁸ Translations from Japanese works are mine unless otherwise stated.

Chapter Summary

In chapter two I explore how Japanese thinkers confronted the idea of modernity and constructed a modern Japanese Identity. In the first half of chapter two I introduce the concepts of modernity, the nation-state, tradition, nostalgia and non-Western modernities, and in the second I consider how these concepts were developed by various Japanese intellectuals and adopted by the state in order to create a modern Japanese identity that strongly influences the way many Japanese still see themselves today.

Chapter three details the recording history of the *Tsugaru shamisen* from the early twentieth century to the present day. Because *Tsugaru shamisen* is a commercial genre, its recording history is a significant part of its overall history, but has until now been largely ignored in the literature. A distinct shift in the content and marketing of *Tsugaru shamisen* recordings in the early twenty-first century is indicative of a shift in the perception of the genre. The release of the first Yoshida Brothers CD in 1999 might be seen as marking the end of the era in which mainstream Japan saw *Tsugaru shamisen* as “old folks” music, and the beginning of a new era of experimentation.

In chapter four I present the history of *Tsugaru shamisen* contests. The first modern contest was held in 1982 in Hirosaki City, and it struggled for much of that decade, but by the peak of the revival in the mid-2000s, national contests had spread throughout the country. From a peak of nine national contests dedicated solely to *Tsugaru shamisen*, six remain as of 2016. The contests are an important part of modern *Tsugaru shamisen*: not only has every young player of note come up through the contest community, but the intra-contest rivalry for supremacy makes them one of the sites of contestation of the present day meaning of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Chapter five examines *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals, first outlining the multiple revivals that

make up the history of the genre, then focusing on the two revival high water marks: the revival of the 1970s, and the millennial revival. In chapter three it will have become apparent that the face of *Tsugaru shamisen* in the twentieth-century was Takahashi Chikuzan, while in the twenty-first century the music's most visible representatives are the Yoshida Brothers. The former was blinded by measles as a child, and apprenticed under another blind musician to become a *bosama*, a member of the group of blind itinerant musicians with which this music is said to have originated; the latter gained national fame in their early twenties, at the turn of the twenty-first century, having risen through the ranks of the competitions detailed in chapter four. Using six themes identified by Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* I consider the ways in which these two revivals differ from one another, and how the world of *Tsugaru shamisen*, and its representation in mainstream Japan, has changed in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Two: Modernity in Japan

Introduction

In this chapter I explore a nexus of ideas that make up the theoretical framework for my dissertation. These ideas are intertwined in a way that makes it difficult to discuss one without discussing others, but perhaps at the centre of the discussion is the idea of modernity. In exploring how the Japanese confronted the idea of modernity and constructed a modern Japanese identity, I also consider the ideas of tradition, nostalgia, and the complex ways that both the rural and the urban are made to represent the nation in modern Japan.

In the first section I introduce the concepts of modernity, the nation-state, tradition, nostalgia, and non-Western modernities. In the second section I consider how these concepts were developed by Japanese thinkers in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century in creating a Japanese identity that, in many ways, remains unchanged to this day.

General Concepts

Modernity

David Punter points out that modernity, essentially, “is always a temporary term which asserts both the *onset* of a condition of things and simultaneously the *passing-away* of other things” (Punter 2003, 6). He suggests that by this definition, placing modernity's beginnings in eighteenth-century Europe is somewhat arbitrary, and that one could just as easily look to ancient Greece, or earlier civilizations that recognized this concept. Punter concedes that the convention of dating modernity from the Age of Enlightenment is not entirely arbitrary; while the idea of a new present that is contrasted with the era it supersedes was not new to eighteenth-century

Europe, from this period “modern” does become a “highly valorized term” (ibid., 3). The convention that dates modernity from the Age of Enlightenment sees the rise of reason over religion, and scientific and technological advancement as its key attributes (ibid., 13).

Roy Starrs notes that the sense in which we generally speak of modernity today might locate its beginnings more recently, with the industrial revolution, or even the first world war, and lists some other characteristics that have come to be associated with modernity, including “revolutionary social changes such as those towards greater gender, class, and ethnic equality,” “intensive urbanization and industrialization,” “the rise of capitalism, consumerism and the middle class,” a “general democratization or massification of culture and society,” and “the dawning of the 'machine age' and the resultant mechanization and regulation of more and more aspects of everyday life” (Starrs 2012, 6). The writings of sociologist Hitoshi Imamura suggest a few more additions: “an emphasis on ... the supposed autonomy of individuals,” “systematized, citizenship-based societies and governments” and “a homogenous and linear progressive sense of time” (Hagiwara 2012, 310).

The concept of modernity is also strongly linked to the rise of the nation-state, and all that that entails. Further, in defining “the modern,” we also define its opposite, “the traditional,” and create nostalgia, a yearning for the traditional. Finally, there is the question of how modernity is conceived of outside of its European birthplace. As the idea of modernization is exported to other parts of the world, it often becomes conflated with Westernization, so recent writing has argued for multiple modernities.

Nationalism and the Rise of the Nation-state

Benedict Anderson, in his seminal *Imagined Communities*, defines a nation as “an imagined

political community” - imagined because most of the members of the community do not know each other, but nonetheless feel a “deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991, 6-7). He points out that while “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” it is “notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze” (ibid., 3).

Before Anderson, Ernest Gellner said “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist,” suggesting that the rise of the nation-state did not occur organically, but was engineered (ibid., 6). As we shall see shortly, there is some truth to this in terms of the spread of the concept, but Anderson's description of its initial emergence is persuasive. He argues that nationalism – and “nation-ness,” nationality, and other related nation-based ideas – came about through this rise of reason over religion. He details the confluence of a number of “discreet historical forces” that occurred in the West, creating an environment which, once established, was transplantable “to a great variety of social terrains, to political and ideological constellations” (ibid., 4). First, exploration of the non-European world opened up the idea of how widely diverse cultures are, which was, along with the development of modern philosophy and science, responsible for the “erosion of religious certainties,” and the rise of reason (ibid., 16, 12). Second, as reason and science began to eclipse religion as a world-shaping force, the idea of nationhood eclipsed that of kingdom, whose “legitimacy derives from divinity” (ibid., 19). Third, the medieval apprehension of time, in which there were no “radical separations between past and present” gave way to the modern idea of linear, calendrical time (ibid., 23, 26).

Anderson points to the “gradual demotion of the sacred language” of Latin in Europe, and the rise of written vernacular languages as another step towards national consciousness (ibid., 18). In Europe, the move to works being printed in vernacular languages had three key effects. First, it

allowed for written communication between peoples whose local variants of a given language might preclude verbal communication, underscoring their commonality. Second it hastened the “fixity” of European languages, which by the seventeenth century had “generally assumed their modern forms.” Andersen argues that these fixed, modern forms “in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (ibid., 44). Third, it set the standard versions of each language – High German and the King's English, for example, which entrenched power in the areas where those versions were spoken (ibid., 45).

According to Anderson, then, the rise of reason over religion, of nationhood over kingdom, and of calendrical time over its medieval counterpart, set the stage for the modern nation. The concept of nationalism was further strengthened by the widespread written use of the vernacular, which tied together disparate users of the same language, led to the fixity of European languages, and helped determine the centres of power in each nation.

C.A. Bayly, in *Birth of the Modern World*, recalls Eric Hobsbawm's statement that “nationalism follows the state, not vice versa,” pointing out that the “conscious policy of new political elites, especially in the later nineteenth century, was what created nationalism. States promoted popular education, defined citizenship, and its duties, (and) counted and imprisoned people” (Bayly 2004, 203). Bayly further insists on the importance of displays of power, “particularly armed conflict between states,” in the creation of nationalism (ibid., 204). He agrees with Hobsbawm and John Brevilley that nationalism's emergence is a process rather than a single event, that “an inchoate sense of nationality, generated by memories and traditions of earlier patriotisms, could be honed and molded by the activity of a newly powerful state” (ibid.).

Bayly makes the point that nationalism emerged differently in different nations, and that this did not happen along clear European/non-European lines. He categorizes them in three groups.

The first group includes nations (many European countries, but also Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and Ethiopia) where those in power gradually, “under the pressure of war, economic and cultural change, and the development of communications,” turned existing feelings of patriotism into “more aggressive and exclusive understandings of nationality” (ibid., 219). The second includes those that were pressured by international war and colonialism to “adopt the language and practices of modern nationalism” (parts of Eurasia and North Africa, but also Hungary and Poland), and the third is made up of those who at the advent of World War I had yet to see nationalism emerge “as a coherent set of ideas and political practices” (Southern Ireland, Russia, and parts of the central Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary) (ibid., 218-219).

Tradition

The modern exists in contrast to the traditional, but their relationship is more complicated than simple polar opposition. The traditional is not only that which is not modern, but it is actually constantly redefined by the modern, since we can only conceive of the traditional in modern terms. Pertti Anttonen in his *Tradition Through Modernity* recalls Dell Hymes' mid-70s notion of traditionalization, and Hobsbawm's later “invented traditions,” writing that the past is not so much remembered as “actively – and often narratively – produced” (Anttonen 2005, 106). And again that, “Since the concepts of tradition and modernity are fundamentally modern, what they aim to and are able to describe, report and denote is epistemologically modern, as that which is regarded as non-modern and traditional is appropriated into modern social knowledge through modern concepts and discursive means” (ibid., 13). Similarly, Stephen Vlastos points out that tradition is often “a prescriptive representation of socially desirable (or sometimes undesirable) institutions and ideas thought to have been handed down from generation to generation” (Vlastos

1998, 3).

Nostalgia

Punter writes that “part of the complex structure of modernity will always be a certain kind of nostalgia, a moment of regret for that which is superseded ... with the onset of the new” (Punter 2003, 6). It has been suggested that this comes from a need for stability amidst great change (Berman 1982, 3). Late nineteenth-century examples of this include Europe's emerging bourgeois supporting pre-industrial “high culture” (in the form of performing and plastic arts and architecture), and Britain's Arts and Crafts Movement – part of an attempt to revive an idealized version of late Elizabethan rural England (Harootunian 2000, xxi; Outka 2009, 8). Nostalgic yearning for the past is often accompanied by dissatisfaction with the modern present, whether it be the perceived loss of traditional culture, or the alienating aspects of “industrialization, technologization, bureaucratization, standardization, urbanization, social fragmentation, individualization, commercialization” and the like (Anttonen 2005, 41). Further, there is a sense that the modern is inauthentic; authenticity is “thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles” (MacCannell 1989, 3).

In this section I offer a brief summary of the concept of nostalgia as a process of constructing and idealizing the past for present needs. As has been noted by various writers on nostalgia, the term was originally coined in the seventeenth century to describe a physical complaint (deriving “from the Greek *nostos*, return to native land, and *algos*, suffering or grief”) resulting from separation from one's country (Lowenthal 1985, 10; Boym 2001, xviii; Dodman 2014, 173). It seemed particularly contagious among soldiers serving abroad, and epidemics were triggered by Swiss folk tunes and Scottish highland bagpipes among their respective troops (Boym 2001, 4).

Though an “outbreak” among soldiers was recorded as late as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, by the mid-nineteenth century, the conception of nostalgia was already moving from disease to “an expression of new patriotic feeling” (Dodman 2014, 175; Boym 2001, 11). The definition shifts again in the twentieth century as nostalgia “comes to be identified with a temporal as well as spatial sense of dislocation” (Nosco 1990, 3). This temporal sense has since come to dominate the general concept of nostalgia.

Shaw and Chase state that “nostalgia is experienced when some elements of the present are felt to be defective and when there is no public sense of redeemability through a belief in progress” (Chase and Shaw 1989, 15). The authors allow for a broader definition of these elements when they state that “Some cultural critics have identified the whole experience of post modernity as a kind of macro-nostalgia. There is no space which we authentically occupy, and so popular culture fills the gap by manufacturing images of home and rootedness” (ibid.). They also state that implicit in nostalgia is the knowledge that we cannot bring back the past, and may not want to. As Lowenthal puts it, “Many seem less concerned to find a past than to yearn for it” (Lowenthal 1985, 7).

At the heart Lowenthal's writing on nostalgia is the idea that this yearned-for past is a construction, and that the past that a society creates serves its present needs. This past is created from carefully chosen (and often misremembered) memories. Lowenthal points out, as did Hymes and Hobsbawm before him, that “Memories must be continually discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order” (Lowenthal 1985, 205). Each generation, then, makes its own sense out of the chaos of the past, but in doing so necessarily and unknowingly constructs a new past. Lowenthal asserts that “We fail to recognize not only *why* we alter history, but often *that* we do. Thus we tend to misconceive the past as a fixed verity

from which others have strayed, but to which we can and should remain unswervingly faithful” (Lowenthal 1985, 326). In answer to what function nostalgia serves, Lowenthal makes a list of overlapping and contradictory benefits that the past is generally thought to confer: “familiarity and recognition; reaffirmation and validation; individual and group identity; guidance; enrichment; and escape” (Lowenthal 1985, 38).

Svetlana Boym's contribution to the literature is to suggest that some of the aspects of nostalgia discussed above may actually be attributes of two distinct types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia, Boym explains, “stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” and “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition,” and so is that type of nostalgia that, as Lowenthal wrote, fails to recognize that it is altering the past (Boym 2001, xviii). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming,” or in Lowenthal's terms is more concerned with yearning for, than finding, the past (ibid.). Boym points out that restorative nostalgia is the sort in which the state engages, for example, by creating national museums and memorials, while reflective nostalgia is engaged in by individuals in a more self-aware manner, as when an exiled writer constructs a version of her imagined homeland (Boym 2001, 15).

Other Modernities

As has been stated, modernity as we know it today was born in the West, out of the conditions outlined by Anderson above, and so has both temporal and spatial components. In the Renaissance, Europeans began to make a distinction between “modern” and “ancient,” and at the same time began to mark “The Orient” as lacking in modernity (Anttonen 2005, 30). This could cut both ways; while places belonging to the “non-West” – what Anttonen calls the “spatial

others” – on the one hand, are seen as “belonging to an earlier stage in the human development towards modernity,” and on the other, were thought to be ageless and unchanging, pure, authentic, and innocent in ways that were lost to the West by modernization (ibid., 31). As modernity was exported, it was often conflated with westernization. Echoing Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Harry Harootunian notes that there is a strong Eurocentric narrative that proposes a “true time” that is “kept by the modern West,” and which all latecomers are forever trying to catch up to (Harootunian 2000, xvi). In this narrative, non-Western modernities are seen as “alternative modernities” or, worse, “‘not quite modern’ – usually a euphemism for being ‘not quite white.’” He calls for the recognition that multiple modernities exist coevally, and the rejection of the notion of the West as a “developmental archimedean point” (ibid.).

Japan's Modernity

In this section I consider how Japan's modern identity was shaped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I first look at how modernity was initially received in Japan, and how this affected its re-imagining of itself as a modern, unified nation-state. I then consider some of the early official documents that defined what it was to be Japanese, and how this identity was further defined by influential intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, looking specifically at the Overcoming Modernity Symposium held in 1942, just months after Japan entered into war with the United States. Next I summarize a body of work known as *nihonjinron*, or the “discourse of Japanese uniqueness,” and lastly I consider the place of the traditional and the rural in the creation of modern Japanese identity.

Modernity in Japan

Iida Yumiko in *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism as Aesthetics* states that “since its encounter with the West in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan has never been at ease with its position in the modern world, and Japanese identity has been constantly reproduced in the context of its love-hate relation to its powerful other, the modern West” (Iida 2002, 3-4). Japan internalized Europe's orientalization of it and other non-Western nations, and for a time attempted to catch up to the West by adopting “modern technologies, institutions and values” and turning its back on its own traditions (ibid., 17). The victories of the late nineteenth-century Sino-Japanese War and the early twentieth-century Russo-Japanese War had many in the country feeling that they *had* caught up with the West, and led some Japanese intellectuals to begin to nostalgically “imagine 'Japan,' formerly a sign of shame, as an ideal place free from the present troubles” (Iida 2002, 4). As in the West, there was a growing sense of the cost of modernization: “rural poverty, alienation, egotistical competition in the capitalist economy, and rising social tensions” led to a recognition of *modan dekatan* (“modern decadence”) in urban centres (ibid., 22; Harootunian 2000, 207). By the time of the Pacific war, this had turned into an intellectual movement, summarized by the phrase “overcoming modernity,” which attempted to define a modern Japan in terms other than those of Western modernity (Starrs 2012, 10).

The phrase “overcoming modernity” was likely coined by philosopher and cultural historian Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), who along with others like folklorists Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) and philosophers Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961) and Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945), shaped a modern Japanese identity by contrasting it with Western ideas of modernity. Various facets of this identity that they helped create will be discussed below. Not all Japanese intellectuals, however, saw the need to incorporate Japan's past into modern life.

Philosophers Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke (1892-1931) and Tosaka Jun (1900-1945), and architect and educator Kon Wajirō (1888-1973) all embraced the study of modern “everyday life,” and rejected the idea of “reducing culture to fixed, unchanging and natural essences” (Harootunian 2000, 150). They engaged in urban ethnography, itemizing the particulars of modern urban life with the same fervour with which the folklorists undertook the project of rescuing disappearing folkways, but their ideas did not take hold the way those of the tradition-minded thinkers like Watsuji, Yanagita, and Yanagi did, and it is the latter group's essentialized idea of Japan that came to dominate the country's self-image (ibid., 150).

Nationalism in Japan

As shown above, the creation of the state is understood today to be an artificial act, but in Japan, as elsewhere, there was an attempt to make this act seem natural (Thomas 1998, 114). As Michael Wiener puts it, “The language, imagery, and iconography of nationalism suggested that the nation was the modern manifestation of a primordial community of which the citizenry had always been a part” (Wiener 1997, 2). Julia Thomas notes that this was carried out over a number of decades and through a variety of practices, including changing the role of the indigenous religion of *Shinto*, and the emperor, and the definition of “the people” (Thomas 1998, 116). In the early Meiji Period (1868-1912) Shinto was put forward at first as the state religion – a status it lost by 1872 due in part to Buddhist and Christian pressure – then in 1905 as the “non-religious state ideology” so that people of any faith could participate in “rites encouraging national unity” (ibid., 120). The disparate practices and beliefs of “folk Shinto” were streamlined and simplified into a “state Shinto” (Befu 1997, 18). This went so far as to include the destruction of many local shrines under the edict *isson issho* (one village one shrine), which

reduced the number of small, “ungraded shrines” by half between 1903 and 1920, and was part of a larger movement to create an image of Japan as a unified nation rather than a collection of regions with quite varied histories and cultural practices (Thomas 1998, 122). Wiener notes that “Regional identities were either suppressed or subjected to a process of cultural redefinition whose objective was to bring reality in line with ideology” (Wiener 1997, 1). Watsuji Tetsurō, whose *Climate and Culture* (1935) will be discussed in detail below, looked at “Japanese national character from an ecological perspective.” He asserted that Japan's mix of Southern and Northern traits was unique in Asia, and forwarded an idea of the people of Japan as mono-ethnic, replacing “the multi-ethnic view that had been widely accepted” earlier with a view that “was to become a basis for postwar theory on Japanese uniqueness” (Tai 2003, 12).

Defining documents of modern Japan

In 1889 the Constitution of Great Imperial Japan established the emperor as the head of state, and in 1890 the Imperial Rescript on Education was published, and would be recited daily in schools until the end of World War II (Ito 2012, 85; Iida 2002, 18). The Rescript described the mythological founding of the Imperial system, with the emperor as the father of a nation “united in loyalty and filial piety,” and expounded “a curious mixture of traditional Japanese virtues and Confucian moral values” (Befu 2001, 129; Iida 2002, 18; Befu 1997, 17). This concept of the nation as a single united body (*kokutai*) would be further developed in the lead up to World War II (Iida 2002, 42).

The modern concept of Japanese ethnic identity dates from this period; as Tessa Morris-Suzuki states “some sense of ethnic Japanese identity may be projected retroactively through Japanese history to the murky ancient beginning, but for the modern sense of the ethnic nation in

Japan we need look no further back than the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century” (Morris-Suzuki 1998, 181). Prior to this period, and even after it, though to a much lesser degree, Japanese people tended to identify first as members of their district rather than citizens of the nation, largely due to the almost three centuries of government-imposed isolation from the rest of the world. An expanding, imperialistic “Greater Japan” identity then began to develop in the teens, as Japan attempted to instil in its colonies of Taiwan and Korea a sense of pan-Asian racial consciousness (Doak 1998, 187). This was bolstered by the writings of intellectuals like Nishida Kitarō, Watsuji Tetsurō and others in interesting ways. For example ceramic expert Yanagi Sōetsu spearheaded the study of Japanese folk art (*mingei*) in the early decades of the twentieth century, and in the late 1930s expanded the definition to include the folk arts of not only the Japanese minorities of the Ainu in northern Japan and Okinawa in the south, but the colonies in Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, and Southeast Asia. *Mingei* “became an integral part of the Japanese state's project to construct and justify an autarchic regional empire in Asia,” that it came to call “the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” (Brandt, 2007, 3).

The above-mentioned Imperial Rescript on Education was followed in 1937 by a 156-page document called the Fundamentals of our National Polity (*kokutai no hongī*), which further underscored the idea of Japan as a unique nation, unified under the emperor, and would define what it was to be Japanese until the end of the Second World War (Befu 1997, 21; Iida 2002, 5).

The Overcoming Modernity Symposium

Both Watsuji and Yanagita wrote about the “double character” of modern Japan that was on one hand modern and Westernized, but on the other still had an “essential” Japaneseness underneath that gave it the capability of “overcoming” the negative aspects of modernity

(Harootunian 2000, 267). Harootunian quotes Watsuji on Japan's history of incorporating aspects of other cultures into its own: “Bringing to life through things that have also overcome other things, and are overcome themselves is the remarkable uniqueness of Japanese culture” (ibid., 254). He writes that for Watsuji “this perception of a double structure constituted the distinct mark of modernity introduced by the encounter with Western capitalism. The appeal to a national talent for creating a double structure worked to lessen Japan's dependence on the West as it revealed a way for 'overcoming' it” (ibid., 256).

In July of 1942, following the entrance of the United States into the Pacific War, a group of thirteen leading intellectuals – novelists, philosophers, art specialists, and historians – held the “Overcoming Modernity Symposium” (Iida 2002, 50). It has been characterized as a major example of Japan's intellectuals contributing to the development of the country's fascist wartime state, though some Japanese writers – Takeuchi Yoshimi in particular – have attempted to show that with all the infighting that went on, nothing concrete came out of the event (Harootunian 2000, 40; Iida 2002, 55). A group of philosophers from the Kyoto school “sought to provide a philosophical grounding of both the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and the Japan-U.S. War,” but this was met with varying degrees of resistance from the other attendees (Kartani 2005, 102).

There was a general disillusionment with modernism, and a feeling that Japan had lost too much in joining the modern world. The symposium, as the title suggests, was attempting to “overcome” the modern, as Iida Yumiko describes it, “to go beyond the modern, to transcend the Western, externally imposed, universal and synchronic structures of capital, reason, and the lesser identity of the other” (Iida 2002, 24). The philosophers of the Kyoto School suggested adopting a world view that involved a “spacialized form of Hegelian history” that would

“separate Japan and the Japanese from the historical world,” an idea that was dismissed by some of the less philosophically inclined attendees, but which ultimately “provided the theoretical repertoire” on which the discourse of *kokutai* was built (Iida 2002, 65, 42). Others suggested that since one of the hallmarks of modernity is reason, rationalism should be rejected “in favour of aestheticism,” in other words, that “The centrality of reason (be) replaced by that of beauty” (ibid., 52, 65). For Japanese thinkers of the time, “Japan’ became a catch-all, empty signifier designating all things lost to modernization,” and so the goal of the symposium was to create a modern Japanese identity “as an aesthetic mode antithetical to the modern” (ibid., 24, 66).

Yanagi Sōetsu, in *Kōgei no michi (The Way of Crafts)* (1927), outlined what he saw as the beauty of folk crafts, and in doing so set out an aesthetic which, more widely applied, could be used as a guide for living an authentic life. Yuko Kikuchi distills his aesthetic as finding beauty in: the handmade, intimacy, functionality, health/sturdiness, naturalness (of materials and processes), simplicity, tradition, irregularity, inexpensiveness, sincerity and honest toil, plurality (easy reproducibility), selflessness and anonymity (Kikuchi 1994, 247; Kikuchi, 1997, 347). This list defines craft in opposition partly to art and partly to mechanical reproduction, which had already decimated the craft industry in Japan, and which he saw as one of the ills Western modernity had brought to Japan.

Nihonjinron, the discourse of Japanese uniqueness

Iida Yumiko has succinctly defined *nihonjinron* (literally “writings on Japanese people”) as the “discourse of Japanese uniqueness,” an idea which can be traced back in one form or another to the earliest writings about Japanese identity (ibid., 3). *Kokugaku*, the study of Japaneseness, came from early eighteenth-century Japanese sinologists trying to find in early Japanese

literature the “distinctive temperament and spirit” that differentiated it from Chinese works (Nosco 1997, 3). Japan defined itself in opposition to the foreign culture that was most significant for it at the time, a pattern that continued into the modern period when first Europe, then the US took over that role (Befu 1997, 12). Kamo no Mabuchi (1697-1769), for example, decided that Japan's character was masculine in comparison to China's feminine, and Motōri Norinaga (1730-1801) saw *mono no aware*, the appreciation for the impermanence of things, as something the Chinese lacked, and therefore a uniquely Japanese trait (Nosco 1997, 11; Befu 2001, 124).

Writings about Japanese uniqueness tend to flourish during periods when Japan is experiencing a positive self-image, but were scarce in the period directly after the country was forced open, and again directly after its defeat in World War II (Befu 1997, 28). From the late nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War *nihonjinron* shaped the identity of the country. The above-mentioned Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) and Fundamentals of Our National Polity (1937), both essentially state-sponsored *nihonjinron*, date from this time. Befu Harumi goes so far as to say that *nihonjinron* was “the official ideology in this period” and was forced on people to the extent that alternative views were forcibly silenced (Befu 1997, 22). In the decades following World War II there was suspicion of the traditional values that led the country to war, but from the late 1960s Japan's rapid economic growth spurred a new appreciation of Japaneseness.

Befu locates the heyday of popular *nihonjinron* works from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, while Iida notes that from the 1990s, with Japan's economic downturn, the focus has changed from celebrating Japan's unique character to “revisionist voices calling for a restoration of conventional moral codes and traditional cultural values” (Befu 2001, 14; Iida 2002, 4). Befu

contends that modern *nihonjinron* do not differ greatly from the prewar version, and that while there is no longer “overt state suppression of contrary views,” the “forces of suasion are more subtle and indirect” today (Befu 2001, 140).

In the postwar period, while *nihonjinron* has continued to be Japan's “dominant identity discourse,” it largely comes from general interest sources – “books, magazines, public lectures, round table discussions, television and radio programs” – rather than scholarly writing (Befu 2001, 46; Clammer 2001, 79). Works in this genre “share a singular objective: to demonstrate unique qualities of Japanese culture, Japanese society, and the Japanese people,” and in doing so, broadly generalize, paying little attention to variation within the Japanese populace (Befu 2001, 3-4). Western writing on *nihonjinron* is almost unanimously critical, but perhaps misses the mark: as Befu points out *nihonjinron* in general are not carefully constructed scholarly works, but mass-market consumer products that were never meant to stand up to rigorous scrutiny (ibid., 12, 62). The interesting thing is not whether or not these ideas are true (most of them clearly are not), but that they have gained such a hold on the self-perception of the Japanese people. On the other hand, the fact that they are written for a mass audience does not, of course, mean that they are inconsequential. Befu argues that the *nihonjinron* model should be seen as prescriptive rather than descriptive, and that that the Japan they prescribe is an idealized one. Further, this idealized image is state sanctioned. He writes “thus intellectuals write *Nihonjinron* as prescription for behaviour. The government turns it into a hegemonic ideology, and the corporate establishment puts it into practice” (Befu 2001, 81). This is carried out by the state in a number of ways, from the bestowing of awards like “national cultural treasure” on people and practices that exemplify this ideal, to financially supporting the “proper” sort of museums and art forms, to promoting sanctioned Japanese culture overseas through institutions like The Japan Foundation (ibid., 81-

82).

Nihonjinron are grounded in the idea of a homogenous Japan where regional differences occur, but are insignificant when comparing Japan as a whole to other cultures (ibid., 68-70). The “imagined community” of Japan is particularly convincing because it is an island nation (which gives it distinct borders), with a language that is only spoken there, and is spoken by everyone (strengthening the idea of shared, exclusive culture), with no significant numbers of new immigrants evident in its recorded history (ensuring “racial purity”) (ibid., 71).

It should be noted again that these traits that make up Japan's uniqueness are more often than not ways that Japan defines itself in contrast with its “other” - China in the pre-modern period, Europe in the early modern period, and the United States in the postwar period. Some of the more commonly discussed traits are *amae*, the “mutual psychological dependency of primary group members, be it family or other groups”; *kokoro*, Japanese spirit; aesthetic concepts like *iki*, a sense of style of dress and manner; *wabisabi*, the beauty of the imperfect; *mono no aware*, the appreciation of impermanence; “a unique affinity for nature”; group harmony and consensus decision making (Befu, 2001, 31-34; Nosco 1997, 3). Other claims to uniqueness that are surprisingly widespread are the ideas that Japan is unique in having four seasons, that the Japanese language has no connection with any other language in the world, that the Japanese people process music in the opposite hemisphere of their brain than Westerners, and the length of the Japanese colon is perfectly suited to digesting Japanese rice (Befu 2001, 38; Clammer 2001, 78).

As stated above, Watsuji Tetsurō *Climate and Culture (Fūdo)* is a very influential piece of *nihonjinron* writing, and will be looked at in some detail here, as it serves as a representative work of this type. Ann Wehmeyer traces the Japanese use of the term *fūdo* to a work called

Fūdoki (*Writings on climate and culture*) from the eighth century. The term *fūdo* (made up of the ideograms for wind and earth) was borrowed from China, where it referred to weather and soil conditions, though in Japan it has eventually come “to refer not only to geographical features and local production, but also to regional customs and regional lore” (Wehmeyer 1997, 96). Watsuji was not the first writer in Japan to study the effect of climate on culture; Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927) wrote on the subject in the late nineteenth century, and several of Watsuji's contemporaries including Shirayanagi Shūko and Usami Keido wrote on the subject about the same time as him. Likewise, scholars in the US, Germany, and France were writing on the same topic, often with racial undertones (Harootunian 2000, 261). In fact, Watsuji included a quote from Hegel in his work which reads as a summary of *Fūdo*: “The character of the folk is nothing other than the way by which they secure the land there in order to enter world history” (ibid., 262). It is Watsuji's work, though, that is most often cited for its “conflation of environment, culture, and biology whose legacy continues to this day” (Befu 2001, 133).

As alluded to above, Watsuji borrowed from Hegel and Heidegger to develop the ideas in *Climate and Culture*. According to Iida, where Heidegger looked at the individual subject in time, Watsuji saw “spaciality” as more important than temporality. In the introduction to *Climate and Culture* Watsuji wrote that, while studying Heidegger, “I found myself intrigued by the attempt to treat the structure of man's existence in terms of time but I found it hard to see why, when time had thus been made to play a part in the structure of subjective existence, at the same juncture space was not postulated as part of the basic structure of existence” (Watsuji 1961, v). Certainly, Watsuji's most famous work is focused on place, but this privileging of spaciality over temporality also served Japan's sense of exceptionalism. Heidegger's focus on time puts Europe at the forefront of civilization; it suggests “a universalist historical narrative in which Japan was

seen as backward and less civilized,” while Watsuji's privileging of spaciality forefronts “Japan's sense of geographical isolation and uniqueness” (Iida 2002, 37). Watsuji also used the ideas from Heidegger's *Being and Nothingness* to show the limits of rational knowledge, and his phenomenology to argue for a “pure experience” in which reason and the senses are united due to a “blurring (of) the Kantian boundaries between the realms of the cognitive, the moral, and the aesthetic” (ibid., 40).

Watsuji's argument for Japanese uniqueness in this book has to do with what he identifies as the three basic climate types to be found on earth: monsoon, desert and meadow. He argues, along with Hegel, that the character of the peoples living in various regions of the world are determined by the climactic type of their region. People from areas with monsoon climates, like India, China and Japan, have had to deal with heat and humidity, violent rains, floods and droughts, which led to a character of passive resignation (Watsuji 1961, 18-19). People from desert areas, like “Arabia, Africa, Mongolia and so on,” had to struggle for survival in an inhospitable environment, and so have developed determination (ibid., 34, 49). Meadow climates, like the Mediterranean, Europe, and by extension, North America, are “a synthesis of humidity with dryness,” and are mild and predictable (ibid., 61). From this predictability people in these regions developed reason (Harootunian 2000, 272). As Watsuji puts it, “In Europe, nature with its docility and its discipline was treated as something to be mastered, as something in which rule was to be discovered” (Watsuji, 1961, 206). He contrasts rational meadow culture with monsoon culture, where nature was not something to be mastered, but “a repository of infinite depth” and something to seek “consolation and assistance from” (ibid.). Monsoon cultures consequently developed a relationship with nature that led to a deep capacity for spirituality and feeling rather than reason. Hot, humid monsoon culture, then, is irrational and

spiritual, but Japan also had cold winters, which distinguished it from other monsoon cultures (here Watsuji seems to willfully ignore the fact that seasonal extremes occur in much of China too), and allowed it to develop beyond one simple climate type. Harootunian summarizes the result thusly: “only Japan was able to master and learn from others what it lacked. The character it had forged in the experience of weathering monsoons, typhoons, and earthquakes stimulated a self-realization that would lead to the adaptation of cultural traits from the others” (Harootunian 2000, 267). Watsuji, then, uses Japan's geographical position to explain its basic character, and escape the Eurocentric narrative which defined non-western states as “not quite modern.” Japan's mixed climate gave it adaptability, he argues, and put it in a unique position to overcome modernity. While most Japanese people are not actually familiar with Watsuji's work, his conclusions are widely believed to be true, and act as axioms for *nihonjinron*, the discourse on Japaneseness.

Natsukashisa, Japanese nostalgia

Chase and Shaw state that societies “with a view of time and history that is linear [in that they distinguish past and present] and secular [lacking the certainty of a manifest destiny] ... should be especially prone to the syndrome of nostalgia” (Chase and Shaw 1989, 3). That these two criteria are key aspects of modernity in general underscores the intertwined nature of the concepts introduced in this chapter. Indeed, there is no shortage of nostalgia in modern, secular Japan; the adjective *natsukashii*, applied to things that evoke nostalgia, is used with great frequency by people of all ages.⁹ Traditional imagery is ubiquitous in present-day Japan; it is

⁹ Once, while talking with a six-year old, I mentioned what I thought to be a current popular toy, but was put in my place as a behind-the-times adult with his answer: “Natsukashii! Yonsai no toki ni sugoi ninki ga atta!” (“How nostalgic! That was very popular when I was four!”).

used extensively in advertising to sell things, but is also consumed in its own right. Chase and Shaw's assertion that popular culture creates images of home and rootedness to compensate for our sense of our own inauthenticity, applies in Japan too. As Millie Creighton notes, many Japanese have

...a consuming popular desire to 'travel home.' It is problematic because 'home' is more than just a geographical location. 'Home' in a temporal sense is the antithesis of the way most modern Japanese live, and a contradiction to four decades of successful struggle to achieve the desired goal of economic parity with the West. [...] 'home' is a 'real Japan,' which in the collective nostalgic imagination implies the return to a pre-Western, pre-industrialized, and non-urban past. (Creighton 1997, 239)

Creighton is specifically writing about how traditional imagery is used to sell vacations to rural hot spring resorts, or traditional sightseeing destinations, but the impulse behind these trips drives all manner of nostalgia. She succinctly states that the function of nostalgia is “to link the present via the past to the future by addressing fears of a vanishing cultural identity, by asserting a unique Japanese heritage in the face of an increasingly Westernized lifestyle, and by promising an affirmation of belongingness to Japan's urban dwellers” (ibid., 242). This loss of cultural identity to Westernization, and loss of the sense of belongingness to urbanization, are precisely what Chase and Shaw would call “defective” about modern Japan, and are the same forces that motivated Yanagita, Yanagi, Watsuji and others to address the issue of Japanese identity in the early decades of the twentieth century, as the Japan they grew up in began to vanish around them.

Rural tradition and urban modernity

In Japan, as in other modern industrialized nations, the rural is associated with tradition and the urban is associated with modernity. Stacy Leigh Pigg quotes the following passage from Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*: “The common image of the country is now an

image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. (...) The pull of the idea of the country is toward old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernization, development” (Pigg 1992, 495). Williams is writing about England, but the sentiment holds true for many modern societies. Since, in non-European nations, modernity is so closely associated with the West, this rural/urban opposition is also seen as an East/West opposition.

The rural and the urban both have positive and negative associations. Pigg notes that in Nepal the rural can evoke a spectrum of feelings including “familiarity, ambivalence, disdain, or nostalgia” (ibid., 493). From one point of view, the rural can be seen to lack what the city has, be it, for example, *siwilai* (civilization) in Thailand, *bikas* (development) in Nepal, or simply the idea of urban sophistication in most Western countries (Winichakul 2000, 534; Pigg 1992, 495). From another angle, the rural can be seen as the repository of a nation's authentic values – like the “heartland” of the United States.

In Japan, the concept of the rural has a similar dual image: *inaka* (rustic countryside) and *furusato* (hometown) (Yano 2002, 19). As *inaka* it is “that which is not *tokai*, not the city. By extension it implies it is lacking in all that makes the city the vibrant, enjoyable, convenient place where anyone who knows what’s good for them prefers to live” (McKinney 1998, 66). On the other hand, as Keith Brown points out, Japanese use images of *furusato* “to create a pure, unsullied, more traditional “other” in Japan to contrast with the artificialities of the lives they see themselves leading in their fast-paced concrete cities, where human relations are seen as distant, contractual... and lacking in warmth, trust, and intimacy” (Brown 2006, 197-8). Further, Yano notes that *furusato* “has retained both the specific meaning of one's family's rootedness to a particular place and the more generalized sense of “national family” rootedness in a mythic

furusato Japan,” through which, she argues, the local is transformed into the national (Yano 2002, 18). To urban dwelling Japanese, *furusato* is the “internal exotic” (ibid., 172).

Jennifer Robertson suggests how this generalized sense of *furusato* might take hold. She writes that “the cogency of nostalgia increases in proportion to, among other things, a sense of homelessness” and notes that, according to some Japanese social scientists, due to rapid urbanization in the postwar era, many Japanese “can't go home again... and by extension there is no particular place to feel nostalgic toward” (Robertson 1998, 118). Thus they adopt a general image of rural Japan on which to project their feelings of nostalgia. Any rural area might do, but as Thompson and Traphagan point out, the Tōhoku region in the northeast of the main island of Honshū, “is often viewed, by Japanese, as quintessentially traditional and, thus, particularly representative of a homogeneous Japan with homogeneous traditional values” (Thompson and Traphagan 2006, 5). Yano states that in defining the rural, “provincial regions such as northern Honshū, with its harsh winters and strong folk traditions, have been generalized as centre(s) of a “true” national identity and particularized as the idiosyncratic periphery of the nation-culture. These spaces are at once core and periphery, internal and exotic, whole and part” (Yano 2002, 18).

Middle-class Japanese urban intellectuals in the 1920s became disillusioned with what modernity had brought to the country, and started to turn to the countryside “as the imagined site of native authenticity” (Brandt 2007, 39). Interest in “new rural objects of study, appreciation, and desire” grew, with encouragement from people like Yanagita and Yanagi. Folklore (*minzokugaku*), folk crafts (*mingei*), folk performing arts (*minzoku geinō*), folk architecture (*minka*), folksong (*min'yō*), folk tools (*mingu*), and farmer's art (*nōmin bijutsu*) were some of the more common areas of study (ibid.). Societal changes like industrialization, urbanization, and

expansion of the educational system led to a “broadening stratum of men and women living not only in Tokyo and Osaka, but also in cities and towns throughout Japan, who began to find satisfaction and pleasure in the idea as well as the artifacts of a rustic version of 'traditional Japan” (ibid., 73).

Mariko Asano Tamanoi writes that it is “an entirely modern activity to imagine a national community by utilizing the traditional, which one could envision temporally (the past as tradition), spatially (the countryside as the traditional), or the combination of both,” but that one of the dangers of this is the othering of the rural (Tamanoi 1998, 92). Indeed, Yanagita's interest in the folklore seems to have come out of a 1921 visit to Okinawa, which had only become part of Japan forty years earlier, and observing the folk customs there (Wilson 1998, 441; Christy 1995, 63). He was mistakenly convinced that Okinawa was a living example of pre-modern Japanese life, and in writing about their “unchanging” practices, beliefs, and language, he was performing just this kind of othering or orientalizing (Harootunian 2000, 324). Though well intentioned, he was perhaps somewhat guilty of this with mainland rural Japan as well. Yanagita saw rural Japan, and specifically the vestiges of “a prior life of the folk” that remained there, as the answer to the problems of modernity (ibid., 294). Iida notes that rural villages then “internalize(d) an urban ideal depiction of themselves,” self-orientalizing in the same way that Japan as a whole did (Iida 2002, 59).

There was a brief period when this urban-rural split was, if not erased, then at least minimized. In the lead up to the Pacific War, as the ideology of *kokutai* united Japan, “the contest between city and the countryside was transposed to a struggle between Japan and the West” (Iida 2002, 59; Harootunian 2000, 312). In the postwar period the split re-emerged even stronger, thanks in part to urban migration.

Yanagita saw the possibility of Japan as a “mixed civilization” of old and new existing together in layers, as Harootunian describes it, “a palimpsestic imaginary where the earlier and essential layers of national life, in the form of custom, practice, and beliefs were still able to filter through the modern overlays and provide a map for the present” (Harootunian 2000, 31). Yanagi Sōetsu likewise saw rural Japan as the “unadulterated,” true Japan (Brandt 2007, 145). He hoped his folk craft movement would effect social and cultural reform, “revitalizing rural society (by creating a folk craft industry) and producing moral-aesthetic uplift in urban households” through the use of folk crafts rather than mass-produced modern products wherever possible (ibid., 4). Yanagita and Yanagi are representative of that group of tradition-minded intellectuals who saw in rural Japan the true Japan. While a return to the pre-modern was impossible, they argued that the problems that modernity had brought could be mitigated, or even “overcome,” to use Watsuji's term, by maintenance of earlier traditions. This self-essentializing view remains largely unchanged to this day, maintained by the popular discourse on Japaneseness.

Tradition, Modernity and *Tsugaru shamisen*

Locating “authentic” Japaneseness in the countryside results in a situation where the “true Japan” is paradoxically “the other” for most of the population. Most Japanese, then, only sporadically connect with what they believe to be true Japaneseness by, for example, travelling to historic sites, attending traditional events, or participating in traditional activities (Robertson 1988; Ivy 1995; Creighton 1997). Traditional music is one such activity: as was noted above, *min'yō*, along with other folk arts, was already being used in the 1920s by intellectuals in an attempt to hold on to the vanishing pre-modern world. This same sentiment was part of the motivation behind the postwar *min'yō* boom, and the *Tsugaru shamisen* booms of the 1970s and

the millennium.

As I discuss in chapter five, there have been a number of *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals, but mainstream interest has peaked twice: from the early to late 1970s, and from the early to late 2000s. The first revival resulted in Takahashi Chikuzan becoming a household name, and the second saw Yoshida *kyōdai* (the Yoshida Brothers) achieve the same level of fame. In both cases there were other players who benefited from the revival, but the average person of their respective eras knows only these two names.

The 1970s *Tsugaru shamisen* revival was part of a general interest in traditional Japan sometimes referred to as the “Discover Japan boom” after a popular advertising campaign by the national railway to promote travel. Marilyn Ivy devotes a chapter to the “Discover Japan” campaign in *Discourses of the Vanishing*, which advances the same argument as this chapter: that popular discourse finds “authentic Japan” in the rural and the premodern (Ivy 1995, 29-48). Takahashi Chikuzan was representative of both of these, coming from the Tōhoku region – the quintessential image of rural Japan – and being one of the last living practitioners of a pre-modern musical tradition (Thompson and Traphagan 2006; Yano 2002). He gained a new audience of young people who found in him something that was lacking in the professional *min'yō* performances of the day (Yamada 1978, 87). As Alan Booth writes, “Chikuzan's popularity among the educated young was due as much to his blindness as to his musicianship and his skill as a storyteller. The *shamisen* is traditionally an instrument of the blind, and Chikuzan's blindness was solid evidence that he was the 'real thing'” (Booth 1995, 71). In his book on Chikuzan and *Tsugaru shamisen*, Kuramitsu Toshio asks several young people coming out of a Chikuzan concert why they are there. One of the respondents says that he had grown up in Tokyo, so unlike his friends who moved there to attend university, he had no *furusato*

(hometown), but that when he listened to Chikuzan he imagined that that was what it felt like to have one (Kuramitsu 1976, 212). This answer almost too perfectly sums up the first revival.

The second revival began around the year 2000 and had peaked by about 2007. In Chikuzan, the first revival had a link to the distant past: he had actually been a *bosama*, travelling around and playing at the gates of houses for rice. The Yoshida Brothers could not hope to embody that kind of authenticity, and in fact no attempt was made to present them in this way. Chikuzan died in 1998, and the term “*Tsugaru shamisen*” was in the air again thanks to the media buzz around his death. The Yoshida Brothers began appearing on television around this time, and released their first album in 1999, which sold exceedingly well for the genre. By the early 2000s their name was familiar to virtually everyone in Japan. Unlike the earlier revival, this one was being marketed to an older generation: the same generation that had been Chikuzan's young audience in the 1970s.¹⁰

The players that were given media coverage were all young, and the image being presented was a modern one, though rooted in tradition. Christopher S. Thompson and John W. Traphagan, in *Wearing Cultural Styles in Japan: Concepts of Tradition and Modernity in Practice*, make the fairly obvious point that the young are “associated with modernity, the embodiment of which is expressed in hairstyles, clothing styles, speech patterns, and expectations about life taken on through the processes of socialization,” while the old are “associated with tradition, the embodiment of which is expressed in ideas that are sometimes longed for nostalgically: clothing styles, speech patterns, and expectations about life that reflect the prewar social milieu” (Thompson and Traphagan 2006, 17-18). In the 1970s revival, Chikuzan was clearly associated

¹⁰ Peluese and Johnson have mistakenly painted this boom as youth driven but my experience is that the audience was decidedly older; at a Yoshida Brothers concert in Kyoto that I attended in 2001, I estimated that ninety percent of the audience was over fifty (Peluese 2002; Johnson 2005, 88).

with the pre-war era and tradition, and this was part of the attraction to his young audience, most of who were born after the war. Just as clearly, the Yoshida Brothers, and other young performers of the millennial revival were associated with the modern, while the instrument – and by extension the music – they played naturally continued to have strong associations with traditional Japan. In Chapter Five I discuss the Yoshida Brothers' image, which pointedly mixes traditional and modern features, in more depth, as part of a larger discussion on how *Tsugaru shamisen* was recontextualized in the millennial revival.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the creation of Japan's modern identity. I showed that Japan has largely defined itself in contrast to the modern West, constructing a prescriptive ideal based on traditions that were already disappearing in the late nineteenth century. I explained how intellectuals like Watsuji Tetsurō worked to create the idea of Japan as a unified nation, and one uniquely qualified to “overcome modernity,” that is, to exist in the modern world without giving up its essential Japaneseness. Considering the concepts of tradition and modernity, I noted how a nexus of ideas – rural, traditional, authentic, non-Western – is set against a contrasting set of ideas – urban, modern, inauthentic, Westernized – resulting in a situation where the “true Japan” is paradoxically “the other” for most of the population. One option for Japanese people who wish to connect with this perceived “true Japan” is to do so through music, and in the last section I introduced *Tsugaru shamisen's* complex and evolving association with tradition and modernity.

Chapter Three: The Recording History of *Tsugaru Shamisen*

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the history of recorded *Tsugaru shamisen* music, answering questions about when recording began, which companies recorded, which early performers were recorded and which were not, and how the repertoire was and is represented by these recordings. I am unaware of any previous work which attempts a thorough examination of the recording history of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, though Takada's *Tsugaru no hibikigoe* contains a short and by no means complete discography of *min'yō* and *Tsugaru shamisen* LP records, and Tanaka and Oda spend part of a chapter in *Marugoto shamisen no hon* (The complete book of *shamisen*) describing how *Tsugaru shamisen* has changed from the 1960s to 2009, and discussing some of the important recordings (Takada 2006, 197-199; Tanaka and Oda 2009).

I begin the chapter by presenting a history of Japanese recorded music, from the earliest known recordings – made in Paris in 1900 – through the first recordings made in Japan, the first commercial recordings of *min'yō*, the first recordings of *Tsugaru min'yō*, and finally the first instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* recordings. I discuss the histories of the major companies that recorded this music, and determine who among the first few generations of players was recorded. I present the repertoire associated with the genre, and include some quantitative analysis of the frequency with which the songs in the repertoire have been recorded. I then contrast the discographies of Takahashi Chikuzan and Shirakawa Gumpachirō, the two most revered early players of the *Tsugaru shamisen*. I also consider the compilations of recordings made by the first few generations of players that made up the bulk of available commercial recordings in the genre before the revival it experienced in the early 2000s. I then contrast this earlier era with the present era, which starts in the 1990s and expands with the millennial revival. I present the

recording history of a few representative players of the present era to illustrate the distinction between it and the previous one. Finally, I look at recent developments in online availability of the music.

A full catalogue of the recording history of the *Tsugaru Shamisen* is not possible at this time, but this chapter presents the general picture. The earlier generations generally recorded improvised versions of canonical pieces, and more recent generations have been including more and more non-canonical pieces on their albums. It is not that earlier generations did not experiment: particularly during the 1970s revival, players like Kida Rinshōei, Yamada Chisato, and Takahashi Yūjirō recorded with jazz musicians and in orchestral settings, but these were anomalies in their recording histories.¹¹ All of the major players born before the 1940s grew up in or just outside of the Tsugaru region and first experienced the music as a living tradition. Players born after 1955, particularly those born outside of the Tsugaru region, encountered the music in the context of revival, and so it is unsurprising that many in this latter group, in attempting to make music that is their own, have tended to create and record new, non-canonical material.

Early History

Earliest Japanese Recordings

The earliest known commercial recordings of Japanese music were made in Paris at the time of the 1900 Exposition by members of a troupe headed by Kawakami Otojirō and his wife Sada Yakko, who enjoyed a brief period of celebrity in Europe and North America in the early twentieth century (Miller 1997). Twenty-nine recordings went on to become part of

¹¹ For more on this, see section three on recontextualization in chapter five.

Gramophone's "Foreign Record Catalogue." Though listed as "made by the Celebrated Imperial Japanese Theatrical Company, Sadah-Yaco [*sic*] Troupe," the group, which performed a variety of musical and dramatic styles, was in fact anything but imperially sanctioned. Kawakami, an inveterate self-promoter correctly assumed that this would go unquestioned outside of Japan (*ibid.*). The records seem never to have been sold in Japan, and were only in the European catalogue (with mismatched titles at that) until 1903, when Frederick Gaisberg traveled to Japan and recorded "some six hundred titles covering every variety of the national music" (Gaisberg 2010, 59). These superior recordings were sold both in Japan and Europe, eclipsing those of Kawakami's troupe, which then languished, completely forgotten for almost a hundred years until their re-release in 1997 (Miller 1997). While the members of the Kawakami troupe were musical jacks-of-all-trades, Gaisberg was able to record a great number of respected players who specialized in particular genres by paying between five and thirty dollars per session (Moore 1999, 111). These recordings were sold in Japan as well as the West, and selections from the EMI archives in England were republished in Japan in 2001 as an eleven-CD set, slightly misleadingly entitled *The first Japanese recordings*.

Record Companies in Japan

Foreign recording companies began manufacturing records for the Japanese market as early as 1903, and within four years the first in-country manufacturing began with German, American, and English companies starting cooperative ventures with local business interests. Over the next three decades a flood of companies appeared, few of which survive to the present day. This section briefly describes the origins of the companies most closely associated with *Tsugaru shamisen* recordings.

America's Columbia Records started manufacturing Japanese records for export to Japan in 1903, and England's Gramophone (1904) and Victor (1908), and Germany's Beka-Grand (1906) and Lyrophone (1911) soon followed suit (Kurata 1992, 247; Shiho 2008, 3). In 1907, the newly founded *Nichibei Chikuonki Kabushikigaisha* (literally "Japan-American Gramophone Company Limited," and better known by the abbreviation "Nichiku") began recording and manufacturing records in Japan (Kurata 1992, 60). In 1910 Nichiku was subsumed by *Nippon Chikuonki Kabushikigaisha* (literally the "Japan Phonograph Company Limited"), which became Nippon Columbia in 1946, then Columbia Music Entertainment in 2002, and remains one of Japan's major record companies today (Nippon Columbia 2014).

Other early Japanese labels include Symphony (1909),¹² National (1910), Parrot (1910), Kabuto (1910), and Mikado (1911), none of which survive (Shiho 2008, 4). In the late teens and early 1920s labels including Hikoki, Uguisu, Tsubami, Lion, Orient, and Nitto were formed; likewise, the early to mid-1930s saw the formation of still others like Midori, Taihei, Asahi, Waldo, and Pioneer (Kurata 1992, 248; 250). Most of these were quite successful in their day, but none seem to have survived into the era of the LP.

While Victor Records began exporting discs to Japan in 1908, it took until 1927 to incorporate as *Nippon Victor Chikuonki Kabushikigaisha* (Victor Japan Gramophone Company Limited) (Kurata 1992, 251). Like Columbia, Victor has remained a major Japanese label, though it has gone through various re-namings over the years: Nippon Victor (1945); Victor Music Industries (1972); and most recently Victor Entertainment (1993) (Victor Entertainment 2014).

¹² Symphony was actually an imprint under the Columbia umbrella, which also had others, including Royal, American, Universal and Globe (Nippon Columbia 2014). These subsidiary imprints likely dealt with specific musical niches: the Regal label, for example, was used for early *min'yō* (Takada 2006, 205). The connection between the many smaller defunct labels and the larger companies is not clearly delineated in the recording history sources I have access to.

Similarly, the German company *Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft* – established in 1898 and better known as Polygram – used Polydor as its Japan export label for several years before founding Nippon Polydor in 1927 (Universal Music 2014). Nippon Polydor was the first Japanese company to use the new “electric recording process” and remained an important company until it, like Polygram, was finally bought out by Universal Music in 1999 (Kurata 1992, 148; Universal Music 2014).

Not all long-lived labels started out as overseas companies; King Records, which began in 1931 as the musical branch of publishing giant Kodansha, and Teichiku, which was founded in 1934, continue to be important domestic labels for traditional and contemporary Japanese music (King Records 2014; Teichiku Entertainment 2014). Other major labels that are important to the recording history of *Tsugaru shamisen* include Crown Records (founded in 1963) and Sony Entertainment (which began in 1968 as CBS-Sony) (Nippon Crown 2014; Sony Music Group 2014).

Early *Min'yō* Recordings

Tsugaru min'yō, the precursor to *Tsugaru shamisen*, appeared relatively late in Japanese recorded music history. This section looks first at general (i.e., non-*Tsugaru*) *min'yō* that preceded it, and then at *Tsugaru min'yō* itself. There were three *min'yō* recorded at the above-mentioned Paris session in 1900 (“*Oiwake*,” “*Yoneyama jinku*,” and “*Kochae bushi*”) and several more recorded by Gaisberg in Japan in 1903 that would later come to be known as *min'yō*, but at the time fell under the rubric *zokkyoku* (“common songs”). Of particular interest for our present purpose is the song “*Kochae bushi*.”¹³ It consists of one verse of a popular song of the day (“*O*

¹³ These are available on the CD *Yomigaeru Oppekepe*, which collects the above-mentioned 1900 Paris recordings

Edo Nihombashi”), which is now part of both the *min’yō* and geisha repertoires, and another (“*Miya san, miya san*”), which belongs to a genre of children’s song known as *doyō*. About half way through the track, the singer says “That is the end,” but was perhaps given a signal by the recording engineer to keep going, because after a few seconds pause Kineya Misaburō, the *shamisen* accompanist, continues with an unrelated one-minute *shamisen* solo. This instrumental section is described in the CD’s notes as a “*kyokubiki*” (an improvised piece) using “*bachisabaki*” (“plectrum handling” or virtuosic right hand technique) and sounds like a typical solo *shamisen* interlude used in some art song genres: fast and fluid, but lacking the rhythmic and percussive qualities of *Tsugaru shamisen* (Seno 1997, 43). It is the earliest known recording of solo *shamisen* improvisation and at least gives us an idea of what early *Tsugaru shamisen* players had to be measured against in terms of speed and virtuosity.

David Hughes writes that many of the earliest commercial *min’yō* records were recorded by urban geisha rather than region-specific folk singers, as would soon become common: “songs from all parts of Japan were being filtered through Tokyo and redistributed to the provinces” (Hughes 2008, 119)¹⁴. Perhaps the particularly virtuosic vocal style of *Tsugaru min’yō* kept them safe from this urbanization for at least a few years; the earliest known recording is *Tsugaru* native Yoneya Gensuke’s 1918 version of “*Tsugaru sansagari*” and “*Kochō aiya bushi*” on the now defunct Nitto label (Matsuki 2011, 37; 139).

By the 1920s *min’yō* was thriving, on both record and the radio, though songs from *Tsugaru* were still relatively rare. In 1925, Narita Unchiku, “the godfather of *Tsugaru min’yō*,” sang “*Jonkara bushi*” on NHK, Japan’s state radio station. Broadcast from Tokyo, it is thought to be

by Kawakami’s troupe.

¹⁴ A similar phenomenon occurred in the United States, where blues and country songs were initially recorded by urban professionals and only later recorded by members of the communities in which the music developed (Malone, 2002, 60; Wald, 2004, 20)

the first radio performance of Tsugaru *min'yō*, and was accompanied by a *shamisen* player identified only as *Mori Ishi fujin* (literally “the wife of Doctor Mori”). *Tsugaru shamisen* researcher Matsuki Hiroyasu surmises that this accompanist was probably sourced in Tokyo, and was not likely a *Tsugaru shamisen* player (Matsuki 2011, 36). In 1928, recording technology in Japan switched from mechanical to electric, and both the aural quality and the quantity of recording increased. In 1931 Nipponophone (present-day Nippon Columbia) had a hit with “*Shiogama ohara bushi*” featuring vocals by Tsugaru natives Kansei Kuniko and Fujiwara Yoshie, which led to the recording of many more Tsugaru *min'yō* (Matsuki 2011, 75, 141).

At this point the vocalist was the selling point of a recording, but the *Tsugaru shamisen* accompanist was often listed on the label. Solo playing on these recordings was limited to a few seconds at a time, whenever there was a gap in the vocals. During the 1930s a great number of troupes made their living traveling around northern Japan, entertaining villagers with humorous stories, music, and dance. In live performance the *shamisen* players began to lengthen their introductions to songs from a few seconds (as heard on studio recordings of the time) to several minutes. Around 1940 Shirakawa Gumpachirō began to perform his extended introduction for “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*” as a solo piece, starting the instrumental tradition of *Tsugaru shamisen* as it is known today (Matsuki 2011, 141).

It may not have been too long after this that solo versions of Tsugaru pieces found their way on to records, though it is difficult to say exactly when, as the dates of these early recordings are rarely clearly given in the literature. The recording history in general has been largely neglected in writings on the *Tsugaru shamisen*; Takada’s book of transcribed Tsugaru *min'yō* lyrics of this period is one of the few sources that deal with recordings, but even here no dates are given (Takada 2006). The book does contain facsimiles of labels from specific 78rpm records, from

which we can infer general periods. For example, because prewar Japanese tended to be written right to left, while postwar Japanese tends to be written left to right, labels with right to left writing are likely from the prewar period. That there are examples of this prewar type of label for solo *shamisen* versions of Tsugaru *min'yō* strongly suggests modern instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* recordings were released before 1945. The label for Kida Rinshōei and Fukushi Masakatsu's instrumental duets of “*Yosare bushi*” and “*Jongara bushi*” (Regal 69014) is written right to left, and therefore likely of prewar vintage (Matsuki 2006, 205).¹⁵ At any rate, by the early postwar period, Shirakawa Gumpachirō, Kida Rinshōei and Fukushi Masakatsu – “three big players”¹⁶ – were certainly recording solo versions of “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” and “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*.”

Two Eras of *Tsugaru shamisen* Recordings

Tanaka and Oda write that there have been six distinct generations of modern *Tsugaru shamisen*, arguing that in each of these generations significant developments occurred (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 159-174). The developments themselves are somewhat arbitrary, but end up dividing the artists by the decades in which they were born, and there is some merit in doing this: the earliest players, like Takahashi Chikuzan (1910-1998) and Kida Rinshōei (1911-1979) are markedly different from the next generation of players like Oyama Mitsugu (b. 1930), Yamada Chisato (1935-2004) and Takahashi Yūjirō (1934-2012). The latter group came of age after

¹⁵ This recording is described on the label as a “*shamisen* contest” since the rubric “*Tsugaru shamisen*” did not yet exist. This is not just the case with commercial recordings; a 1956 scholarly anthology of folk songs from Aomori, including transcriptions of many field recordings of non-commercial *min'yō*, speculates about the *Tsugaru shamisen*'s roots, differentiates it from the accompaniment of Tsugaru *min'yō*, and lists the major players, all without once using the phrase “*Tsugaru shamisen*” (Kawanishi 1956, 253).

¹⁶ Important things come in threes in Japan: The three great scenic views of Japan, the three great gardens of Japan, the three big songs of Tsugaru, and so on. Because of his history, Takahashi Chikuzan has always been considered something of an outsider in the *min'yō* world, and so did not make the list.

World War Two, and as a result are more influenced by western popular music. The generation following them, represented by Hasegawa Yūji (b. 1941) and Sawada Katsuaki (b. 1944) are, according to Tanaka and Oda, more influenced by rock music (ibid., 165). While players of this era may have made recordings that back up this assertion, none are cited by Tanaka and Oda, and the contributions by these players on the compilation albums of the 1990s do not indicate any obvious rock influences. Sawada, in particular, *has* pointed out connections between *Tsugaru shamisen* and jazz and rock, but both he and Hasegawa are now among the last generation of players from Tsugaru. For my purposes here, the above players all belong to an earlier era of players whose extant recorded output is largely traditional.

I contrast this earlier era with the present era, the members of which were all born in the 1950s or later, and almost all of who have come up through the *Tsugaru shamisen* national contests discussed in chapter four. The recorded output of the present era consists of a significant ratio of non-traditional, western-influenced compositions. Takahashi Chikuzan II (b. 1955), Oyama Mitsugu II (b. 1957),¹⁷ and Sato Michihiro (b. 1957) all belong to Tanaka and Oda's fourth generation, and have all recorded *Tsugaru shamisen* albums that are pointedly non-traditional. The fifth generation, represented by the Yoshida Brothers (b. 1977, 1979) and Agatsuma Hiromitsu (b. 1973), is the heart of the present era. Most Japanese people have heard of the Yoshida Brothers, and it is thanks to the sales of their first two albums, which spurred a flurry of recording in the 2000s, that the *Tsugaru shamisen* has any profile at all in Japan today. Tanaka and Oda see a sixth generation in the young players who followed the Yoshida Brothers, that includes Oyama Yutaka (b. 1981), Nitta Masahiro (b. 1984), and Asano Shō (b. 1990), and

¹⁷ Oyama Mitsugu II is actually referred to simply as Oyama Mitsugu; his father, the original Oyama Mitsugu, took the name Oyama Mitsuo when he passed the *iemoto* on to his son. While this practice is common in kabuki theatre, it is rare in the *min'yō* world, where the successors typically have the suffix *nidaime* (II), *sandaime* (III), and so on appended to their names.

Hanawa Chie (b. 1982), but I am not convinced they are markedly different from what they consider to be the fifth generation (ibid., 173-174).

Early *Tsugaru Shamisen* Players

This section catalogues the *Tsugaru shamisen* players, detailing which ones are known to have recorded and which are not, and whose recordings continue to be a part of the present day conception of *Tsugaru shamisen*. If asked to create a list of early *Tsugaru shamisen* players, even informed fans and players will have trouble giving more than ten or fifteen names. The aim of this section is to give a more complete picture of this group of early players. Appendix A gives as complete a list of early players as is possible at this time, drawing on lineage charts in Matsuki (2011), Groemer (2012) and Daijō (1984), and ranking charts from 1942, 1952, and 1967 reprinted in various sources (Matsubayashi 2000, 101; Takada 2010; Matsuki 2011, 125). Appendix D contains players who were listed in these various ranking charts and who are known to have recorded. This information was compiled from actual and facsimile 78-rpm record labels, and from LPs, cassettes and CDs.

The players

Four players, Shirakawa Gumpachirō, Kida Rinshōei, Fukushi Masakatsu, and Takahashi Chikuzan, stand out as the giants of early recorded *Tsugaru shamisen*. They were all born between 1909 and 1913, learned *Tsugaru shamisen* as an accompanying (rather than solo) instrument, and were the first generation of players to perform solo pieces. The generation that preceded them included early sighted accompanists like Umeda Hōgetsu and Kase no Momo,

who toured with *min'yō* troupes but are not known to have played solo, and who were themselves preceded by blind itinerant originators of the genre like Nitabō, Kinbō and Ōta Chōsaku.

The second tier of important players includes Mihashi Michiya (a pop singer whom many credit with first bringing *Tsugaru shamisen* to national attention), Oyama Mitsugu, Takahashi Yūjirō, Yamada Chisato, and Fujita Junichi, and Sawada Katsuaki. Most of the members of this group were born in the 1930s, and by the time they were learning *Tsugaru shamisen*, its possibilities as a solo instrument were already beginning to be explored.

Though *shamisen* players seemed to be getting some recognition in the folk song community as early as the 1940s (as evidenced by the list of players on Narita Unchiku's 1942 ranking list of *Tsugaru min'yō* performers), wider interest in *Tsugaru shamisen* did not start in earnest until the 1950s (Matsubayashi 2000, 101). In 1953 Chikuzan was still supporting Narita Unchiku on Radio Aomori's "*Min'yō kyōshitsu*" (Folksong classroom) program. Matsuki states that Shirakawa recorded his last session in 1955, in Tokyo, for King Records (Matsuki 2011, 142). In 1956 Fukushi Masakatsu moved to Tokyo to play in the *min'yō sakaba* (folksong pubs) catering largely to migrant workers from the north of Japan, especially Aomori, working on construction projects in Tokyo. For decades men from Aomori had come to Tokyo in a practice known as *dekasegi*, which can be defined as "seasonal labour migration from rural to urban settings," but in Tokyo's postwar construction boom the number of these workers increased dramatically (Guo et al 2005, 18). These numbers enabled a host of such folksong pubs to open, and by 1958 a *min'yō* boom was underway, centered on the many pubs in the Akasaka district of Tokyo.

Tsugaru shamisen is generally thought to have entered the national consciousness through the Aomori-born popular singer Mihashi Michiya. Mihashi was a student of Shirakawa Gumpachirō,

singing *min'yō* and playing *shamisen* before he became a famous pop singer, and returning to this music during the 1950s *min'yō* boom. *Tsugaru shamisen* is said to have become known nationwide after a high-profile 1959 concert “20 years in *Min'yō*” in Tokyo (Matsuki 2011, 143). Mihashi was known to feature Shirakawa, and later Kida Rinshōei, in his concerts, and no doubt gave them time to at least play extended introductions to pieces, as was common in *min'yō* since the late 1930s, if not entire solo pieces. While it is unclear if much solo *Tsugaru shamisen* music was being recorded even at this time, it is known that in 1963 Takahashi Chikuzan recorded the first full-length solo *Tsugaru shamisen* LP, taking the legitimacy of the genre to a new level. Chikuzan biographer Matsubayashi Takuji states that Chikuzan only began to think about creating new solo compositions in 1960 (Matsubayashi 2000, 328).

The fact that so little from the period of the late forties to the early sixties appears in re-releases suggests that there may not have been many recordings in the first place. While scattered recordings of players born in the 1910s and 20s exist, the great majority of the players on CD re-issue anthologies (excluding Shirakawa, Kida, and Chikuzan) belong to the second group, born after 1930.

The recordings

As stated in the previous section, Shirakawa Gumpachirō, Kida Rinshōei, and Fukushi Masakatsu recorded some solo tracks in the 1940s, though exact dates remain unknown. It is also unclear how many other players recorded solo performances. I own 78rpm records of Hasegawa Taketarō and Igarashi Kiyoei, and have seen photographs of Oyama Mitsugu and Takahashi Chikuzan 78s from the mid to late 1950s, and so am able to add them to the list of early recorded players. In general, though, information about this era is not readily available. Very little from this time period has been re-released, and even less with any information on the dates, labels and

serial numbers of the original releases.

Takada (2006) lists a number of LPs by the most famous players (seven each for Takahashi Chikuzan and Kida Rinshōei, two each for Mihashi Michiya, Kudō Kikue, and Yamada Chisato, and one each for Takahashi Yūjirō, Sawada Katsuaki, and Sasaki Kō), but nothing like a complete discography for this music exists.

My own awareness of the availability of *Tsugaru shamisen* recordings begins in the mid-1990s, and from this period to the present I can compile a fairly complete list of major label recordings, and add to that list some minor label and self-released material. The period before this is much less clear, but it is very likely that major players released a number of albums that disappeared without a trace and have never been reissued. Present-day fans have to make do with compilations containing a relatively small number of players and recordings that are not representative of the actual recorded history of the music. Many of the early players may not have recorded any solo pieces, or those recordings may be deemed by record companies to be too poor in quality to merit re-release. This is certainly the case with Fukushi Masakatsu, who has long been considered to be one of the three most important players of the early post-war period, yet does not appear once in the more than twenty compilations to which I have had access.¹⁸

The Repertoire

Until recently *Tsugaru shamisen* had a fairly fixed repertoire, and albums largely consisted of solo instrumental versions of canonical folksongs. Appendix B summarizes the track listings of sixty-six *Tsugaru shamisen* albums, which contain a total of 860 tracks, but only thirty-two

¹⁸ Fukushi was said to be an exceptionally sensitive accompanist, but did not make many recordings, solo or otherwise (Yamada 1978, 64-66).

different pieces, appearing between one and 190 times. To simplify this information further, I have organized these pieces into three groups. The first group consists, not surprisingly, of what are referred to as “the big five” Tsugaru pieces, and a group of *kyokubiki*, or improvisational pieces. “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” is the representative *Tsugaru shamisen* piece, and on its own makes up almost one quarter of the total 860 pieces in my survey. Specifically, “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” appears 190 times, “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*” appears ninety-three times, and “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” appears seventy-five times. “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*, ” though traditionally the third of the “big three,” appears fifty-eight times, and “*Tsugaru sansagari*” appears forty-eight times. There are also seventy-five general *kyokubiki* pieces, which are improvisations or semi-improvisational compositions, and may have fanciful titles evoking Tsugaru, or may simply be identified generically as “*kyokubiki*.” These six pieces make up over sixty percent of the total number of pieces in the survey.

The second group includes eleven pieces, which appear between fifteen and thirty-eight times in the sixty-six albums in the survey. They are “*Yasaburō bushi*” (which appears thirty-eight times), “*Tsugaru ondo*” (37), “*Tosa no sunayama*” (37), “*Ajigasawa jinku*” (36), “*Tsugaru jinku*” (25), “*Ringo bushi*” (22), “*Tsugaru tanto bushi*” (18), “*Kuroishi yosare bushi*” (17), “*Tsugaru waiha bushi*” (15), “*Tsugaru shiogama jinku*” (15).

Finally, the last group consists of fifteen pieces that appear ten times or less, including eight pieces that appear only once. The full list can be found in Appendix B.

To summarize, the canon itself is quite limited, and within that canon, a handful of pieces are disproportionately represented. The sixty-six albums in this survey contain a total of only thirty-two pieces. Six pieces make up well over half of the tracks, and one piece on its own accounts for almost one quarter of the total number of tracks. To an outsider, this body of recordings is

likely to appear extremely repetitive. In fact, some of these recordings are reused in numerous compilation albums, but players are also expected to present new versions (improvisations and/or compositions) of the standard repertoire, especially on solo albums. Fans of the music are interested to hear how a particular player interprets a piece at a particular time, and it is this fact that accounts for the over-representation of the most popular pieces.

Discographies

Takahashi Chikuzan's recording history

In this section I detail Takahashi Chikuzan's¹⁹ recording history, discussing what he recorded with each of the companies he worked with. Rather than looking at his output strictly chronologically, each company is discussed in turn to highlight their varied approaches to his work. A chronological list of his recordings can be found in the discography at the end of the paper.

Chikuzan released many more albums than any other player, and his discography, while not representative in this respect, is instructive in terms of how record companies deal with *min'yō* artists' recordings. Most companies treated his albums differently than a typical pop record: as often happens with *min'yō* recordings, they reissue the same tracks as a new album with a new cover and serial number (sometimes rearranging the track order, sometimes not), and reuse tracks on anthologies without any indication of where they come from.

In concert Chikuzan typically talked, played *shamisen*, and occasionally played flute and sang; some of his CDs follow this format, and some are actual concert recordings, but most

¹⁹ In this section and elsewhere, I refer to Takahashi Chikuzan (1910-1998) simply as “Chikuzan,” though this is the equivalent of his given name rather than his family name, because that is how he is most commonly referred to in Japan. All other players are referred to by their family names, as is the standard practice.

simply present instrumental solo (and occasionally group) versions of canonical Tsugaru *min'yō*, which he recorded again and again over the course of his career. The following is a list of the canonical pieces that Chikuzan recorded more than once on his twenty-five albums, with the number of appearances of each piece in parentheses:

- “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” (31)
- “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*” (30)
- “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” (21)
- “*Tsugaru ondo*” (17)
- “*Tsugaru sansagari*” (14)
- “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*” (13)
- “*Yasaburō bushi*” (12)
- “*Ajigasawa jinku*” (11)
- “*Iwaki*” (10)
- “*Tosa no sunayama*” (9)
- “*Ringo bushi*” (6)
- “*Tsugaru waiha bushi*” (6)
- “*Tsugaru jinku*” (5)
- “*Oshimako bushi*” (5)
- “*Tsugaru yamauta*” (3)
- “*Tsugaru tanto bushi*” (2)

A complete list of Chikuzan’s recorded output can be found in Appendix B, where it is compared with a large sampling of other players’ recordings. This partial list shows that certain pieces appear with a frequency that is unimaginable in most music genres. Versions of “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” and “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*” are particularly numerous, appearing thirty-one and thirty times, respectively, on the twenty-five albums. They appear more than once on some albums because there are “old,” “middle,” and “new” versions of these pieces which are considered different enough to be distinguished as separate pieces. Even so, it is clear from this list that certain pieces are almost obligatory for a *Tsugaru shamisen* album, and that the same piece must vary enough from recording to recording to justify this sort of repetition. As can be seen in Appendix B, this is not specific to Chikuzan, but holds true for *Tsugaru shamisen* albums

in general.

The remainder of this section details Chikuzan's recorded output from various record companies, and characterizes how each of these companies used – and often reused – his work.

King Records

Takahashi Chikuzan no seikai (The world of Takahashi Chikuzan) was released by King records in 1963, and was the first full LP album of instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* music. It was subsequently re-released with different artwork in 1972, and 1977, and reissued in 1997 as a CD commemorating the historic 1963 album, with the original cover but new liner notes, and remains in print in this form. It most recently resurfaced in 2011 (with the song order changed) as part of King's "Stars of *min'yō*" series. Individual tracks from this album have been included in many of King Records' *Tsugaru shamisen* anthologies. King also released *Tsugaru no hibiki - Takahashi Chikuzan* (Echo of Tsugaru - Takahashi Chikuzan) in 1998, which contains NHK recordings made in 1979 and recordings of the same pieces ("*Tsugaru yosare bushi*," "*Tsugaru ondo*," "*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*," and "*Iwaki*") made towards the end of his life in 1993. The liner notes claim that this side-by-side comparison shows that his playing only increased in depth and simplicity as he aged. In 2010 King released a two-CD collection entitled *Tamashi no hibiki* (Echo of the soul). The first disc is clearly listed as a reissue of selections from the 1974 double LP *Takahashi Chikuzan Aomori Live 1974* on the defunct Japanese label Disques Jean-Jean (described below). The second is divided into two parts: eight recordings of Chikuzan accompanying various famous singers, and eleven instructional tracks recorded in 1990. It also contains, as a "bonus track," an excerpt from a 1958 Chikuzan performance of a *Naniwa bushi*

piece.²⁰ This second CD is one of a handful of recent releases that contain obscure, recently unearthed Chikuzan recordings.

Victor, Nippon Columbia, and Nippon Crown

Victor's 1971 LP *Ketteiban Takahashi Chikuzan* (The definitive Takahashi Chikuzan) has been repackaged regularly since its initial release (including a second time in 1971, then in 1974, 1980, 1982, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1997, 2005, and 2009), with new titles, covers, and serial numbers but with its content unchanged. The same group of recordings shows up on a 1980 Victor cassette that accompanied an educational book on *Tsugaru shamisen*, and it appears to have been used, uncredited, in poorly mastered bootlegs from Korea and China sold in Japan in the 2000s, which are discussed below.

In 1971 Nippon Columbia released one LP that has never been reissued. In 1999, the year after Chikuzan's death, they released five CDs of material taken from radio shows that Chikuzan recorded with his teacher Narita Unchiku between 1955 and 1969. In them, Narita explains, then sings the songs to Chikuzan's *shamisen*, or occasionally *shakuhachi* accompaniment. Though they are valuable recordings, featuring the only officially released examples of the duo performing *min'yō* from other parts of Japan, they are now unfortunately out of print.

Nippon Crown has treated its Chikuzan material in a more straightforward manner. Crown had two albums in its catalogue, which, in contrast to King and Victor, it kept in print for decades with no attempt to disguise their origins. The first was *Tsugaru-jamisen kettei ban* (The definitive *Tsugaru shamisen*), released in 1973. During much of the 1990s this was the only album of

²⁰ *Naniwa bushi* is a traditional genre of ballad singing, unrelated to *min'yō*, which Chikuzan made a living accompanying for a time.

Tsugaru shamisen music that was available in general interest CD shops. It sold for 1500 yen – half the price of most Japanese CDs – but suffered from poor sound quality. In 1974 Crown put out a second album, with one side of Tsugaru *min'yō* with *shamisen* (and *kokyū*, a bowed lute) accompaniment and a second side of solo *shamisen* versions of many of the same pieces. This album was released as a CD in 1996, but has been less consistently available than the earlier, all-solo album. In 2003, *Takahashi Chikuzan Tsugaru-jamisen*, a CD of selected remastered tracks from the 1973 and 1974 LPs was released, and has since replaced those two earlier albums in Crown's catalogue.

Sony

Sony's output is album-based, treating each original LP as a complete and integral work. While this is the norm for popular music, it is exceedingly rare in *min'yō*. Though it covers a span of only eight years, Sony's Chikuzan catalogue displays a much broader range of Chikuzan's abilities than any other label, giving him the time to explore pieces on various instruments, and speak at length, as he was wont to do in concert.

Between 1973 and 1974 Sony recorded Chikuzan in various locations: in the studio, at his home, at festivals in Aomori prefecture, and at "*Jean-Jean*" (pronounced "jan-jan") a performance space in Tokyo where he played regularly from 1973 to 1995. This resulted in four LPs: three released individually in 1974, and the fourth released in 1975. Though sold separately, they highlight different facets of his art. Recorded live at *Jean-Jean*, the first and second LPs cover much of the solo instrumental repertoire (though Chikuzan sings to his own accompaniment on the first track of the first LP as a demonstration of the earliest sort of *Tsugaru shamisen* performances), and include the sorts of anecdotes that Chikuzan typically told between

the pieces. The third LP, *Jūsan gata: Tsugaru-jamisen kumikyoku* (Jūsan marsh: a *Tsugaru shamisen* suite), features Chikuzan playing transverse flute and shakuhachi, and improvising new compositions on *shamisen*, and includes some lengthy spoken sections. It was recorded “in the field” in Aomori prefecture, and the liner notes contain a somewhat disingenuous apology for atmospheric background noises like frogs, crickets, and rain on a few tracks (Sato 1989) The fourth album was recorded in a studio, and opens with a long talk by Chikuzan, then features Sudō Un’ei singing a dozen famous Tsugaru *min’yō* with Chikuzan on *shamisen* and his student (and later successor) Takahashi Chikuyō on drums.

Sony recorded two more live albums in 1978 and 1981, which were combined into one CD in 1996 with the English title *High Sound*. There is some overlap in the pieces covered in the two albums, presumably to show how the same pieces could be altered through improvisation (in one case) or the addition of a second *shamisen* (in others). Sony also briefly offered its entire collection of Chikuzan recordings as a five-LP box set in 1983 and a five-CD set in 2009.

Disques Jean-Jean, Canyon Records, RAB, and Tsugaru Shobō

Disques Jean-Jean, a now defunct label, was established by the live music club of the same name. The label seems to have been created with the aim of documenting live performances. It released a two-LP set in 1974, recorded in September of that year at the Aomori City civic auditorium. Chikuzan talks, and plays transverse flute and *shakuhachi*, accompanies Sudō Un’ei on a few folk songs, and of course plays the solo instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* standards for which he is best known. As mentioned above, a version of this concert, abridged to fit on one CD, was released by King Records in 2010. In 1994 they released a CD commemorating

Chikuzan's seventieth year of performing, recorded in the much more intimate setting of the club Jean-Jean, shortly before he retired from performing due to ill health. It showcases the performance style Chikuzan honed over decades of small club performances throughout Japan, telling stories and commenting on current events between partially improvised renditions of *Tsugaru shamisen* standards.

Canyon Records released and quickly withdrew two unauthorized albums of Chikuzan's playing. The first, *Shamisen no uta* (The song of the *shamisen*) in 1975, was taken from a television program on which Chikuzan appeared, and created without his permission and therefore was soon taken out of distribution. Remarkably, they did the same thing again in 1978 with a record called *Cold plectrum: the autobiography of Takahashi Chikuzan*, with the same result (Takahashi Chikuzan Official Website 2014).

In 2010 RAB (Radio Aomori Broadcasting) released a CD to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Chikuzan's birth. It collects recordings made in the RAB studios, and at local and international performances. Most of the tracks feature Chikuzan's solo *shamisen* versions of standard Tsugaru folk songs, but he talks, plays some traditional festival music on transverse flute, and accompanies his teacher Narita Unchiku on a few pieces. More and more of these "from the vault" recordings have been coming out over the past few years. RAB also broadcasted a radio documentary to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Chikuzan's birth, which included various recordings in the possession of Takahashi Noriko, Chikuzan's granddaughter. It won some broadcaster's awards that year, and was released as a CD in 2012.

In 2010 Tsugaru Shobō, which specializes in books dealing with the Tsugaru region, republished the book *Listening to Takahashi Chikuzan* (Sato 2000) by Sato Sadaki. Sato co-authored the best-selling *Solitary travels with Tsugaru shamisen: an autobiography* (Takahashi

1976) with Chikuzan, editing and arranging many hours of interviews into a coherent narrative. *Listening to Takahashi Chikuzan* is something of a companion book to Chikuzan's autobiography, and the new edition includes a CD of Sato's personal recordings of concert material from 1964, 1978 and 1979.

Unofficial and Unlicensed Releases

Daisō, a chain with a virtual monopoly on 100-yen shops (dollar stores) in Japan, briefly sold a Chikuzan CD in the early 2000s that combined uncredited tracks from three LPs released by King Records, Victor, and Crown.²¹ While Japan's copyright terms were a good deal less strict than those of most Western countries at that time, the disc was probably illegal, as it seems unlikely that Daiso had sought permission from these record companies.

In 2010 in Japan I purchased a CD that used tracks from these same three LPs, and even went so far as to feature a photo of Chikuzan on the cover. The disc was undated, and printed in Korea by the generically named Fine Disc Corporation.

Shirakawa Gumpachirō's recording history

Shirakawa Gumpachirō (1909 - 1962) is often referred to as "*Tsugaru-jamisen no kamisama*," the god of *Tsugaru shamisen*, so it is almost unbelievable that, in contrast to Takahashi Chikuzan's voluminous output, a total of only thirteen unique Shirakawa Gumpachirō tracks have been available on official releases in the last twenty years. Shirakawa's last studio recording session was apparently with King Records in Tokyo in 1955, which, as was noted above, was before the phrase "*Tsugaru shamisen*" had any currency (Matsuki 2011 142; Kawanishi 1956,

²¹ With careful listening, I was able to trace the tracks to the following records: Victor JV-1172-S 1971 (LP), KING KC 1025 1963(LP); and Crown [SW-5037 1973 (LP).

253). While he seems to have recorded extensively as an accompanist, it is likely that he recorded a very limited number of the strictly instrumental pieces we think of today as *Tsugaru shamisen*.

The following is a list of his entire available output of *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces, with the number of unique recordings of each piece in parentheses:

- “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*” (4)
- “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” (3)
- “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” (3)²²
- “*Tsugaru sansagari*” (1)
- “*Kogarashi*” (cold wintery wind) (1)
- “*Tsugaru no kyōshū*” (Tsugaru homesick) (1)

King Records, Nippon Columbia, and Tsugaru *Min'yō* 21st Century Heritage Association

King continues to release one or more *Tsugaru shamisen* anthologies per year, which usually contain a few tracks by Shirakawa. These LPs, cassettes, and CDs contain no information about when or where the recordings were made, but careful listening reveals that all of the tracks come from a pool of just five original recordings. Four of them (“*Tsugaru jonkara bushi* (the new melody),” “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi* (the old melody),” “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*,” and “*Tsugaru sansagari*”) seem to have been recorded at one session, as they share exactly the same “presence” and degree of echo, but a fifth (“*Tsugaru yosare bushi*”) sounds like it might be from a different session.

In 2003 King released a two-CD set that featured ten Shirakawa tracks: the above mentioned five stand-bys; two duets with Shirakawa and his famous student Mihashi Michiya;²³ a version of “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” in which he accompanies the singer Narita Unchikujō; and two 78rpm

²² One of these *Aiya bushi* tracks is from a 78rpm record, and is mislabelled “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*.”

²³ These two tracks may be from a rare live Mihashi Michiya/ Shirakawa Gumpachirō LP which has, to my knowledge, never been released on CD.

records. All of these, except the first live one with Mihashi Michiya, feel short and hurried by today's standards, but they are a sort of Rosetta Stone for *Tsugaru shamisen*, containing many phrases that Shirakawa invented and are used today by every player as the building blocks of composition and improvisation.

The few Columbia *Tsugaru shamisen* anthologies that have been released in the last decade or so contain one or more of the three tracks Columbia seems to own: a version of “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” and two semi-improvised pieces based on “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” that go by the evocative titles “*Kogarashi*” (“Cold wintery wind”) and “*Tsugaru no kyōshū*” (“Tsugaru homesick”) (Various, Nippon Columbia 2003). Takada also lists three undated Columbia LPs of *Tsugaru min'yō* featuring Shirakawa accompanying various singers. While unavailable on CD, they reinforce the fact that his original role was that of an accompanist rather than a solo player (Takada 2006, 198).

In 2009 the *Tsugaru Min'yō* 21st Century Heritage Association produced a CD to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Shirakawa's birth. The notes explain that it is a compilation recorded from his family's personal 78-rpm record collection. Most of the tracks feature Shirakawa accompanying *Tsugaru min'yō*, but on the last three he performs six short solo pieces. With two per track, each piece is under two minutes long. Being of dubious legality, the CD has not been widely distributed, but is only available at booths at *Tsugaru shamisen* contests, and a few *shamisen* stores. For the same reason, none of the tracks are directly identified by record company or serial number, but the CD cover features several labels, showing that Shirakawa recorded with Victor, King, Teichiku, Nitto, and Regal (a Columbia Records imprint).

Compilations

Alan Booth, in his 1995 travelogue *Looking for the Lost*, mentions the 1970s *Tsugaru shamisen* boom that saw Takahashi Chikuzan playing to college-age audiences in the hip Shibuya district of Tokyo (Booth 1995, 69). He recounts a meeting with Yamada Chisato in Hirosaki City, during which Booth told him that he owned four of his records, to which Yamada replied “no one wants to record me now... it’s not like the old days.” (Booth 1995, 66). While this is not a scholarly work, it is written evidence that suggests that there were more opportunities to record during the 1970s than during the early 1990s when this conversation took place. This is in line with my experience; for the most part, solo albums of players other than Chikuzan have not been widely available for at least the last twenty years, so it is through compilations that these early players have been heard. The recordings that make up these compilations seem originate from previous decades, though this sort of information is never included in their minimal liner notes.²⁴ King Records seems to release a new compilation at least once a year that recycle a relatively small pool of recordings from their vaults. Some of these releases are single CD albums, others are doubles, but they all draw from that same pool, with the result that by buying a small number of these, the consumer will own all of the tracks – frustratingly, many of them multiple times. King Records has dominated the compilation market, but Columbia and Victor also occasionally release compilations, which tend to include more tracks from the most recent generation of players because these two labels have been more active in recording this generation.

²⁴ Though I have contacted all of the major labels, I have been unable to get any information from them on the history of their commercial releases, let alone access to things like recording logs to find out when these historic sessions originally took place.

The Present Era

The present era might be divided into a period before the revival, and using the success of the Yoshida Brothers first album as the starting point, the revival itself. This section first looks at the recordings of some innovative players from the 1990s – Takahashi Chikuzan II, Sato Michihiro, and Oyama Mitsugu II – and at the contest-related recordings from the same period. Next, the Yoshida's full discography is discussed, and then for the sake of comparison, the output of some others who followed in the wake of their initial success is reviewed.

Before the Yoshida Brothers

Oyama Mitsugu II (b. 1957), son of Oyama Mitsugu, and now head of Oyama-ryū, the largest *Tsugaru shamisen* “school” or group, has recorded a number of albums that fuse Western tonal harmony and Japanese *min'yō* sensibilities and instrumentation, including 1993's *Jawamegu* (Spine-tingling), and 2002's *Kyōran* (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 167). In 2004 he recorded *From Tsugaru With Love: Play the Ventures Songs With the Tsugaru Shamisen* on which he and his son Yutaka trade lead solos accompanied by one of Japan's top surf guitar bands. Like a number of *Tsugaru shamisen* players of his generation, as a teenager his first love was surf guitar, and it was Terauchi Takeshi's album *Let's go eleki bushi* (1965), on which the Japanese guitar legend played a surf version of “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” that inspired him to learn *Tsugaru shamisen* in earnest (Sasaki 2004).

Takahashi Chikuzan II

Yoshino Fusako was born in Tokyo 1955, began studying with Takahashi Chikuzan when she was eighteen, and was eventually given the “art name” Takahashi Chikuyo to signify that she

was one of his pupils (Groemer 2012, 94). She became his *uchideshi* or live-in disciple until going out on her own at twenty-four, and in 1996 she was chosen by Chikuzan as his successor and given the title *Nidai*me Takahashi Chikuzan or The Second Takahashi Chikuzan (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 167). In 1995, as Takahashi Chikuyo, she released *Tsugaru-jamisen to sono kokoromi* (*Tsugaru shamisen: an approach*) that included traditional pieces and original compositions that use poems by Tsugaru-born underground poet, playwright and film maker Terayama Shuji as lyrics. Some of the pieces are solo, and others are performed as duets with violin, or second *shamisen*. In 1998 as *Nidai*me Takahashi Chikuzan she recorded the solo *shamisen* album *Shamisen kudoki* (Disques Jean-Jean) with the same mix of traditional pieces and new compositions setting Terayama Shuji's poems to music. Unlike most *Tsugaru shamisen* players, she sings while playing the demanding traditional pieces. She puts this skill to use in her original compositions, singing and playing in a variety of Japanese music styles including traditional art and folk forms, pre-war popular music, *enka* (a sort of semi-traditional Japanese pop form), Okinawan folk, American blues, and Turkish folk. In 2000 she released *Chikuzan*, a two-CD album; the first disc contains twenty traditional Tsugaru *min'yō* songs and the second contains fifteen original compositions in the styles just described. Her third album *Shamisen jonkara* (Sukezaemon, 2008) consists entirely of traditional Tsugaru *min'yō*, and her fourth, *Sai (Paint)* (Try Records, 2013), has her collaborating with a pianist on traditional and original compositions. Chikuzan was strongly influenced by Tokyo's 1970s avant-garde performance scene, many members of which also performed at Jean-Jean where she and her teacher appeared regularly, and it is evident in her highly personal and idiosyncratic performance style. She has taken *Tsugaru shamisen* in a very different direction than other players of this new era, most of whom are male and have come up through the national contests.

Sato Michihiro

Sato Michihiro (b. 1957) began to study with Yamada Chisato in 1977, and in 1982 and 1983 he won the *Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in its first and second years (Matsuki 2011, 97). In 1985 he recorded *Ganryujima (Ganryu Island)*, an album of *Tsugaru shamisen* and saxophone duets with avant-garde jazzman John Zorn. A second album in 1988, *Rodan*, saw him playing with a variety of experimental musicians from New York's "downtown music" movement (Brackett, Grove Music Online). On both of these albums Sato plays Tsugaru-based riffs of varying lengths in free-form, experimental conversation with other performers. His next two recordings, *Tamashi no neiro* (Timbre of the soul) (Waon, 1992) and *Pure Sound of Japan: Tsugaru-jamisen no Sekai (Pure sound of Japan: the world of Tsugaru shamisen)* (Kyoto Records, 1995) consisted of entirely traditional pieces played solo or with a second *shamisen* and *shakuhachi*. 1995's *Natsu yoi matsuri* (Late night summer festival) featured newly composed pieces that mixed traditional Japanese music and a variety of conventional Western forms. The "Sato Michihiro *Tsugaru shamisen* band" that performed these pieces included *shamisen*, *shakuhachi*, traditional Japanese drums, western percussion, acoustic bass, and electric guitar. The recordings he has made since then – *Tsuki mo kōru yoru ni* (On a night when even the moon freezes) (2000), *Tōhoku roman* (Northeastern Japan romance) (2004) and *Hibikiau neiro kara miao kansei* (Meeting of sounds and sensibilities) (2010) – have been largely traditional, with a few new compositions thrown in.

Contest recordings

Through much of the 1990s and the early 2000s various record companies released live

recordings of the winning solo and group performances from Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest. Until the millennial revival, these recordings were the best way to hear what young players were doing with the *Tsugaru shamisen*; though the performances were necessarily conservative for contest purposes, the skillful playing made them worth listening to.

The first of these recordings that I am aware of is 1986's *We Are the Tsugaru-jamisen*, which featured studio recordings of the best players from Hirosaki's contest that year. These pieces are longer and more interesting than typical contest pieces, which are hampered by the need to show mastery of a given set of techniques and riffs in a very limited time frame.

In 1998, perhaps recognizing the limitations of live contest recordings, the label chito-shan released *Tsugaru Modern* featuring a live “*Battle Royale*” of the best young players of the time, which gave them a chance to play longer, more interesting pieces than the contest format allowed. The lineup consisted of Kinoshita Shinichi, Agatsuma Hiromitsu, Shibutani Kazuo, and Shindō Shōtarō, who had all won Hirosaki's contest at least once. Shibutani and Shindō represented young players of Tsugaru, playing standard *Tsugaru shamisen*, and Kinoshita and Agatsuma were representatives of the style that was developing outside of the Tsugaru region, and performed traditional pieces, but also Tsugaru-Western hybrids accompanied by piano and drums. This recording seemed very modern when it was released, but the following year the Yoshida Brothers first album came out and, with its slick production and presentation, it changed the way *Tsugaru shamisen* albums looked and sounded.

The Yoshida Brothers

The Yoshida Brothers are the representatives of modern *Tsugaru shamisen* in the minds of most Japanese people, and their discography, while more extensive than other modern players, is

representative of the state of present day *Tsugaru shamisen*. Domestically, they have released fourteen albums, two CD singles, and three DVDs, and have a number of foreign releases in the US, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. They have also appeared as guests and collaborators on the recordings of other artists, and both Ryōichirō and Kenichi have side projects – *WASABI* and *Hayate* respectively – with whom they have recorded.²⁵

Ibuki (1999), the Yoshida Brothers' first album, sold 90,000 copies in the first few years of sales, and touched off the millennial revival (PacRim News, 2001). Somewhat surprisingly, it is almost entirely traditional: there are traditional solo instrumental versions of “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*,” “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*,” and “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” from the “big five” *Tsugaru min'yō*, played by one or the other of the brothers, and a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” in which first one brother then the other performs his take on the piece before coming together at the end in a duet. “Modern,” the opening track, is the only piece that uses non-*Tsugaru* elements throughout and it is less than two and a half minutes long. The first thirty seconds of “*Ibuki*” features an eight-phrase opening that is clearly based on western harmony, but for the rest of the piece the brothers play fairly standard *jonkara* riffs alternately together and alone. In total, about three minutes of the approximately thirty-minute running time of the album could be considered non-traditional playing. The object of the album seems primarily to be to highlight their traditional playing skills, and only secondarily to showcase some new form of composition on the *Tsugaru shamisen*, though in retrospect “Modern,” the first track, does contain the seed of their recognizable sound.

Move (2000) sold over 100,000 units, and follows the formula of *Ibuki*, with an opening *shamisen*-only track that uses western rhythms and tonal harmony throughout (Tanaka and Oda

²⁵ See the discography for a complete list.

2009, 170). Unlike *Ibuki*, it features only three completely traditional pieces (predictably, the “Big Three”: “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” and “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*,” all of which appeared on their first album too), and four others that incorporate long sections of essentially traditional playing. It also uses, albeit sparingly, some accompanying instruments: *cajón*, a drum set, and a traditional hand drum of the *noh* theatre are included on several of the non-traditional tracks. From this album on, almost every album uses an English word or phrase for its title, and the trend of naming songs with evocative Japanese words like “*Ayumi*” (“Strolling”), “*Hayate*” (“Hurricane”), and “*Wakimizu*” (“Boiling water”) begins with this album too.

With *Soulful* (2002), the progression away from traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* continues. This album features only two traditional *Tsugaru* pieces, “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” and “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” though both appeared on their previous albums; as progressive as this album is, it seems it still has to include a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.” The traditional pieces and a reworking of “Modern” from the first album are performed with two *shamisens*, but the accompaniment on the other tracks includes the basic instruments of a modern pop band - synthesizer, electric guitar, drums, and bass. The non-traditional pieces feature *shamisen* variously picking out slow pop melodies over lush synthesizer accompaniment, or performing *Tsugaru*-derived riffs over fast-paced rock band accompaniment.

The only traditional *Tsugaru* piece on *Frontier* (2003) is “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” played first by Kenichi, and later on the album by Ryōichirō as solo *shamisen* pieces. The newly composed pieces use common western chord progressions, but as on previous albums, the *shamisens* perform them with appropriate *Tsugaru*-derived riffs and ornamentation. The accompaniment on this album goes a step further than that of *Soulful*, using strings and other instruments to achieve

an orchestral sound.

With *Renaissance* (2004), the Yoshida Brothers manage to release an album that does not include a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.” The only canonical piece on the album is “*Tanto bushi*,” performed as a *shamisen* duet. As with at least the two previous albums, the new compositions are often in standard western popular music styles and feature *shamisen* picking out simple melodies or playing in a more aggressive Tsugaru-derived style. The accompaniment on this album is varied: “*Takeda no komori uta*” (“Lullaby of Takeda”), a folk song from Kyoto, is performed with uilleann pipes; others employ dreamy synthesizer accompaniment, acoustic guitar, or jazz combo backing. “*Kodō*” (“Beat”) is a piece in the manner of the first album's “Modern”: performed on just two *shamisens*, fusing Western rhythmic and tonal sensibilities with *Tsugaru shamisen* technique. The result is something new that could not likely have been created on any other instrument.

Yoshida Brothers (2005) continues to use the formula that was more or less established with *Soulful*, the third album: a few traditional pieces, a few *shamisen*-only tracks, and some essentially Western pieces that happen to use the *shamisen* as the main melodic instrument. A variety of arrangements are used on this album as well, from the horn-heavy “Passion” that sounds like an early Bond movie theme, to the spare Brian Eno cover “By This River,” which features a male vocalist singing in English.

Hishō – Shamisen dake no sekai (Soaring: the world of shamisen only) (2006) is, as the title suggests, a departure from the trend towards increasingly complicated arrangements, with all of the tracks performed with just one or two *shamisens*. The album includes six traditional Tsugaru pieces, reworkings of “*Ibuki*,” “Modern” and “*Kodō*” from earlier albums, and some new compositions in one or another of the styles mentioned above. Their next release, *Zenkoku tour*

2006 hishō: jikkyō kanzen rokuon ban (*Nationwide tour 2006 soaring: completely live recordings*) (2007) featured live recordings of existing material, performed with just *shamisen*, or with a standard touring band that at times included accordion and *shakuhachi* too.

Another Side Of Yoshida Brothers (2009) features a collection of guest artists, and as a result is more varied than usual. On many of the tracks the *shamisen* feels like little more than a novelty, thrown in over pieces in a variety of genres: dance music, slow rap, synth-heavy modern jazz, or pop orchestral movie score. A few tracks rework some of their earlier compositions, with drum machines, heavily filtered *shamisen* sounds, and “exotic” West Asian vocalizations. A stand-out track is “Change,” with a half-Canadian band called Monkey Majik that was very popular in Japan at the time. This song was released as a single, and increased the Yoshida Brothers exposure in Japan, as they opened for Monkey Majik both in Japan and in shows in Toronto and Vancouver.

Prism (2009) uses rhythm tracks, and heavily processed *shamisen* sounds, as well as the usual mix of electronic and acoustic instruments. “AIYA” is an almost standard *min'yō* version of “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*,” with traditional drums and flutes accompanying the *shamisens*; it differs only in that it lacks vocals, and adds a newly composed phrase that is returned to periodically. “*Akita Obako*” begins as a traditional *min'yō* piece and transitions organically into a slow blues-rock number. “*Fujin*” is the album's two-*shamisen* Western/Tsugaru fusion piece. Other tracks fall into categories described earlier: on “Red Bird” the *shamisens* pick out a simple melody over lush synthesizer accompaniment; on “End of the World” and “Mr. Nagano's Foolish Proposal” they play over filmic, orchestral textures; on “Seven” they use Tsugaru-derived techniques to solo over standard pop chord progressions.

In 2012 two greatest hits compilations were released: *Yoshida Kyōdai Best vol. 1: 1999 ~2004*

and Yoshida *Kyōdai Best vol. 2: 2005 ~2009*. The first contains no traditional pieces at all, and the second the only traditional piece is “AIYA.” There are a few *shamisen*-only modern compositions (“Modern” and “*Ibuki*”), but the majority of pieces are those Western compositions featuring *shamisen* in pop, rock, or orchestral arrangements.

There are no traditional pieces on 2014's *Horizon*, only the types of pieces described above: the *shamisens* playing simple melodies over lush arrangements; Tsugaru-inflected lead lines over pop textures; and two-*shamisen* Western/Tsugaru fusion pieces. As of this writing the most recent Yoshida Brothers' release is a five-song EP CD tied to a popular comic and *anime* called *Naruto*. The tracks vary widely from heavy rock to a high energy dance remix of an earlier composition, to the wistful, dreamy synth-backed sort of arrangements discussed earlier.

In the wake of the Yoshida Brothers

The success of the Yoshida Brothers first CD had record companies scrambling to record other young *Tsugaru shamisen* players including Kinoshita Shinichi (b. 1965), Agatsuma Hiromitsu (b. 1973), Nitta Masahiro (b. 1984), and Takahashi Chikudo (b. 1970). Kinoshita released two albums of traditional music, three hybrid albums, and a *Tsugaru shamisen* instructional book between 2001 and 2004. Nitta Masahiro has released a number of inventive recordings, including collaborations with Okinawan *sanshin* player Yonaha Toru, Oyama Yutaka, and American *Tsugaru shamisen* players Kevin Kmetz, Mike Penny, and Kyle Abbott.

Agatsuma Hiromitsu is a distant second to the Yoshida Brothers in terms of popularity; he is not a household name, but has had a successful career, having released fifteen solo albums since 2001. While his solo career did not start until after the release of the Yoshida Brothers' first album, he had already been quite active for over a decade. In 1986, at the age of twelve, he

received the “special award” at Hirosaki's contest, and so appeared on the LP *We Are the Tsugaru-jamisen* mentioned above. In 1989 he won Kanagi's inaugural *Tsugaru shamisen* national contest, and went on to win at Hirosaki in 1995 and 1996. In 1991 he joined the traditional Japanese music/rock fusion band *Musashi*, which included a *shakuhachi* player and a traditional Japanese drummer as well as the usual rock instrumentation, and played with them until the release of his first solo album in 2001 (Honma 2001, 234). Unlike the Yoshida Brothers albums, Agatsuma's have consistently been thematic, each with its own sound or focus.

Agatsuma (2001), his first album is a mix of solo traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces and new compositions with accompaniment. *Beams* (2002), his second album is a Rock/Tsugaru hybrid fusion while his third, *Classics* (2003), consists entirely of traditional solo *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces. All of the pieces on 2005's *Eien no uta* (Eternity's poem) are loosely based on Japanese *min'yō*, performed on Japanese and Western instruments. *Standards* (2008) has him playing a wide variety of mostly western popular pieces, from “Beat It,” to “Scarborough Fair” to “The Theme From Mission Impossible,” and with *Tōki* (Ten Seasons) (2010), he returns to entirely traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces. His most recent album, 2015's *Dentō to kakushin: ki* (Tradition and innovation: wake) has him collaborating with instruments and vocals from traditional Japanese *gagaku* and *noh* ensembles, as well as piano and *shakuhachi*, and includes yet another version of each of the “three big” *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces: “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” and “*Tsugaru ohara bushi*”.

As the revival continued, other young players were also recorded: Asano Shō, who had won Hirosaki's competition three times in a row by the time he was sixteen has recorded four albums of traditional and contemporary music since 2008; Kevin Kmetz, who grew up next to an American military base in Aomori, has released several CDs including a major label heavy

metal-infused album with the tongue-in-cheek title of *God of Shamisen* (2008); Shirafuji Hikari and Takeda Kanami, winners of multiple national contests, record as a duo under the name *KiKi* and are pushing the two-*shamisen* Tsugaru sound in new directions, starting with 2012's *2GIRL Shamisen*.²⁶ This list is not exhaustive; there are a number of other players with major label recordings, and many more with small label or self-published CDs, but it is a representative sampling of the sorts of music being recorded.

Online sources

Informally surveying many young Japanese music listeners and perusing several online music outlets has led me to conclude that digital downloads are not a significant commercial mode of music consumption in Japan at the moment. The younger Japanese people I have spoken with prefer renting and ripping CDs, or listening to free streaming services to buying mp3s on iTunes or similar sites. This may be partly due to the fact that one mp3 track costs as much as renting an entire CD in Japan.

The selection of traditional music available for download is limited, compared to what is available on CD. The search term “津軽三味線” (“*Tsugaru-jamisen*”) produced 324 tracks in the “digital music” section on Amazon Japan's site, while searching the same term in the physical media section produced 258 results.²⁷ Though some of the 258 results were only tangentially related to the genre, most were CDs with ten to twenty tracks on each. This disparity holds true even for popular young players; the Yoshida Brothers' store on Amazon Japan has 110 tracks available for mp3 downloads, but about twenty CDs. The situation is much worse for players

²⁶ The title is a pun: the English phrase “two girl *shamisen*,” pronounced with a Japanese accent as “tsoo gaaru *shamisen*” is a homophone of “*Tsugaru shamisen*.”

²⁷ These figures are from a search carried out in November of 2015; an Amazon search from March of 2014 produced eighty-eight digital tracks and 222 physical media results.

from the older generation, who, apart from Takahashi Chikuzan, are almost entirely unrepresented.

As for other sites, the offerings at iTunes were better than those at Amazon, with twenty-eight Yoshida Brothers albums and twenty-two Agatsuma Hiromitsu albums available for download [sic].²⁸ Searching by the term “*Tsugaru shamisen*” was not fruitful, nor was searching for older artists by name. Mora.jp, another popular Japanese site has albums by only four *Tsugaru shamisen* players, and the major labels' own sites had very little traditional music available for download. This is unsurprising as the audience for traditional music in general is largely older people who tend to continue using CDs and even cassette tapes, formats they are more comfortable with.

A YouTube search for “津軽三味線” returns about 105,000 results.²⁹ As above, with the exception of Takahashi Chikuzan, there are very few videos – including audio tracks with still pictures for visuals - of the older generations of artists discussed in this paper.³⁰ The overwhelming majority of the videos are recordings of amateur performances, as one might expect on YouTube, but in other respects, it follows the pattern of the above-mentioned online sources. As explained in the preceding footnotes, the availability of purchasable digital media seems to be increasing, but it still lags behind physical media for *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the general state of *Tsugaru shamisen* recording up until 2016. I divide

²⁸ Neither the Yoshida Brothers nor Agatsuma have actually released this many albums.

²⁹ This number was 48,000 in March 2014, less than half of the November 2015 count.

³⁰ As with iTunes and other music sites, inputting Japanese characters produces different results than inputting the romanized “*Tsugaru shamisen*.” The latter method returned 33,200 results (23,500 in March of 2014) and skewed towards videos intended for an international audience.

the recording history into two eras: an earlier era when the focus was on canonical pieces, and the present era when the focus is shifting away from the established canon in favour of new pieces using non-traditional compositional techniques and musical structures. Appendix C analyses the contents of thirty-nine albums by four contemporary artists and shows that over seventy percent of the combined tracks are outside of the traditional repertoire. This is not to say that experimentation had not been attempted earlier; it is a genre with innovation as one of its founding principles. As writer Daijō Kazuo never tires of pointing out, the earliest player that we have information about, Akimoto Nitarō, exhorted his students to “play (their) own *shamisen*.” Shirakawa Gumpachirō greatly expanded the vocabulary of improvised *Tsugaru shamisen* with newly inventive riffs that were likely inspired by listening to postwar American jazz (Takada 2010). Takahashi Chikuzan expanded the repertoire of pieces that could be improvised on and played solo in order to record the first all solo *Tsugaru shamisen* album in 1963. Players from Kida Rinshōei to Mihashi Michiya, Yamada Chisato, and Takahashi Yūjirō recorded with western musicians, but the recorded output of this earlier generation is overwhelmingly traditional in nature. A number of players of the present era, while versed in tradition, have been greatly expanding the definition of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Chapter Four: National *Tsugaru Shamisen* Contests

Introduction

As with most modern, westernized cultures, competition plays a considerable role in Japanese society. Elementary and high school students compete in sports and arts-related competitions as part of the education process. The vast majority of students also spend a significant part of their time in high school preparing for university entrance examinations, and an entire industry of cram schools, or *jukku* exists to give attendees an advantage over those who try to study on their own. There are also several different tests of English competence that many Japanese take after university to give them the credentials necessary for certain kinds of work. Besides taking exams to improve career opportunities, some people compete to test themselves, or to motivate themselves to improve at a hobby. For some, this might mean running a marathon; for others, it might mean competing in a calligraphy, or singing, or *Tsugaru shamisen* competition. Most of the participants in the competitions discussed in this chapter are using the contests in this way, but a few skilled players see the contests as a stepping stone to a career as a professional player.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of national competitions on the present state of *Tsugaru shamisen* in Japan. The young stars of the genre who are re-shaping the sound of the music have all come up through and been influenced by these contests. The Yoshida Brothers, the biggest stars of the millennial boom, credit their success partly to the competition experience; as young boys playing an instrument that was considered old-fashioned by their classmates, they were inspired by seeing older, better players who made the music seem cool (Yoshida Kyōdai 2000). Two commercial movies about *Tsugaru shamisen* were made in the 2000s, and both featured a competition in their climax (Nitaboh 2004; Overdrive 2004).

It has been conservatively estimated that there are 20,000 *Tsugaru shamisen* players in Japan,

and eighty-four *ryūha*, or schools, and I estimate that there are 300 to 400 national solo competitors in a given year (Hayashi 2007, 2).³¹ While it might seem like an insignificant percentage of the total number of players are interested in competition, the number of solo competitors does not tell the whole story. Many *ryūha* have their own competitions which prepare lower level students for eventually entering a national competition. These are not regional qualifying contests like those held in Ireland (discussed at the end of the chapter), but no doubt have the effect of reducing the number of *ryūha* students who decide to compete nationally in any given year. It was my experience, studying with Nishikawa Shinobu and Nishikawa Misao in Kyoto in the 1990s, that only a few of their students entered the two or three national competitions that existed at the time, but everyone was aware of the competitions whether or not they themselves competed.

As was noted in the literature review in chapter one, there is a small body of literature specifically focused on traditional music competitions. David Hughes includes a section about competition in his book on Japanese *min'yō*, and Groemer briefly discusses the effect of *Tsugaru shamisen* competitions on the music of the twenty-first century (Hughes 2008, 202; Groemer 2012, 103). Monographs and articles have also been written on American fiddle, Scottish bagpipe, and Irish music competitions (Goertzen 1985, 1988, 1996, 2008; Loten 1995; Gibson 1998; Henry 1989). In 2003 an entire issue of *The World of Music* was devoted to the topic, with articles on traditional music competitions in Trinidad, Burma, Grenada, Indonesia, Uganda, and the United States (Baumann 2003). At the end of this chapter I will use some of this scholarship

³¹ Hayashi Mitsuo gives this number in the program of Aomori's 2007 contest, but Asashō Yoshinobu gave an estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 in 1986, and Suda et al put the number of players at 50,000 in 1998 (Asashō 1986; Suda et al 1998, 11). This is particularly confusing as the number of players has undoubtedly grown substantially in the last few decades. For whatever reason, it seems difficult to arrive at a reliable figure, even for the number of schools: Rausch reported that there were ninety-four in 2001, while Hayashi reported eighty-four at the height of the revival in 2007 (Rausch 2001, 65; Hayashi 2007, 2).

to give some context to the *Tsugaru shamisen* contest situation.

The first half of this chapter is an ethnographic description that draws on my experiences of attending the *Tsugaru shamisen* International Contest in Hirosaki City ten times over a fifteen-year period. I describe the difficulty of getting to the city due to its remoteness, and the experience of arriving at the hall in which the contest is held. I analyze the program from 2010, the last year I attended, and then summarize the 2015 competition, which was live-streamed in its entirety and available for a few weeks thereafter on the video streaming service ustream.tv.

In the second half I outline the history and development of Japan's national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests. I first consider the precursors to the modern *Tsugaru shamisen* contests of the late twentieth century, the formal *min'yō* contests and informal competitions among the *bosama* (the first players of *Tsugaru shamisen*) of the early twentieth century, and then discuss the modern contests themselves. I look at each of the seven major annual contests in terms of funding, adjudication, the ways contestants are separated into categories, the numbers and demographics of participants and winners, and the ways in which the competitions distinguish themselves from one other. The major contests are covered in chronological order, from Hirosaki (1982) to Nagoya (2007), and after this a few short-lived or very recently established contests are briefly discussed. Finally, a summary of the various aspects of the contests is presented, including a consideration of how gender is handled at various contests, and the effect of the contests on musical style. This summary brings in writing on other traditional music contests in order to give some context to the situation in Japan.

I. Experiencing Hirosaki's 34th Annual *Tsugaru Shamisen* International Contest

One of the key features of the Tsugaru region is its remoteness. When the railroad from Tokyo to Aomori City was completed in 1891, it cut the travel time from twenty days to three (Suda, Daijō and Rausch 1997, 74). Until 2010, it still took the better part of a day; even after the three-and-a-half-hour bullet train trip to its terminus at Morioka City, there was still a two-hour bus ride to Hirosaki City. In December of 2010, with the completion of the Tōhoku bullet train line, the 675 kilometre trip took just under four hours (East Japan Passenger Railway Corporation). With travel time between airports, check-in, and all of the annoyances surrounding modern air travel, flying is not a much more attractive option. Tsugaru is still one of the most inaccessible regions in mainland Japan.

In premodern times Hirosaki was a castle town that served the ruler of the region, and as such an oasis of culture in northern Japan; now it is second in size and importance to the port city of Aomori. Its population was estimated at 178, 279 in 2014, down from 183, 473 in 2010 and 194,197 in 1995, the result of an urban migration that has been affecting rural Japan for decades (Statistics Bureau Japan).

The streets from the train station do not lead directly to Hirosaki Castle Park, the town's main tourist attraction, but force the traveller through a series of switchbacks, a hold-over from a time when slowing the enemy's approach was the castle's first line of defence. This is just one of many ways that Hirosaki's history as a castle town and outpost of culture has been kept alive. Another is the annual Hirosaki Cherry Blossom Festival, which was started on the castle grounds in 1918, and has been held almost without interruption since (Suda, Daijō, and Rausch 1998, 93). Today it runs for two weeks from late April to early May, during which time as many as 2.5 million people visit the grounds (Oda 2009, 177).

The *Tsugaru-jamisen zenkoku taikai* is held in the Castle Park during the festival, on the second and third of May each year, and when the timing is right, attendees witness the otherworldly sight of the 5000 cherry trees in full bloom on the castle grounds (ibid.).

Approaching the Citizens Hall, a modernist concrete building from the mid-1960s that has been home to the contest for most of its thirty-four-year history, one first hears the sound of the *Tsugaru shamisen* coming from players scattered around the grounds, each simultaneously practising his or her own solo piece. Entering the hall, the sound becomes louder. The first floor is taken up by booths selling *Tsugaru shamisen* and related accessories, CDs, and books. The second floor leads to the balcony section of the auditorium, but there is a large mezzanine where groups of players have each claimed floorspace by laying down bags, instrument cases and territory-marking tarps. They will camp here for the day, or at least until their members have finished performing. At any given moment several groups or solo players are practising in this space, each working on his, her, or its own piece, resulting in a cacophony of competing tempi, rhythms, and melodies that is in its own way as impressive and disorienting as the park grounds in full bloom. Entering the auditorium, the sound from the mezzanine is shut out by a set of heavy double doors, and the eye is drawn to the elaborate curtain spanning the stage at the front of the hall. It was designed by Hirosaki's Munakata Shikō (1903-1975), the most famous modern Japanese woodblock artist and a recipient of the Order of Culture, the highest award in Japanese arts. He is nationally and internationally known for his rough, vibrant folk art-style woodblock prints, which are often based on traditional and mythical Buddhist and Shinto themes (Merritt 1990, 200). The 1400-seat hall is used for a variety of performances, but the curtain seems particularly fitting for this contest, presenting as it does a nationally respected modern folk art of the Tsugaru region.

The Contest Programme

The entire programme (see Illustration 4.01) is printed on both sides of one sturdy sheet the size of a newspaper, making it somewhat cumbersome to read when the hall becomes crowded. The format is fairly standardized and has changed little in the almost twenty years that I have been collecting these programs. The left side of the front page contains separate greetings from a few important local people, typically the mayor and local scholars, welcoming participants and referencing local identity markers: Mount Iwaki (known as *Tsugaru Fuji*, the Mount Fuji of the Tsugaru region) and the cherry trees that bloom at this time of year; the severe climate that is said to have created the stubborn character of Tsugaru natives and given rise to the *Tsugaru shamisen*; local culture dating back to the 1600s when Hirosaki was a castle town; and local produce, specifically apples, which the area has come to be famous for since the first orchards were planted in the late 19th century (Aomori Prefectural Government 2011). The left side of the front page also typically lists all of the A-level winners going back to the first contest, and the present year's sponsors. In 2010 these included surrounding municipalities (three cities and six towns), local product and tourist associations, five local broadcasting stations, eight local newspapers, and two local radio stations. The right side of the front page contains a list of all of the previous year's award winners in each category (in 2009 a total of sixty-six awards were given out); a profile of a Japanese participant living in Australia; an article on an upcoming event calling for participants to climb Mount Iwaki and perform together on the summit; and a call for submissions to the annual "big five Tsugaru folk song" lyric contest.



Illustration 4.01: 2010 Programme, front

On the other side of the programme, this year's competitors are listed by category, in order of appearance, as are the judges (in 2010 the twelve judges were local scholars, writers, and performers of traditional arts, and representatives of the sponsoring newspaper and television companies). The schedule for both days is given as well, with the lower level competitors (junior level, C-level, senior level, and B-level) grouped together on day one, making day two the more interesting one to attend, with the large and small group performances, the song accompaniment category, the women's A-level, and the men's A-level. Also listed here are the master of ceremonies, the singers for the “folk song accompaniment” category, and the volunteer staff for the event. A section listing next year's categories and the maximum number of entrants for each

also appears here. Finally, along the edges of both sides of the programme are small advertisements, which will be discussed further below.



Illustration 4.02: 2010 Programme, back

The Contest

The thirty-fourth annual contest in Hirosaki was held on Sunday, May third and Monday, May fourth 2015, in the middle of Japan's *Golden Week*, an English phrase that refers to a few consecutive days – never a full week – in early May during which most of the country takes a vacation. This ensures that competitors and their families are able to make the long trip to Hirosaki from anywhere in the country, and coincides with the cherry blossom festival, but also

means that people who compete year after year, as many do, spend every *Golden Week* – the one vacation period of the year when people have a chance to travel – in Hirosaki.³² That competitors and their families do this is another testament to their commitment to their hobby.

For the last two years the *Tsugaru shamisen* International Contest³³ in Hirosaki has been live-streamed and temporarily archived at www.ustream.tv, which has given people that cannot attend the opportunity to watch the contest in real time, or in a more leisurely fashion over several days after the contest has finished. The first day is covered in four video clips, totalling eight and a half hours of performance, and the second day in six clips totalling nine hours. It is almost impossible to sit through the entire schedule over the two days of the contest; most people look over the schedule, make note of the players they want to watch, be they friends and family members or particularly good players, and spend a part of each day elsewhere. Consequently, the auditorium tends to be rather empty during the lower level categories, but almost filled to capacity for the men's and women's A-levels on the second day.

Below I will describe in some detail the 2015 contest that I watched on ustream.tv, as it is, in format and content, typical not only of the *Tsugaru shamisen* contests that have been held in Hirosaki for the last thirty-four years but also of those held more recently all over the country.³⁴

Day one: greetings

Nagamine Kenichi, the winner of the contest in 1984, gives the opening greeting, as he has ever since Yamada Chisato, the contest's founder, passed away in 2004. He notes that spring has arrived late this year, which means that the cherry blossoms are unfortunately not in full bloom

³² See the map in Appendix E for the location of the contest sites discussed in this chapter.

³³ The title was changed in 2014 from the “Tsugaru shamisen National Contest” (*Tsugaru-jamisen Zenkoku Taikai*) to the “Tsugaru Shamisen International Contest” (*Tsugaru-jamisen Sekai Taikai*).

³⁴ Some of the footage of the 2015 contest has since been moved to YouTube (*Tsugaru-jamisen Sekai Taikai* 2015).

for this year's contest. He recalls the long history of Hirosaki's cherry blossom viewing festival, and marvels at how the *Tsugaru shamisen*, born in the harsh climate of the Tsugaru region, has become an international music thanks to the efforts of many people here today. In a very short speech he manages to efficiently tie the contest to tradition, and use place to lend it authority, while pointing out its worth as an international music.

Tanaka Kōichi, who has been Master of Ceremonies since at least the late 1990s, then takes the stage to introduce this year's judges, who include two past contest winners, two Tsugaru *min'yō* singing champions, three Tsugaru scholars, and a grand master of the *koto*, the Japanese zither. Conspicuous by their absence, for reasons that will become apparent later in the chapter, are the newspaper and radio executives who were always found among the judges in the early years of the contest.

The first day is taken up with the group and lower, or “C-level,” categories that are divided by age into junior, youth, middle and senior. Competitors place themselves in categories, and ideally compete at the level that they feel is best suited for them. The hope is that people would rather compete at a higher level than win an award at a low level, and generally it seems to work out this way.

Junior C-level

The contest begins at ten a.m. with the junior C-level players, which can include anyone up to fifteen years of age, though younger players that feel up to the challenge are encouraged to compete in the B or A-level categories. This year there are eighteen contestants in this category, some so small they can barely reach the upper part of the neck of the *shamisen* (see Illustration 4.03), and a few not quite ready for competition who lose their place but struggle along through

their allotted two-and-a-half minutes. Almost everyone in this category is just trying to make it through his or her piece, and execute as many of the techniques as possible in a composition that was probably put together by his or her teacher. Some do this better than others, but everyone is applauded for trying, and the best players play something that is actually occasionally pleasant to listen to. There are always a few promising players in this group that stand out as performers to watch in the coming years.



Illustration 4.03: Junior C-Level Onodera Maiyū (screen capture from www.ustream.tv)

Senior C-level

At eleven a.m. the senior C-level players, which include men and women over sixty years of age, begin. There are thirty-four contestants, almost double that of the junior group. Most of these players are probably also recent beginners, and in general do not play as well as the junior

C-level players. Very young players tend to be good mimics, and have probably put in more hours of practice. These seniors generally play at a slower than normal tempo, and have problems with rhythm and volume as they negotiate the various requisite riffs and techniques. In general their attacks lack crispness and they have problems with intonation, resonance, and missed notes. As with the juniors, a few of them have trouble getting through their two-and-a-half minutes, but all receive applause: at this level, the accomplishment is managing to perform on the stage.

Groups

It has been said that the addition of group categories in 1988 is what finally made the Hirosaki contest viable, as it more than doubled the number of contestants (Matsuki 2011, 98). Almost all of the contests that will be discussed in this chapter have group categories; it adds another dimension to the competition in ways that will be discussed below, including participatory inclusiveness, compositional experimentation, and dress.

Playing in a group can be a way for players who are intimidated by the idea of competing as a solo performer to participate in the contest. Many groups are made up of a number of strong players, and often a larger number of weaker players whose weaknesses are mitigated in a group situation. Group competition is considerably less anxiety-inducing for most players; contestants who could not have looked more serious while playing solo often appear relaxed, and might even smile as they take the stage with their group.

Groups typically include players who are also competing as individuals and perhaps study under the same teacher, or at least live in the same area so that they can practice together. This is not always the case; for example in 2014, the group *Bachido* was composed of Japanese and

non-Japanese players from around the world, many of them part of an online community centred on the chat boards of the website Bachido.com. They had been learning the piece on their own in the months leading up to the contest and only began to practice in the same physical space a day or two prior to competing. Mixed gender groups are common, as are groups with members of widely disparate ages.

Until the late 1990s, groups more or less played the same sorts of pieces that individuals played, almost always a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.” They either played in unison throughout, or had sections in which part of the group played an ostinato pattern while the rest continued to play the main part. It may have also included a section in which the strongest player played a virtuoso solo while the rest of the group played something that rhythmically supported the solo, but made no attempt at Western tonal harmony. Recently group compositions have become more experimental: my field notes from 2005 show that one group's composition contained a section of blues, with one player soloing while the rest of the group played a “walking bass” line.

There is a tendency for groups to appear in matching outfits of some kind, often a T-shirt with the group name printed on it, and pants of more or less the same colour. Occasionally a group will wear pseudo-traditional uniforms like those worn by folk performing arts groups, made of brightly coloured synthetic materials, in designs that are pointedly modern takes on traditional styles. This somewhat kitschy style, while accepted in traditional folk performing arts circles, is not generally in evidence at *Tsugaru shamisen* competitions. For decades Yamada Chisato had made an effort to show that *Tsugaru shamisen* was a living art form, and this included the conscious choice to not dress in traditional Japanese clothing at his *min'yō* bar. His students who performed there with him followed suit, and this style choice was carried over when he started

the contest. Yamada's early large group performances had the hundreds of players wearing matching T-shirts and pants, which became the default uniform for groups performance at the contest as well (Matsuki 2011, 101). This preference for non-traditional dress still distinguishes *Tsugaru shamisen* contests from most other *min'yō* contests.

B-groups (five to ten members)

The B-groups³⁵ begin at one in the afternoon. There are seven groups in the “B group” (five to ten members) category. Each group has a name, which often identifies the school they belong to and are in a sense representing. For example, the *Yamada sangenkai* (Yamada *shamisen* group) belong to the Yamada lineage of players, and the *Waseda daigaku Tsugaru-jamisen aikō kai* (Waseda University *Tsugaru shamisen* enthusiast's group) are all students at Tokyo's prestigious Waseda University. One group goes by the playfully cumbersome, but descriptive name “*daredemo sankā dekiru Tsugaru-jamisen circle*” (the “anyone-can-join *Tsugaru shamisen* club”).

This year, as in past years, most groups are dressed in a way that ties them together, typically wearing matching printed T-shirts and pants, though one group has gone upscale with matching white shirts and black and white striped vests. Most of the groups play some version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” in the manner described above, but include a very short melodic section, often employing a major heptatonic scale rather than *jonkara*'s standard pentatonic scale (e.g. C-Eb-F-G-Bb-c). This trend to include a snatch of western melody seems to have begun in the 2000s, following the *Tsugaru shamisen* boom of that time, and is tolerated in the group setting, but not in individual performance. One group plays a medley of *Tsugaru* folksongs, and another ends

³⁵ “B” and “A” here refer to the number of members in a group rather than skill level.

with a western cadence rather than one of the standard *jonkara* endings. The winning group, *Hayate* (“hurricane”), is a bit of a super group, as six of the eight members have won the top men's or women's level in one of the national contests. Some or all of them appear in a *shamisen* group of the same name which has released two albums (Hayate Discography 2016). They are all dressed in markedly different ways, underlining their individuality. Their exceptional mastery of technique is complemented by the interesting composition, which begins with something like a four-part round before reverting to an extremely well-executed version of *jonkara*, with various members taking solos.

A-groups (more than ten members)

The “A group” category (more than ten members) has only one entry this year, the sixteen-member *Nitta-ryū* group (Illustration 4.04), all dressed in the default T-shirt and dark jeans, but with brightly coloured, matching *happi* coats worn over top.³⁶ Their composition includes some non-traditional sections that utilize chord progressions and western scales, and is a good example of the sort of material that is allowed in group but not solo performances at this point in time.



³⁶ A *happi* is a light, short-sleeved jacket often worn over street clothes today at many traditional events.

Illustration 4.04: Nitta-ryū group performance (screen capture from www.ustream.tv)

Middle C-level (40-59), youth C-level

At two in the afternoon, the middle C-level category, which includes men and women between forty and fifty-nine years of age, begins. There are thirty-two contestants in this division. As might be expected of relative beginners who picked up their instrument in middle age, their playing is relatively slow, lacks resonance, and includes a lot of missed notes. At four in the afternoon, the youth C-level category, including players between sixteen and thirty-nine years of age, begins. This is the last category of the day, and in general these are the most accomplished of the C-level players, some of whom would not be out of place in the B-level division. There is an awards ceremony for winners of the first day's categories, which follows the same format as the ceremony on the second day, described below.

Day two: greetings

Day two begins with a longer introduction than the first day. First Nagamine Kenichi opens the event with a short speech that is very similar to the one he gave on the first day, then a representative from the mayor's office addresses the rather sparse crowd, touching on the town's nationally famous cherry blossom festival and apple production, as well as its rich history and culture. Like Nagamine just before him, he includes the obligatory reference to place and music, insisting that the same strict climate that produced the *Tsugaru shamisen* is also responsible for the warm hearts of the people of the area, and that the personality of the people can be heard in the timbre of the strings.

Next, the Master of Ceremonies announces that James Westerhoven will give an introduction

in English, “since this is an international contest.” Westerhoven, a resident of Hirosaki for the better part of four decades, has published English translations of various Tsugaru authors including Dazai Osamu (1909-1948), one of the giants of modern Japanese literature, and Osabe Hideo (b. 1934), who has written novels about Tsugaru since the 1970s (Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). That Westerhoven is Dutch and speaks Japanese as well as he speaks English is less important than the fact that this is now officially an international contest, with international competitors, an international judge, and the word “international” right in the title. Professor Sasamori Takefusa, who has been involved with the contest almost since its inception, stands beside Westerhoven to provide an approximate Japanese translation.

Westerhoven talks about the *Tsugaru shamisen*'s status as a living music, references its beginnings, and suggests that it expresses not only the energy of the Tsugaru people, but also the loneliness.³⁷ Lastly, Sasamori asks Westerhoven why he thinks *Tsugaru shamisen* has become so popular abroad, and he answers that the energy and loneliness that he spoke of earlier is not peculiar to Tsugaru or Japan, but something that people all over the world can recognize.

The MC introduces the judges again, and the first contestants of the day take the stage.

B-level

At ten in the morning on the second day, the B-level category, open to men and women of all ages, begins. They are given a time limit of three minutes, thirty seconds more than the C-level players. There are thirty participants in this category, and there is a wide range of skill levels; some players have overestimated their abilities and should have entered at the C-level, while the

³⁷ Interestingly, Westerhoven consistently uses the pronunciation “*shamisen*,” while Sasamori and the other locals consistently use “*jamisen*,” though my informal polling of players from around the country suggests the two pronunciations are considered interchangeable outside of the region.

winner of this category would not have been out of place in the A-level. The best players display a wide range of dynamics, good intonation, acceptable speed, clear single-string playing, and a nearly flawless execution of various required techniques. All but two of the players play a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*”; one performs a version of *Tsugaru sansagari*, and another shakily attempts a medley of relatively easy Tsugaru folk songs – something almost unheard of in solo competition, and a reminder in its conspicuousness of how well the self-screening process generally works.

Song accompaniment

The next category is the song accompaniment (*utazuke bansō*), which begins at eleven thirty. This category was introduced in 2003 partly as a corrective: many young players were focusing on instrumental versions of Tsugaru *min'yō*, and specifically on *jonkara*-based pieces to the exclusion of all others. Most older players maintain that one cannot properly play instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* unless one can sing, or at least fully understand, the folk songs on which the style is based, and there is a general consensus that the playing of young people who have no interest in these folk songs, while technically impressive, lacks something important. One of the contest's organizers told me that everyone had started sounding the same, and that young players had lost the “flavour of Tsugaru,” which comes from song accompaniment. Other national contests have taken this idea even further, as will be discussed later, but in Hirosaki the plan was to include a new category that tested both the breadth of participants' repertoire, and their ability to react to a live singer.

Each year one song from the “big five” Tsugaru folk songs³⁸ is chosen, and an announcement for the following year's song appears in each year's program. This year the song is “*Tsugaru jonkara shin-kyū bushi*,” which two previous Tsugaru *min'yō* contest winners takes turns singing. Each contestant plays his or her original solo prelude that can be up to ninety seconds long, at which point the singer is prompted with a *kakegoe* yell to start.³⁹ The key traits of a good performance here are an interesting, mistake-free prelude, and an understated, rhythmically solid accompaniment that does not get in the way of the singer. Not every player punctuates his or her performance with *kakegoe* cues, but the winners tend to use them throughout.

Women's A-level

At one thirty in the afternoon, the women's A-level, open to all ages, with eighteen competitors, begins. Players in both the women's and the men's A-level are given four minutes to perform. This extra time allows them to show off more techniques; for example, they might include a very quiet section that slowly builds to display the full dynamic range of the instrument.

As expected, the general level of playing is quite high, but there are contestants who are no better than many of the B-level players, missing some strings and hitting others unintentionally, displaying poor intonation, and lacking in dynamics. The winner in this division, Shibata Ai, plays very cleanly – without missing strings or accidentally hitting them – and her transitions

³⁸ “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*,” “*Tsugaru sansagari*,” “*Tsugaru yosare bushi*,” or “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” have all made at least a couple of appearances, but “*Tsugaru ōhara bushi*” has yet to come up, perhaps due to the relative complexity of its form. The contest specifies which of the several distinct sung versions of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” is to be accompanied: the old (*kyū*), the middle (*naka*), the new (*shin*), or the old-new mix (*shin-kyū*).

³⁹ *Kakegoe* are vocables that the main shamisen player uses to cue the singer, drummer, and other shamisen players during an ensemble performance. Men use a forceful, confident, gruff voice, and women use a high piercing voice. There is a range of *kakegoe* used for this purpose in Tsugaru shamisen; in this contest shouts of *Hup haao*, *Hup*, *Ara yooo*, *Haiii 'up*, and *Haiii* were used by various players to cue the beginning of verses, and *Ha hai*, *eeiii ArRrRra* (with a rolling r), to indicate the end of a verse.

between sections are very smooth. She displays her mastery of a variety of techniques, shows great dynamic range, and uses *kakegoe* calls, which are not required or indeed common in solo competition, but do add excitement to the performance. Her playing incorporates some new elements, including an unconventional beginning and ending, and a short section containing a non-traditional melody. Her style would have been considered too unconventional ten or fifteen years ago, but is on the acceptable leading edge of “traditional” playing today.

Second place goes to a twelve-year-old named Honda Rin, who will be someone to watch in the coming years. She has a very clean sound, and displays a mastery of traditional techniques without making any noticeable mistakes. The winners in this section are very young; first placed Shibata is the oldest at twenty-three, Honda is twelve, and the others include three fifteen-year-olds and a seventeen-year-old. One other notable performance is that of Kitamura Miri, who shows a lot of energy, playing forcefully but with great dynamic control and very few mistakes. She uses a lot of short repeated phrases, false starts and feints that catch the listener's attention in their unexpectedness. In the end, she does not place in the top six: while her performance is arresting, it is likely too far outside of what is considered acceptable at this contest at this time.

Men's A-level

The men's A-level, open to all ages, with thirty-one competitors, begins at three in the afternoon. As with the women's A-level, there is a range of abilities presented in this category. One player, Uchida Hikari, stands out by playing several non-standard melodic and rhythmic figures, including a section of two-string “chords” that suggest a western harmonic progression and is clearly too far from tradition to be accepted here. The award winners in this category all stay safely within the tradition, though this year's champion, Kasai Toshiyuki, plays a masterful

version of “*Tsugaru sansagari*” rather than “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.” It is relatively rare, but not unheard of, to win with a piece other than “*jonkara*,” but this is Kasai's third consecutive win, so he may have wanted to prove himself with a different piece.

The award winners in the men's A-level skew older than those in the women's category: Kasai is in his mid-twenties, but the second and fourth place winners are in their late forties or early fifties, the third and sixth place winners are in their late teens or early 20s, and the fifth place winner is in his mid-teens.

Attractions

After a short break, the day ends with a series of professional performances: three past Hirosaki champions – Kinoshita Shinichi, Yō Shōtarō, and Okada Osamu – accompany singers and dancers on four pieces, and then each performs a solo composition. These last three pieces are not constrained by a time limit or a checklist of techniques, and as a result they are more satisfying to listen to, highlighting the difference between contest compositions and other musical performances.

Awards ceremony

The awards ceremony begins at six o'clock and takes no more than twenty minutes; the auditorium is almost empty at this point in the day. The curtain rises to the winners standing in columns corresponding to each category, with the first place winners at the front of their respective columns and the others behind them in order of placement.

Before presenting the awards, Sasamori gives a short speech pointing out some of the qualities that the judges were looking for in the performances. Besides technique, players must

display the special characteristics of *Tsugaru shamisen*: *chikara-zuyoi* (bold) and *takumashisa* (courage) but also “loneliness” (in English). But, he says, technique and form only go so far, one also needs to show *tamashii* (soul or spirit) to make moving music; music lacking soul is just frivolous. He also points out that players must have the courage to do something new, but at the same time if they deviate too far from the proper style, it becomes something strange, so a balance must be struck. Just where this balance lies, of course, is one of the key questions in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world, to which each contest has its own answer. This point will come up again as other contests are discussed, and will be addressed in the chapter's conclusion.

Awards are presented to the B-level winners by James Westerhoven, who offers “congratulations” (in English) to each recipient. The song accompaniment awards are presented by a new person, and the winner gets a cash award along with the usual certificate and trophy. The women's A-level awards are presented by an elderly man with a strong Tsugaru accent. Shibata Ai receives an envelope, a certificate, and a special cup as the Women's winner that is distinguished from the other trophies by its shape. He goes off script when presenting to the runner up, twelve-year-old Honda Rin, telling her that she played “very VERY well,” and that she should keep on practicing until she is as good Shibata. Sasamori presents the men's A-level awards, handing Kasai Yoshiyuki a trophy that is at least three feet tall, a certificate, a large winner's flag that he keeps for the year, and two envelopes (see Illustration 4.05). One envelope is for winning this year, and the other is for having won three contests in a row, which also means he will have to retire from this competition now. The size of the men's trophy and the presentation of the winner's flag make it clear that the winner of the men's A-level is the over-all winner of the contest; as it stands now, a woman simply cannot win the contest.



Illustration 4.05: 2015 Awards ceremony: Kasai, centre, the men's champion, and Shibata, far left, the woman's champion (screen capture from www.ustream.tv)

II. Surveying the National *Tsugaru Shamisen* Contests

Min'yō Contests

The *Tsugaru shamisen* contests discussed in this chapter are part of a larger *min'yō* contest culture in modern Japan that stretches back more than one hundred years. It is difficult to say exactly where and when these contests started, but even in the *Tsugaru* region there are records of an amateur singing contest at the autumn festival on Mount Iwaki as early as 1905 (Suda, Daijō, and Rausch 1998, 81). What is considered the first modern *min'yō* contest was held in 1910 for the song “*Esashi Oiwake*” in the town of Esashi, in Hokkaido, north eastern Japan, which was “partly influenced by the classical music *concours* of Europe” (Hughes 2008, 134).

Unlike European *concour*s, or indeed most music competitions around the world today, it was entirely devoted to one piece, and in this respect was a model for many other *min'yō* contests in Japan today. It has been held annually in its present incarnation since 1963, and celebrated its 53th anniversary in September of 2015 (*Esashi-oiwake Zenkoku Taikai* 2013).

According to Daijō Kazuo, there were contests between the *bosama*, the earliest players of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, as early as 1913, though the idea that these bore any resemblance to today's competitions may be part of Daijō's "invented history" of the tradition, since it is clear from other writing that unaccompanied Tsugaru-jamisen did not become an attraction in itself until almost three decades later (Suda, Daijō, and Rausch 1998, 90; Sasamori and Westerhoven, 2004). Gerald Groemer writes more cautiously that the *bosama* played on temple grounds at summer festivals, and that some of these occasions "might have turned into competitions" (Groemer 1999, 36). Groemer also cites an interview by scholar Kimura Genzō (1902-1978) with Maeda Takesaburō, one of the last living *bosama*, in which he says that there were contests in Kanagi, with prizes for the loudest sound, or new riffs, which gives some credence to Daijō's assertions (Groemer 2012, 62).

In 1934 the *Tōnippō newspaper* in Aomori began to sponsor a song contest, though by the late 1930s, as World War Two began to affect every aspect of daily life, such contests would have stopped altogether (Groemer, 1999, 51). In 1948 NHK, the state radio and television broadcasting company, began a "national singing competition known as the *nodo jiman zenkoku konkūru* ("voice pride national *concour*s") which included a traditional music category. In 1950 The Japanese Folk Song Association (*Nihon Min'yō Kyōkai*, or *Nichimin* for short) was established, and soon began holding its own *min'yō concour*s (Hughes 2008, 142). General contests proliferated, and more and more contests were started for specific songs so that today

they number in the hundreds. Takeuchi Tsutomu, in his 1996 book on folk song contests in Japan, estimated that at that time they attracted about 30,000 participants a year (Takeuchi 1996, 9). These *min'yō* contests served as the model for Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest, which was established in 1982.

1. Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* International Contest

Yamada Chisato

Yamada Chisato, while not strictly the founder of Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* International Contest, was its driving force until his death in 2004. He was born on October tenth, 1931 in Ajigasawa, a port town in Aomori prefecture (Matsuki 2011, 88). As a child – the second youngest of nine siblings – he listened on the home phonograph player to the great *Tsugaru shamisen* players of the time, and in his early teens taught himself to play along with them on a *shamisen* that lay around his house, unused. At this time the profession of *shamisen* player was still looked down on, mainly because it was so hard to make a living at it, and his parents were firmly against his taking this route (Matsuki 1994). Unable to put it out of his mind, however, at fifteen Yamada ran away with the *shamisen* from his home in Ajigasawa to travel with Fukushi Masakatsu's troupe. He served a sort of apprenticeship with Fukushi, carrying his bags as they went from town to town to perform, all for the privilege of listening to his mentor (Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). Yamada said in an interview: “All he told me was, ‘You learn to play the *shamisen* by listening.’ That was it. He didn't teach me anything - not a single lick or trick” (ibid.).

He began a small traveling troupe of his own in 1949, and in 1964 settled down and opened *Yama uta* (“Mountain Song”), his own *min'yō* bar in the city of Hirosaki, named after one of the

local songs. From the beginning he used his students to staff the club in a sort of modified version of the apprenticeship he had served. Over one hundred people studied with him in the forty years that he ran the bar, with the same “learn by listening” method that Yamada’s teacher used. During my Masters fieldwork in 2003, there were six full-time and many more part-time or occasional students studying at the bar. In 1982 Yamada helped found Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* national contest, and began performing abroad in Europe and North America. He continued promoting *Tsugaru shamisen* nationally with group performances of hundreds of players through the 1990s, including a 1000-player event at the Tokyo Dome (Matsuki 1994). Yamada was getting quite frail from complications due to diabetes when I last met him in May of 2003, and he passed away the following year.

History

The contest was originally conceived of by ATV (Aomori Television Broadcasting Company) as part of their twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, but they had some trouble getting it off the ground, and Yamada, having organized *Tsugaru min'yō* singing contests in the past, stepped in to help (Matsuki 2011, 95). It was first held on May first, 1982, in conjunction with a *Tsugaru min'yō* singing contest, as an outdoor event on the grounds of Hirosaki’s Castle Park. The day was a national holiday, and coincided with the park's cherry blossom festival, as it was hoped that sightseers would stop by and add to the audience. There were only nineteen players at the first contest, and it took a few years to begin attracting participants, but by its fifth year there were 140 competitors (Matsuki 2011, 96; Asahō 1986). In 1984 it moved to the other end of the large Hirosaki Castle Park grounds, and was held in a field adjacent to the Hirosaki Citizen’s auditorium; in the late 1980s it moved into the auditorium itself, and has remained there since

(Matsuki 2011, 97). In 1988 a group category was introduced, greatly increasing the number of participants, and it seems that this ensured the contest's survival (Matsuki 2011, 97). In 1999 it became a two-day event, which it has been more or less ever since. More categories have been added over time, including one for women, players under fifteen, players over sixty, and one for accompanying singers, all of which will be discussed further below. In 2001 several of the top players were absent, and, as will be discussed below, this year seems to mark the point at which Tokyo's "*Tsugaru shamisen Concours National Contest*" began to challenge Hirosaki's dominance.

Over time the contest has also become more institutionalized: in 2001, for the first time, the audience was asked to hold applause until the end of a performance, going against the long-standing audience practice of clapping during the most difficult passages, but allowing the judges to clearly hear each player's execution of these passages; and in 2005 it became a rule (recently rescinded) that only players that were affiliated with a recognized school would be allowed to enter the contest. Both of these changes go against the contest's early rebellious reputation, where affiliation was ignored, and exceptional playing was rewarded with instant applause, while sub-par playing could prompt hecklers to tell the player to "go home." In my experiences in the mid to late 1990s, when Hirosaki was *the* proving ground for young players, there was a charged atmosphere in the hall and in the lobby where players and their teachers, friends and family members gathered, as everyone seemed to be sizing up everyone else; today the atmosphere seems more welcoming and friendly.

In the next section I will discuss various aspects of the contest in detail, many of which apply to the other contests discussed in this chapter. I discuss them in detail here to describe the general characteristics of all of the national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests. In descriptions of subsequent

contests many of these categories will only be discussed in passing to show how they resemble or differ from Hirosaki's contest.

Funding

The contest is run by the NPO 21 *Tsugaru-jamisen Network Japan*, which was founded in 2003 and seems to have replaced the Aomori Prefecture Arts and Culture Research Group (*Aomori ken geinō bunka kenkyūkai*), which was made up of many of the same members (Sasamori 2003).⁴⁰ Funding for the contest seems to come from four main sources: the entrance fees from both participants and audience members, the sponsors who are explicitly listed as such on the programme, the companies that advertise on the programme, and the merchandise booths in the lobby of the hall. The subject of money is not easily discussed in Japan, so I have no figures for revenues or expenses connected to the contest. Expenses include the cost of the hall rental, the various awards, certificates, and cash prizes, and may or may not include salaries or honoraria for NPO executives, judges, performers and the MC, as it is unclear if any of these people are paid. It is clear at least that this is a labour of love for those involved, and in fact the contest ran in the red for at least its first four years (Matsuki 2011, 98).

Audience members pay 2000 yen for a one-day ticket, and 3500 yen for a two-day ticket.⁴¹ Solo participants pay 5000 yen to enter the contest, and groups pay about 2000 yen per person and slightly less for larger groups.

In 1997, the first year for which I was able to obtain records, there were eleven sponsors listed on the programme: the Aomori Prefecture Arts and Culture Research Group, Hirosaki City, the Hirosaki City Tourist Association, NHK Broadcasting (Hirosaki branch), Tōōnippō newspaper, Michinoku Newspaper, Radio Aomori Broadcasting (RAB), Aomori Television Broadcasting

⁴⁰ The title uses the English words "Network Japan" for a modern, international connotation.

⁴¹ While exchange rates are always changing, 2000 yen can be very approximately thought of as twenty dollars US.

Company (ATV), Aomori Asahi Broadcasting (ABA), the Nihon Columbia Recording Company, and a sole independent business, the Akimoto liquor store. As was seen earlier, newspapers had a history of sponsoring *min'yō* contests, and the other sponsors, except for the one local business, are all media outlets, or municipal governments and business and tourist associations. The list of eleven sponsors on the 1997 programme had grown to thirty-two by 2010, and while a few sponsors have left, or reappeared under new names, and many new sponsors have been added, the type of sponsors remains the same today.

The 1997 programme has fifty-five advertisements and the 2010 programme has fifty-nine, so the number seems to be fairly consistent. The type of advertiser has also remained basically the same over the years. Some of these are *shamisen*-related advertisers, like instrument makers from all over the country (10), local pubs featuring live music (3), local performing groups, classrooms, and associations (6), and other *Tsugaru shamisen* events (3).⁴² While these ads are aimed at competitors and their families, the remainder seem to target the local population, with advertisers ranging from car dealerships, insurance companies, gravestone carvers, and insecticide producers to cram schools, newspapers and apple orchards.

There is space for about ten booths run by traditional music stores from around the country that sell *shamisens* and accessories, as well as related books, CDs and DVDs. Some of these sellers have booths at the other national competitions as well.

Adjudication

Matsuki states that the judges for the first contest in 1982 included Yamada Chisato; *Tsugaru shamisen* researcher and player Daijō Kazuo; and Terashima Katsu, a pre-war *min'yō* performer

⁴² These numbers are from the 2010 programme.

(Matsuki 2011, 97). There were also almost undoubtedly representatives from the various sponsoring companies. The 1997 programme lists Terashima as the head judge, as well as two music scholars, and representatives from two newspapers, a radio station and a television station as judges. In subsequent years other local scholars served as judges, as did a representative of the Nihon Columbia Recording Company in the years during which it was a sponsor. By 2003 the number of judges had risen to ten, and by 2010 there were twelve judges, eight of whom might be considered to have some musical expertise. One of the contest's organizers I spoke to in 2010 made specific mention of the problem of giving sponsoring media representatives positions as judges, noting that some said it reflected badly on the contest, and in fact by 2015, all eight judges were local musical experts of one sort or another. That same organizer also admitted that in the early years of the contest the judges basically followed Yamada's lead on who should win, as it was very difficult to distinguish among the best players. The criteria by which contestants are judged, and the transparency of the process of adjudication, has become increasingly important in recent years, and will be discussed further below.

Categories

It seems that from the first contest there were three categories: A-level for advanced players, B-level for intermediate players, and C-level for beginners (Matsuki 2011, 96). A source from 1986 states that C, B, and A-level players should have been playing for more than three, four, and five years respectively, and these guidelines continued to be listed on programmes until at least 2010 (Asahō 1986). The 2015 entry form no longer stipulates a minimum number of years of practice, but merely identifies A, B, and C-levels as being for, respectively, advanced, intermediate, and beginner-level players.

A group category was introduced in 1988 when Kyōgoku Toshinori a prominent player and head of the Kyōgoku school of Osaka brought an eighty-member group to the contest. This seems to have been part of a strategy to increase the number of participants, and groups have been part of the contest ever since. They are now divided into two categories: small groups of ten members or less and large groups of more than ten, though these rarely exceed 25 members (Matsuki 2011, 98).

For a time there was a D-level for very new players, but this was permanently dropped in 1998. There are ten categories in the 2015 contest: junior C, youth C, middle C, senior C, B, women's A, men's A, song accompaniment, large group, and small group. The number and types of categories have varied over the years, and these changes seem driven by a desire to maximize the number of awards handed out. If there were only a few categories, less accomplished players would be unlikely to place, and might feel less motivated to enter the contest. Presently, however, each category has a winner, a runner up, and three or four awards for “placing,” then there are special awards, judges’ special awards, and “fighting spirit” awards given out in various categories. At the 2015 contest, a total of sixty-two awards were given out in ten categories; with 229 solo contestants, one in every 3.7 gets an award (21 Tsugaru Samisen [*sic*] Network Japan 2015).

While the motivation for these categories is benign enough, it has created a situation where the ultimate winner of the entire contest is male by default. The women's A-level has been identified as such since its introduction in 1998, but there was some vacillation about what to call the men's A-level: some years it was simply called the “A-level” and other years the “men's A-level,” until 2005 when the latter was settled on. The concern is that while, for example, a junior or senior player can enter the A-level if he wishes, a woman cannot enter the men's A-level. Prior

to 1998, when it was simply called the “A-level,” women did compete against men, and at least had a chance at winning the top prize. Every year the programme lists the past A-level champions and in an attempt at equality includes the women's champions alongside the men, but the men's trophy is about three times larger than the women's. Other contests have dealt with this question in other ways, and this will be discussed further in the chapter's conclusion.

A similar problem arose when the number of non-Japanese contestants began to increase. In the 2010 programme a “foreigner” category was listed for the 2011 contest, with the stipulation that Japanese living abroad could also compete in this category. The rationale was that the number of non-Japanese players was increasing, and if they lived outside of Japan and had to study on their own, they were at a disadvantage. The non-Japanese who were present at the 2010 contest, however, saw it as a ghettoizing action and argued that it should be dropped, which it was.

Criteria

Contest pieces are *kyokubiki*, or newly-composed solo instrumental works, generally based on “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” the most famous traditional song of the region. “Composition” here largely involves arranging standard riffs within a fairly rigid structure, and is actually far less important than the execution of the piece. Speed, accuracy, tone, and the ability to execute and seamlessly combine standard riffs and techniques are all among the criteria on which competitors are judged. As mentioned above, C-level beginners have two-and-a-half minutes, and advanced A-level players have four minutes to demonstrate their mastery of this checklist of techniques, so there is very little room for personal expression.

The criteria by which contestants are judged in Hirosaki are not explicitly listed anywhere on

the programme or website. Daijō Kazuo, in a newspaper column from the early 1980s, listed three rather vague criteria: a high level of technique, with no misses, in other words, a balance of difficulty with accuracy; mastery of timbre, from heavy striking to light playing; and adding something new to the music (Daijō 2000, 12-13). One of the judges has suggested three related criteria: the initial tuning of the instrument; precise intonation; and the accuracy of the plectrum (not missing strings, or hitting others accidentally). He also gave some insight into the actual scoring process, noting that each player starts with one hundred points, and loses points for each mistake. For example three points might be deducted for missing a string, or five points for being out of tune from the start. However, as mentioned above, in the opening remarks of the awards ceremony in 2015, Sasamori Takefusa stated that apart from technique, there are harder to define characteristics that must also be present in a winning performance: *chikara-zuyoi* (bold[ness]), *takumashisa* (courage), soul, and loneliness, and it is unclear how these less tangible aspects fit into the above scoring process.⁴³

The contest in Nagoya lists ten criteria in its programme which, while not explicitly mentioned at all contests, are certainly things that all judges consider important. For this reason they are worth listing here. The criteria and their explanations might be translated as follows:

String tuning: beyond just being in tune, the *sawari* buzzing should be perfectly set up.

Plectrum handling: contrast of quiet striking near the edge of the skin and loud striking near the bridge, and other plectrum techniques.

Control of sound: there should be no extraneous sounds being made, or accidental damping of strings.

Accuracy of pitches

Quiet playing: including reducing the sound by placing one's pinky on the bridge. The sound should be clear, not muddy, and the technique should be used naturally in the course of the piece.

Volume (force): the ability to create a consistent, solid sound

Rhythm: unnatural rhythms should not be used; strong and weak beats should not be confused.

Degree of difficulty: successfully using difficult phrases or riffs.

Composition

Originality: ingenuity of phrases

⁴³ In less gender-neutral terms, *chikara-zuyoi* might be translated “muscular” or “masculine,” and *takumashisa* as “brawniness,” which suggests why the default winner in Hirosaki is always a man.

(All Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee 2010, 5)

Contestants' final scores are determined by dropping the highest and lowest judges' scores, and averaging the remaining scores. Since 2014 the scores of all contestants winning awards have been posted online, and prior to that for several years they had been posted in the foyer of the hall between the end of the contest and the beginning of the awards ceremony. This still left time for the scores to be altered behind closed doors, and this lack of transparency has been addressed by several contests in different ways, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Participants

When the contest first started, it was made clear that anyone, regardless of his or her affiliation or school, could enter. This was in sharp contrast to the often sectarian nature of traditional Japanese music organizations that are strictly divided along *ryū-ha*, or “school,” lines, and often forbid their members to play with those of other schools. However, in 2005 self-taught players were no longer accepted in Hirosaki, further evidence to many that the contest was becoming increasingly institutionalized. They appear to have recently softened their stance on this point, as the 2015 entry form has a space for affiliation, but indicates that filling it in is “optional.”

As there are a limited number of hours in the two days in which the contest is held, there are a limited number of spaces for entrants, which are filled on a “first come, first served” basis. It has run at almost full capacity for a number of years, though not every category is filled every year. The number of spots available in any given category is listed on the entry form and has varied over the years to reflect contestant demand. In recent years the number of beginner-level players of various ages has increased, as has the number of players in the song accompaniment category.

The total number of contestants in 1986 was 140; by 1999 this had almost doubled to 274, and peaked in 2006 at 449 (Daijō 2000, 36).⁴⁴

Most contestants are enthusiasts with no illusions about winning the big prize, and use the contest preparation as a means to improve their playing. Children who enter have usually grown up in a house where *Tsugaru shamisen* is played, but, especially since the boom of the early 2000s, it is not uncommon for teenager players to have come to the music on their own.

With the appearance of very young entrants from the late 1990s, it is possible to track the progress of contestants through the levels. Asano Shō first appeared in the contest in the D-level in 1997 at seven years old. In 1998 he placed in the D-level, and move to the C-level in 1999, placing here too. In 2000, at 10 years old, he moved up to the B-level category, finally winning it in 2002. In 2003 he moved to the men's A-level, placing that year and winning it for the next three years, to retire from the contest in 2006 at an unprecedented 16 years of age. Shirafuji Hikari followed a similar trajectory, first appearing as a ten-year-old in the Junior category in 2000, then winning it in 2002 to move to the C-level. Winning the C-level in 2004, she jumped to the women's A-level in 2005, and won it in 2007, 2008, and 2010. Both of these players have been exceptionally successful, but many lesser known players have moved through the levels in similar ways.

Awards

The winners of each category get a trophy, and winning groups and A-level champions get an unspecified cash award as well. High-quality instruments or cash prizes have also been awarded to winners of three consecutive A-levels. Until 2007 Columbia Music Entertainment released a

⁴⁴ Here and in every case in this chapter where a citation is not given, the information comes from direct analysis of the programmes from the contest in question.

CD of winning performances, but has stopped doing so as the company is no longer connected to the contest. The monetary prizes are insignificant, given the expense of studying the instrument and even traveling to this remote city, but the prestige of winning and the opportunities a title opens up for a player outweigh any compensation he or she receives at the awards ceremony. Almost every men's A-level champion, and many of the women's A-level champions, are successful performers or heads of their own schools today.

Winners

In the thirty-four-year history of the contest the “*champion*” (the English word is used) has always been a man. The average winner’s age is about twenty-three; the youngest winner was fourteen (2003) and the oldest was thirty-six (1989). In the woman’s A-level category, which has existed since 1998, the youngest winners were seventeen (2000, 2007) and the oldest was thirty-six (2005); the average age is about twenty-four. Hirosaki allows a maximum of three consecutive wins, at which point the champion is forced to retire. This has actually occurred six times in the contest's history, where multiple wins are the norm in the men's A-level: Shibata Masato won a total of five times, and Shibutani Kazuo a total of four. There are four three-time winners, five two-time winners, and only three one-time winners. As a result, in the contest's thirty-four-year history, there have only been fourteen *champions*. The women's A-level has much less repetition, with one four-time winner, one three-time winner, and two two-time winners in its eighteen-year history.

Distinguishing Features

Hirosaki's stature as the oldest contest meant that other contests had to find ways to

distinguish themselves from it.⁴⁵ As will be seen in the section below on Kanagi, the contest in that town did this by appealing to tradition, as the purported birthplace of the genre. For almost two decades Hirosaki was clearly the dominant contest. However, when a third contest, established in Tokyo in 1998, began to challenge that dominance, Hirosaki started to define itself as the home of *authentic Tsugaru shamisen*. In Tokyo the winner is generally the player with the greatest mastery of technique, while in Hirosaki very good players have suffered for stepping outside of the bounds of what the judges determine to be authentic *Tsugaru shamisen*. The writer of the essay in the 2001 programme justified this traditionalist stance by invoking *joppari* - a word from the Tsugaru dialect used to describe the stubborn, conservative nature of the local people (Tsutakawa 2001). In his 2015 awards ceremony speech, Sasamori explicitly stated that while players must have the courage to try new things, one could not deviate too far from the proper style, and he wrote in the essay from the 2003 programme that certain rhythms and scales – expressions of the physical geography (*fudō*) and resultant folkways of Tsugaru itself – were necessary if the music was to be considered *Tsugaru shamisen* (Sasamori 2003).

This invocation of place is the main way that Hirosaki asserts its legitimacy. As mentioned in chapter two, the concept of *fudō*, the idea that local and national culture is shaped by environment, is deeply embedded in the modern Japanese consciousness. The short essays included in the yearly programmes and the introductory remarks each year never fail to point out that *Tsugaru shamisen* was born in the harsh climate of the Tsugaru region. The idea that *Tsugaru shamisen* comes from the area and needs to continue to be nurtured in the area has a long history. Kida Rinshōei, one of the three early recording stars of the genre, said that his playing suffered

⁴⁵ For the sake of brevity, I will refer to contests by their location rather than their full titles. In context, “Hirosaki” and “Tokyo” refer respectively to the “Tsugaru Shamisen National Contest” and the “Tsugaru Shamisen Concours National Tournament.”

when he moved to Tokyo because the harsh chill of Tsugaru was needed for a soulful sound, and Agatsuma Hiromitsu, one of the stars of the first generation to come up through the contests, was born and raised near Tokyo, and was quoted as saying “A person not raised on the water of Tsugaru cannot make the sound of Tsugaru” (Matsuki 1994; Honma 2001, 112). This sentiment continued to be echoed for quite some time, though it has lost some of its force in the last decade.

Prestige

While Hirosaki's contest enjoyed dominance for almost twenty years, and is still considered a prestigious title, it has suffered from a lack of transparency almost since its inception. There were grumblings early on that Yamada's students were winning each year; while Kinoshita Shinichi's victories in 1986 and 1987 went some way towards disproving this, many champions after him were also Yamada's students. In 1994 Agatsuma Hiromitsu controversially lost to Shibutani Kazuo, who was being groomed to become Yamada's successor. Matsuki reports that the audience booed at the awards ceremony that year (Matsuki 2011, 97). In the contest's thirty-four year history, players affiliated with Yamada have won sixteen times – just under half of the contests – which does raise questions. To be fair to Yamada, he may have consciously or unconsciously largely been using his own style of playing as the standard against which he judged all young players, which would have given his students a wide advantage over other contestants. Part of the distrust of the contest's results is due to the question of the competency of the judges. As stated above, in the early years the judges, who were generally not experts, deferred to Yamada. The fact that in recent years musical experts have replaced representatives of the media companies sponsoring the contest suggests that attempts are being made to address

this point.

At any rate, there was enough dissatisfaction in the *Tsugaru shamisen* community that a third national contest was established in Tokyo in 1998. In 1998 and 1999, players freely competed in both events, but by 2001 the new contest had gained sufficient momentum to threaten Hirosaki's dominance, and that year contestants made their allegiances known. Of the twenty-three men and women who placed in the A-level categories in Hirosaki between 1997 and 2000, only one appeared in both Tokyo and Hirosaki in 2001. The tension between the two contests has gradually relaxed somewhat, and by 2010 about a third of the participants in Tokyo also appeared in Hirosaki.

2. The *Tsugaru Shamisen* All-Japan Kanagi Contest

Kanagi is a small town located about forty kilometres north of Hirosaki. It is the birthplace of Akimoto Nitarō – better known as Nitabō – the blind *shamisen* player who Daijō Kazuo has long, and rather unconvincingly, argued is the sole originator of the genre. To get to Kanagi from Hirosaki by train takes about two hours, with a transfer at Goshogawara City to an infrequent but quaint one-car local line. Looking out the window one sees a flat plain filled mostly with apple orchards and rice fields, and Mount Iwaki on the horizon dominating the landscape. The town itself is very small, and it is less than a ten-minute walk through mostly residential streets from the station to the Kanagi Town Citizen's Hall where the contest is currently held.⁴⁶

There is an institutional atmosphere to the building, which is more like a school than an event hall. There is a lobby where staff hands out programmes, rooms off to the left where noodles are served, and to the right the main hall, which could easily be mistaken for a school gymnasium.

⁴⁶ Its population stood at 10, 557 in 2005, just before it was incorporated into Goshogawara City (Brinkhoff 2015).

There are no chairs, but most of the floor has been covered for this event with *goza*, traditional straw matting, and visitors who do not want to stand at the back or along the walls take off their shoes and find a space to sit in the matted area. The raised and curtained stage runs along the front of the brightly lit hall. Compared to Hirosaki, more of the audience seems to be locals that have come for some entertainment, and this adds to the general relaxed, small town atmosphere of the event. This atmosphere is one of the things that set it apart from all of the other national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests.

The first “*Tsugaru Shamisen All-Japan Kanagi Contest*” (*Tsugaru-jamisen Zen Nihon Kanagi Taikai*) was held on May fourth, 1989 on an outdoor stage on the grounds of Ashino prefectural park in the town of Kanagi (see Illustration 4.06) (Kon et al. 2009, 2). It continued to be held here until 2002 except for four occasions on which, due to rain, it was moved indoors to the Kanagi elementary school gymnasium. In 2003 it finally found a permanent indoor location in Kanagi Town Citizen's Hall, described above. Also since 2003 it has been a two-day event, held on the annual national holidays of May fourth and fifth each year (Kanagi *Genki* Club NPO 2010).

Daijō Kazuo

Daijō Kazuo (b. 1928) was raised in a wealthy family in Hirosaki City, and heard stories as a child about the wandering *shamisen* players from his mother (Suda, et al. 1998, 121). In 1959, as a young writer, his interest in the history of the *Tsugaru shamisen* was reignited when Kida Rinshōei, one of the giants of the genre, moved in to his neighbourhood. As almost no information on the subject existed at the time, Daijō began interviewing players living in



Illustration 4.06: Kanagi's original outdoor contest (Sudo 1998, 126)

Hirosaki. By asking *Tsugaru shamisen* players who they learned to play from, and then asking those players in turn who they had learned from, he claims that he was able to trace the lineages back to Nitabō (ibid., 122). However, according to a few sources who would rather remain anonymous on this point, Daijō found a lot of information in those interviews from the early 1960s that he has not shared, likely because it contradicts his Nitabō narrative. Daijō has written a number of non-scholarly books and articles in which Nitabō figures prominently, and he played a large part in the founding of a *Tsugaru shamisen* museum in Kanagi, discussed below, and the creation of *NITABOH*, an animated feature-length film, both of which forward the Nitabō narrative.

He was also involved in Hirosaki's contest from very early on, in an organizational capacity

and as a head judge. He left this contest to found his own in Kanagi, motivated, he has written, by what he saw as sponsorship irregularities which he felt compromised the integrity of the 1988 Hirosaki contest (Daijō 2000, 104). Others have suggested, however, that he started the contest due to other unspecified difficulties with Yamada Chisato (Matsuki 2011, 98).

History

Though he lives in Hirosaki, he decided to establish his contest in Kanagi due to the aforementioned connection to Nitabō. Holding the contest in Kanagi differentiates it from Hirosaki as it focuses on what Daijō, at least, identifies as the roots of the music. That it was held outside (in good weather) for the first fourteen years of its existence was surely also meant to evoke the image of itinerant *bosama* playing at the gates of people's homes or on temple grounds.

While Hirosaki's contest had never focused heavily on the history of the music, insisting instead that it was a living art form, Daijō sought from the beginning to connect Kanagi's contest to the music's origins. In an article written in 1990 he distanced himself and his contest from the modern, flashy *Tsugaru shamisen* that was being played in Hirosaki, stating that he was not a performer, but that he played *bosama*-style *shamisen*, and poorly at that (Daijō 2000, 132). He went on to say that he had started this contest for the advancement of *Tsugaru shamisen*, as a place where contestants would be judged only on their own merits, regardless of affiliation, and that he was not the head of his own school, and had no students (and so, unlike Yamada, no vested interest in who won). This was partly a justification for his contest and partly a criticism of Hirosaki's judging irregularities that had seen one of Yamada's students win almost every year to that point. The first-place award at Kanagi is called the Nitabō award, and Nitabō is referenced

in all promotional material about the contest. In the booklets published for the fifteenth and twentieth anniversaries of the contest, essays by local experts and short greetings from past winners all revolve around the common themes of the contest's connection to Nitabō and the birthplace of the *Tsugaru shamisen* (Kon et al. 2003; Kon et al. 2009).

Satozukuri

As much as the location lends the contest a sense of authenticity, the town has begun to use its designation as the birthplace of the *Tsugaru shamisen* as a tourist draw. Kanagi also happens to be the hometown of Dazai Osamu (born Tsushima Shūji, 1909-1948), a large figure in early twentieth-century Japanese literature. Dazai, like most Japanese writers of his time, came from a wealthy family, and the imposing Tsushima family home has since been turned in to a museum dedicated to Dazai. In 2000 the *Tsugaru-jamisen kaikan*, a small *Tsugaru shamisen* museum with an adjoining performance space, was opened next door to Dazai's family home (Matsuki 2011, 149). They share a restaurant and gift shop and together manage to draw tour buses and independent tourists to the town. This is part of a nation-wide movement known as *satozukuri*, or “village building,” which attempts to revive rural areas that have been depopulated by the general trend of flight to urban areas (Robertson 1998; Clammer 2001). The contest's main organizer, the Incorporated NPO Kanagi Pep Club, is explicitly defined as a *satozukuri* organization, and lists *satozukuri* as one of the contest's aims. (Kanagi *Genki* Club NPO 2006)

Funding

Programmes indicate that the contest is run by the *Tsugaru shamisen* All-Japan Kanagi Contest Executive Committee, and the NPO Kanagi Pep Club is listed as the chief organizer.

Funding for the contest comes from two sources: participants' entrance fees, and the sponsors listed on the programme. There is no entrance fee for audience members at Kanagi. In 1989 solo participants paid 3000 yen to enter and groups paid 1500 yen per member; in 2010 this had only risen to 3500 and 2000 yen respectively (Daijō 2000, 104; 2010 entry application form).

The *Tsugaru shamisen* all-Japan Kanagi contest shares many sponsors with Hirosaki's *Tsugaru shamisen* national contest. The programmes that I have managed to gain access to list the same newspaper, television, and radio companies mentioned in the previous section on Hirosaki: The Tōōnippō and Michinoku Newspapers; The Aomori Television Broadcasting Company (ATV) and the Hirosaki branch of NHK Broadcasting; and FM Aomori and Radio Aomori Broadcasting (RAB) are all sponsors in Kanagi too. In addition to these, there are the Kanagi town education committee, the Kanagi Tourist Association, and the Kanagi Merchants and Industry Association. In 2005 Kanagi town was incorporated into Goshogawara City, with corresponding changes in the names of some of the sponsors, like the Goshogawara City Tourist Association, Goshogawara Merchants and Industry Association. In addition, the incorporated NPO Kanagi Pep Club (*NPO Hōnin Kanagi Genki Club*) was added in 2006 (Kanagi *Genki Club* NPO 2006).

Adjudication

The judges are not listed on the one-page programmes handed out to audience members, but a thirteen-page application for the 2010 contest did list a number of proposed judges, which included Daijō himself, the branch heads for the Tōō Daily and Michinoku newspapers, the head of Hirosaki City East Citizens' Hall, a member of the *Nihon Min'yō* Association, a *koto* player and a guitarist. This list is representative of the sorts of judges I have seen in my five visits to

Kanagi, and it should be noted that only two of the seven judges could be said to have any kind of professional connection to *Tsugaru shamisen*. Both Hirosaki and Kanagi have been criticized on this point, and some of the more recently established contests have striven to address this by appointing respected *Tsugaru shamisen* players as judges.

Categories

The first contest in 1989 had five categories: an elementary and middle school level which included children up to fifteen years of age, a high school and university level, a B-level, an A-level, and a group category. These categories turned out to be an awkward way to divide skill levels for this sort of competition, so by the third year elementary school students had their own level, and middle school and high school students were put together, while university students were subsumed into either A or B levels, depending on their ability. A seniors' level was also added that year. By 1993 the group category had been split into three sections: elementary, middle, and high school students; groups with ten or fewer members; and groups of eleven or more members.

This was essentially how things remained until 2008, the twentieth anniversary of the contest, when the A-level became a much more demanding “tournament-style” contest. This involved rounds in which pairs of contestants played their own versions of one of the “big five” *Tsugaru min'yō*. The piece to be played in any given round was literally picked out of a hat by an audience member moments before the round began, and at the end of each round the number of remaining competitors was halved, as the winners of each pairing went on to compete against another contestant. Recently, a “seeding” system was introduced whereby the top eight players from the previous year are seeds, which means that they each play against newer players, rather

than each other, in the first round in order to increase the chance that the best players go on to compete in later rounds (*Tsugaru shamisen* All Japan Kanagi Contest Executive Committee 2010, 4).

This tournament-style contest also meant that from 2008 on, A-level contestants needed to be able to play their own versions of all of the “big five” *Tsugaru min'yō*. Prior to this, competitors at any of the *Tsugaru shamisen* competitions only needed to be able to play a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” to win the contest, which had the unintended consequence of creating a generation of young players who were only interested in playing that one piece, and in fact might not be able to competently play anything else. As will be seen later in the chapter, several national contests have attempted to address this unforeseen development. It is clear that it was a problem: in 2006 there were forty-one players in the A-level category in Kanagi, but in 2010, two years after the introduction of the A-level tournament, that number had dropped to sixteen. Competitors that had not mastered the “big five” *Tsugaru min'yō* pieces were forced to play in the B-level category, and the swelling numbers of B-level players led to the creation of a C-level category, which was added in 2009, for players with five or fewer years of experience (Kanagi *Genki Club* NPO 2010). It should also be noted that Kanagi differs from some of the other national *Tsugaru shamisen* competitions in that it has never had men's and women's categories.

Criteria

In terms of contest pieces, solo players have always been encouraged to play a version of any *Tsugaru min'yō*, and while most competitors choose to play a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” in some years up to thirty percent have played other pieces. As mentioned above, since 2008 all A-level players have to be prepared to play the “big five” *Tsugaru min'yō*.

Specific judging criteria are not explicitly listed, but the 2010 application form states that an understanding of the songs that these instrumental pieces are based on, competency in the basics of performance, and the handling of the plectrum are among the things that the judges will focus on. Nitabō was supposed to have often said “Imitation is something that even a monkey can do” and “Play your own *shamisen*, don't imitate blindly,” and Daijō has made much of this sentiment (Suda et al. 1998, 57, 69, 95). It is somewhat paradoxical that this contest that considers the origins of the genre so important also places such a premium on innovation. Yoshida Kenichi, of the Yoshida Brothers, and Nitta Masahiro are two examples of players who won at Kanagi (and later at Tokyo) but were considered too far outside the tradition to win at Hirosaki. The question of tradition and innovation will be considered further in the conclusion of this chapter.

Participants

The number of contestants has steadily grown over the course of the contest's existence. In 1989 there were thirty-two solo and four group performances; by 2002 there were 109 solo and thirteen group performances (Kon et al. 2009, 2-14). In 2010 the numbers had risen further still to 182 solo players and twenty-one groups, and in 2015 there were 152 solo players and twenty-four groups. It should be noted too that Kanagi has always been open to anyone, specifically stating that one need not belong to an established school to enter, which, for a time, was not the case in Hirosaki.

Awards

In line with the contest's attempts to connect itself to the history of the instrument, three of the A-level awards are named after historical figures from the *Tsugaru shamisen* world: the first

place award is the “Nitabō award,” and two special, non-ranked A-level awards are named after Shirakawa Gumpachirō and Kurokawa Momotarō. All categories have first, second and third-place awards, all first place awards have an unspecified monetary prize, and every entrant gets a participation award (*Tsugaru shamisen* All Japan Kanagi Contest Executive Committee 2010). As in Hirosaki, a large number of awards are handed out relative to the number of contestants: in the five solo categories there are a total of forty awards, and in the three group categories there are a total of seventeen awards (Kon et al. 2010, 14). Over the last decade there have been 160 solo contestants on average each year, which means one in four contestants got an award. In the same period there have been about twenty groups on average per year, which means that almost every group that entered went away with an award (Kanagi *Genki* Club NPO 2010). Clearly, the awards at this contest, as at others, serve a motivational function.

Winners

The youngest winner was Agatsuma Hiromitsu, who won the first contest, in 1989, at the age of fifteen, and went on to win at Hirosaki, and become the second most well-known player, after the Yoshida Brothers, in the new millennium. There have been fourteen winners in total, two of whom won twice. The oldest winner was Horio Taima, who was forty-two in 2013. Just over half of the winners have been in their twenties, and the average age of winners is twenty-five. Two women have won Kanagi: Nishimura Shinobu in 2005 at seventeen, and Takeda Kanami in 2011 at twenty-one. There have been two three-time winners and four two-time winners. Not all winners leave on top: a look at Kanagi's history shows that several first place winners have returned only to place second, third, or lower in subsequent contests (*ibid.*).

Distinguishing Features

Besides being set in the purported “birthplace of the *Tsugaru shamisen*,” which, as has been discussed above, lends the contest a certain authority in the eyes of some, Kanagi stands out for the recently adopted tournament-style competition for the A-level category, which turned what can be a rather dry contest into a compelling spectacle. The intimacy of the small hall also distinguishes Kanagi from other National contests. Smaller contests held by individual schools for their own members have a similar feeling of intimacy, but the general level of performance is not at all comparable to Kanagi.

Prestige

Kanagi's contest has always been a smaller event than Hirosaki's. The respectable number of participants that it enjoys is largely due to its temporal and geographic proximity to Hirosaki's contest. Particularly prior to the 2000s, many players saw it as a less intimidating place to try competing before attempting to take the stage at Hirosaki. Having already made the long trip to Aomori prefecture, many people competing in or simply attending the competition in Hirosaki stay an extra day to go to Kanagi. Players have freely competed in both contests since their inception, except for a very few of Yamada Chisato's closest students, who may have quietly sat out Kanagi out of loyalty to their teacher. Looking through Kanagi's contestant history, many of the young stars of *Tsugaru shamisen* who went on to be national champions at the more prestigious Hirosaki and Tokyo contests, including Agatsuma Hiromitsu, Yoshida Ryōichirō and Kenichi, Nitta Masahiro, Hanawa Chie, Abe Kinzaburō, Abe Ginzaburō, Hanawa Chie, Yamaguchi Kōjin, Kasai Yoshiyuki, Shirafuji Hikari, and Takeda Kanami, made their national debuts at Kanagi (Kon et al. 2009, 15-31; Kanagi *Genki Club* NPO 2010). Likewise, winning in

Kanagi often seems to be a step towards the ultimate goal of winning in Hirosaki, Tokyo, or, more recently, Aomori. Agatsuma Hiromitsu, who won Kanagi's first contest at age fifteen, said in his biography that he felt at that point that he still needed to win at Hirosaki to be considered the best in Japan (Honma 2001, 109), and after twenty-seven years, Kanagi's unofficial status as a second-tier contest remains.

3. Tokyo's *Tsugaru Shamisen Concours* National Contest

History

The first *Tsugaru shamisen Concours* National Contest (*Tsugaru-jamisen Concours Zenkoku Taikai*) was held on April fifth, 1998 in the storied Hibiya Kōkaidō Public Hall, sandwiched between the upscale Ginza shopping district and the Imperial Palace in the centre of old Tokyo, where it has been held ever since, generally on the first Sunday in April.⁴⁷ Not coincidentally, this is when the cherry blossoms tend to bloom in Tokyo, so most years' attendees are able to see the blossoms in Hibiya park as they can a month later in Hirosaki. The four-storey concert hall, built in 1929 with a 2,074 seat capacity, is one of the oldest and most prestigious in Tokyo (Hibiya-kokaido).

The contest was organized by the Japan *Min'yō* Association (*Nihon min'yō kyōkai*), with an executive committee composed of many of the biggest names in *Tsugaru shamisen*, including Oyama Mitsuō, Takahashi Yūjirō, Sawada Katsuaki, and Fujita Junichi, and other influential *min'yō* players like Kyōgoku Toshinori and Kikuchi Tankyō (Miura 1998). The number of young *Tsugaru shamisen* players had been growing steadily through the 1990s, thanks in no small part

⁴⁷ This contest is usually referred to by participants as the Hibiya contest but for the sake of clarity I refer to it as the Tokyo contest throughout this dissertation.

to the contest in Hirosaki. As much as that contest had helped to foster a new generation of players, there had been grumblings since its inception about unfair judging practices, described above in the section on Hirosaki, and addressing this problem was a large part of the impetus to create this new contest in Tokyo.

Funding

The contest's organizing body, the Japan *Min'yō* Association (*Nihon Min'yō Kyōkai*), is the largest *min'yō* organization, with over 40,000 members, and a sizable headquarters in the south of Tokyo that, among other things, oversees a number of national *min'yō*-related contests each year (Hughes 2008, 278). They are listed as the main sponsor in each year's programme and on the contest website (*Nihon Min'yō Kyōkai* 2010). As with Hirosaki, funding comes from several different sources including official sponsors, advertisers, entrance and participation fees, and merchandise.

The entrance fee for audience members is about 5000 yen for reserved seating on the first floor, about 3000 yen for general admission to the first floor, and about 2000 yen for general admission to the second floor. Contestants pay a fee of about 5000 yen to enter the contest. In the early years the contest had four other co-sponsors: two other *min'yō* organizations, the Japan Native Place *Min'yō* Association (*Nihon Kyōdo Min'yō Kyōkai*), and the All-Osaka *Min'yō Association* (*Zen Osaka Min'yō Kyōkai*); and two newspapers, the Yomiuri and the Hōchi. Since 2001 only the newspapers have stayed on as sponsors. Unlike Hirosaki and Kanagi, there is no local government sponsorship, perhaps because the incentive to promote this traditional art form is not as strong outside of its area of origin.

The programme is a glossy twenty-four page magazine-sized booklet, the last eight pages of

which are taken up with the expected advertisements for instrument makers, *shamisen* lessons, and other upcoming contests put on by the Japan *Min'yō* Association, and a few contest-related businesses like trophy shops and the event's videographer. Many of the same merchants who appear in Hirosaki also have booths in the lobby of the Hibiya Kōkaidō Public Hall, and the organization also sells DVDs of the winning performances of each of the past contests.

Adjudication

From its founding the *Tsugaru shamisen Concours* National Contest relied on the reputations of the people connected with it, and in its first few years there were as many as sixteen highly qualified people on the judging panel, including all of the most respected living players of *Tsugaru shamisen* and the heads of many *min'yō* schools. Essentially a *Who's Who* of the *Tsugaru shamisen* world, it was a show of force meant to challenge the dominance of Hirosaki, which, as mentioned above, it ultimately did.⁴⁸ By the early 2000s it had in fact established itself as the dominant contest, and since that time there have been a more reasonable eight or nine judges in any given year, all from the same prestigious pool.

Categories

In the contest's first year there were only four categories: junior group, general group, junior solo, and general solo. A women's category was introduced in the second year, and a senior's category in the third, but each of them lasted only one year. In 2002 group competition was dropped altogether, leaving only solo players in two categories, but since 2004 the competition has been divided into elementary school aged children, middle school aged children, and a

⁴⁸ The list includes Oyama Mitsuō, Takahashi Yūjirō, Fujita Junichi, Sawada Katsuaki, Sasaki Sadakatsu, Kyōgoku Toshinori, Goshiki Ryūji, and Narita Takeshi.

general category for everyone else. This experimenting with categories seems to happen at every contest, and here one can perceive a struggle between the initial intention of keeping things simple and the desire to motivate contestants by handing out more awards. The Japan *min'yō* Association invests a lot of effort in its other activities in nurturing an interest in Japanese folk music in children, and this mandate can clearly be seen in the organization of categories in this contest. Since 2007 there has been an extra competition between the four top-scoring players from the general category to decide their final placement.

Schedule

The contest programme features a significant number of non-contest performances by top singers, players and dancers, all connected to the Japan *min'yō* Association. A typical schedule starts at ten in the morning with a large group performance of anywhere from fifty to one hundred or more players, followed by the elementary and middle school categories, then a performance by the previous year's three winners and a few songs with vocals, *shamisen*, drums, and possibly dancers. Around noon an official greeting is given, and the presentation of the awards to the young contestants takes place. From about one in the afternoon the general category begins. There are usually about eighty contestants in this category, or about four hours of playing with a short break in the middle. At about five in the evening the four top players perform again to decide the ultimate order of winners of the contest, and this is followed by a half hour of folk song performances much like those earlier in the day. After this, the awards are handed out, and closing remarks are presented to finish the day off by six o'clock.

Criteria

The criteria for the Tokyo contest are not specifically listed anywhere, but in general the trend is a relative favouring of sheer mastery of technique over adherence to what might be considered a traditional playing style. In practice, the difference between the two is very hard to quantify and has shifted over time, but the winners of the first two Tokyo contests – Ishikawa Hajime and Yoshida Kenichi – had both competed in Hirosaki several times and lost, it was said by many at the time, because they played too far outside the bounds of tradition. As with the other contests, almost all of the competitors play their own *kyokubiki* version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.”

Participants

In the contest's first year there were seventy-five solo entrants and ten groups with a total of 180 members. In each subsequent year the number of solo players increased and the number of groups dropped, until in 2002, in its fifth year, the group categories were discontinued. The number of solo contestants has levelled off at about 130, which fills the available time for the one-day contests. Being a one-day contest, and being centrally located and easily accessed from anywhere in the country, the number of applicants is far greater than the number of available spaces. Unlike other contests, rather than filling the spaces on a first come, first served basis, Tokyo requires applicants to send a recording to demonstrate a minimum level of competence, which means that the level of performance is quite high, particularly in the general category.

Awards

For the first three years of the contest, there were three prizes given out in each category, so there was a very low ratio of awards to solo contestants compared to the other contests: as few as

one in twenty. Starting with the fourth contest in 2001, the number of awards greatly increased, increasing the ratio of awards to contestants, particularly in the junior categories where the effect of winning an award is likely strongest. From 2001 until 2012, there were first, second, and third place awards; two awards each under the titles “judges' encouragement,” “performance,” “fighting bravely,” and “effort;” and five “excellence” awards. From 2013 until the present the number has been reduced somewhat with first, second, and third place awards, two “judges' encouragement” awards, and five “excellence” awards.

As with the other contests, there is some prize money handed out, but the amounts are relatively insignificant compared to the cachet of winning the contest. The programme for 2000 lists the following values: in the general category, 200,000 yen for first place, and 50,000 yen for second place, and in the senior's category 50,000 yen for first place and 30,000 yen for second place. The 2001 and 2002 programmes also list a 200,000 yen award for first place in the general category, but do not mention any other prizes, and subsequent programmes make no mention of specific cash awards, though they are still in place.

Winners

Tokyo does not publish the ages of its contestants, but since many of them have competed at contests that do, it is still possible to determine the general trends. In line with Hirosaki and Kanagi, the average age of winners in the general category is twenty-three; the youngest winner was sixteen-year-old Shibata Masato in 2003, and the oldest winner was Habu Misao, at forty, in 2013. Winners are generally in their late teens or early twenties, with only two having won in their thirties or forties. There have been four female champions, more than at any other contest,

and they are on average significantly older than their male counterparts.⁴⁹

Reason for Existing

Miura Shumon, the head of the contest's executive committee, writes in a one-page greeting in the first year's programme that the contest was started in order to foster the further development of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, to advance Japanese culture, and to nurture young players' abilities and confidence (Miura 1998, 1). This greeting is repeated in subsequent programmes with minor changes, like references to the *Tsugaru shamisen* boom in mainstream Japanese culture in the early 2000s (Miura 2001, 1; *ibid.*, 2006, 1). The number of people playing the *Tsugaru shamisen* had been growing since the late 1980s, and Miura notes in the first programme that by 1998 it was the most popular genre in the *min'yō* world (Matsuki 2001, 98; Miura 2001, 1). This growing popularity may have been enough to motivate the Japan *Min'yō* Association to consider adding a *Tsugaru shamisen* contest to the list of contests it was already organizing, and the general feeling of discontent with the results of the contest in Hirosaki would have only added to this.

Distinguishing Features

The *Tsugaru shamisen Concours National Contest* has distinguished itself from its two predecessors in several ways: location, the calibre of its judges, making a qualifying recording part of the application process, the final battle to determine the champion, and the establishment of an official YouTube channel where extensive video footage of the contest is posted.

It was the first national *Tsugaru shamisen* contest to be established outside of the Tsugaru

⁴⁹ Matsubashi Reika (thirty-one) in 2007, Shibata Yuri (twenty-two) in 2008, Habu Misao (forty) in 2013, and Suzuki Rie (twenty-eight) in 2015.

region, which in itself distinguished it from the other two existing contests. As the genre was still strongly connected to the region at the time, however, this was a disadvantage. It was overcome, in part, by appointing professional players as judges, all of whom, unlike executives from newspaper or television companies, were unquestionably qualified for their role. Eventually all of the other contests followed suit and made efforts to improve the calibre of their judges. Another feature of the contest that has since been adopted in one form or another by some of the other contests is the “battle” at the end of the day by the four best players to determine their final placements. This adds an element of focus and drama to the contest format, which, through the sheer number of contestants, can be tedious to sit through. In 2015, for the first time, the Japan *Min'yō* Association posted much of the contest online on their own newly-created YouTube channel. Individual performances from various contests have been posted on YouTube almost since its inception, but the officially sanctioned videos of entire categories being posted now are new. This is another way that the contest organizers are striving to keep up with the times and promote the music (*Kōeki Zaidanhōjin Nihon Min'yō Kyōkai* 2015).

Prestige

When the *Tsugaru shamisen Concours National Contest* started in 1998, Hirosaki had already been running for sixteen years, and was something of an institution, so setting up a third contest was a bit of a risk. As was mentioned above, holding a contest outside of the Tsugaru region at the time was also a bold move, as the music was still very strongly tied to its place of origin. Within a few years, Tokyo's contest had established itself as not only a viable contest, but in most people's eyes, the most prestigious title in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world. There were at least four factors that contributed to this.

First, it had the overwhelming support of the leaders of the *Tsugaru shamisen* and *min'yō* worlds, including some of the same people who had previously helped promote Hirosaki's contest (Matsuki 2001, 98). Second, the calibre of the judges was very high, and the adjudication was perceived as fair. Third, the central location made travelling to the contest a much less daunting prospect. Fourth, holding the contest on a Sunday in early April meant a much smaller time commitment for contestants and their families. Part of the reason that Hirosaki's contest was held during the block of national holidays in May known as *Golden Week* every year was that it would be difficult or impossible for many people to make the trip in a two-day weekend. However, *Golden Week* is also the only chance that many Japanese get to travel at all, so attending the contest at Hirosaki year after year meant, for many people, forgoing any other vacation travel plans. The idea of being able to compete in a national contest and take a trip somewhere in *Golden Week* too was no doubt very appealing for a lot of people. The contest draws players equally from all over the country, unlike more recently established national contests, which tend to have a higher percentage of local participants.

Controversy

Unaware of any power struggle happening in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world, I made my yearly trip to Hirosaki in 2001 and noticed that almost none of the best players that I had become accustomed to seeing were attending that year. Asking around afterwards, I found out that many people had decided not to attend Hirosaki that year. Looking at the general statistics, there was a slight dip in the number of solo performers: from 142 in 2000 it dropped to 126 in 2001, though it rebounded and continued to climb into the 200s through the *Tsugaru shamisen* boom of the 2000s. As was discussed above in the section on Hirosaki, while many players competed at both

Tokyo and Hirosaki in 1998 and 1999, only one of twenty-three top-ranked players did so in 2001. As mentioned above, players gradually returned to freely participating in both contests.

While contestants feel free to compete in both events, only one player, Shibata Masato, has won both: Tokyo in 2003 and Hirosaki in 2007, 2008, and 2010 to 2012. This is due to his ability to play in the style that each contest is looking for: “traditional” *Tsugaru shamisen* in Hirosaki, and modern *Tsugaru shamisen* in Tokyo. Yamada Chisato spoke about the modern playing style in the early 2000s, saying “What they play is not pure *Tsugaru shamisen*.... I tell such artists all the time, ‘Always remember that the real, the original *Tsugaru shamisen* and the style that you are playing - in other words, the 'adapted' *Tsugaru shamisen* - are two different things. Never mix those two styles up’ ” (Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). In contrast, one of the organizers of the Tokyo contest often stated that *Tsugaru shamisen* is a living tradition that should not be stopped from evolving, a sentiment which is clearly reflected in the choice of winners in Tokyo.

4. The National *Tsugaru Shamisen Concours* Osaka Contest

History

The National *Tsugaru Shamisen Concours* Osaka Contest (*Zenkoku Tsugaru-jamisen Concours Osaka Taikai*) began on November 28th, 2002, and has been held on the last weekend in November ever since. In its third year, in 2004, it became a two-day event with the first day dedicated to folk songs from Aomori, and the second day dedicated to *Tsugaru shamisen*. It has been held in a few different municipal halls, all somewhat removed from the city's centre (Nakayama 2005, 2).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Information for this section comes from the 2005 programme (Hasegawa 2005), unless otherwise stated.

Funding

The contest is run by the Aomori Prefecture Native Arts Association, and as at most of the other contests, funding comes from four main sources: the entrance fees for both participants and the audience, the sponsors who are explicitly listed as such in the programme, the companies that advertise in the programme, and the merchandise booths in the lobby of the hall.

Audience members pay 2500 yen in advance per day, and 3000 yen at the door. Solo participants pay 6000 yen to enter the contest, and groups pay 1500 yen per person. There is a 1000 yen fee for participating in the mass group performance “*rokudan daigassō*”. The main sponsor for the contest is the Aomori Prefecture Native Arts Association (*Aomori kyōdo geinō kyōkai*), and the secondary sponsors are Aomori Prefecture; Osaka city; the national *Sankei* newspaper, and the Aomori prefectural newspapers the *Michinoku*, and the *Tōōnippō* newspaper; and a group of Tsugaru region enthusiasts called the People of Aomori Prefecture Association (*Aomori kenbitokai*). In the thirty-four-page 2005 programme, the last six pages are devoted to advertisers, generally from the Kansai region in which Osaka is located, and include some restaurants and instrument shops and a lot of local *min'yō* schools that have no doubt encouraged their members to take part in the contest. Several merchandise booths appear in the lobby of the hall each year, generally run by the same shops that run the booths at the other national contests.

Adjudication, Categories, Criteria, Participants

There were eight judges at the 2005 contest, including Takahashi Yūjirō, Goshiki Ryūji, Kyōgoku Toshinori, Narita Takeshi, and Kon Jūzō II, some of the same respected elder statesmen of the Tsugaru and *min'yō* world that concurrently judged the contest in Tokyo. Most of these people also sit on Tokyo's executive committee, so their involvement here clearly shows that the

Osaka contest is understood to complement, rather than in any way challenge, the existing contests.

In the first year of the contest there were seven, by now rather predictable, categories: elementary and middle school children; women over fifteen; men over fifteen; seniors; “big prize” (open to anyone); group A (original compositions based on the big five Tsugaru *min'yō*); and group B (playing “*rokudan*,” the basic, group-friendly standardized composition based on “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*”). In 2005 the category for older players was split into those over fifty and those over sixty-five, and sometime between 2011 and 2015, a song accompaniment category was added. This newest category is only open to the first, second and third place winners in the “Big Prize” (Ōshō) category, and the first place winners of each of the other solo categories. The song for any given year is chosen from among the “big five Tsugaru *min'yō*” and announced in the application form to give would-be contestants a chance to prepare.

Neither the programme nor the application form lists any specific criteria for judging, but given the overlap of judges, and the number of players who have won both Tokyo and Osaka, it can be assumed that the criteria are very similar. Repertoire is largely explained in the above paragraph on categories, but as elsewhere, the vast majority of competitors perform a *kyokubiki* based on “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.”

In 2005 there were 155 solo players and twenty-seven groups, and in 2010 the number of applicants was limited to two hundred, with groups counting as one application, so it seems that the numbers have remained fairly consistent (*Osaka taikai jikkōinkai jimukyoku*, 2010, 1).

Awards, Winners, Distinguishing Features, Prestige

In the first year of the contest there were five awards handed out in each solo category, or

thirty solo awards in total, and ten group awards. Since then the number of awards in each category has increased and decreased slightly and inconsistently, but in general one in four solo entrants, and one in three groups, receives an award (Hasegawa 2005; *Osaka taikai jikkōinkai jimukyoku* 2010, 3; *Aomori-Ken Kyōdo Geinō Kyōkai*). None of the documents I have access to indicate anything about prizes, though there may be nominal cash prizes as there are at most contests.

The youngest winner at Osaka was sixteen-year-old Shibata Masato in 2003 and the oldest was thirty-nine-year-old Habu Misao in 2012. Both of these players won in Tokyo at around the same time, and in fact most of the winners in Osaka have won at least one other national contest. The average winner's age is fairly typical of the other contests at twenty-four.

With Tokyo's contest having set the precedent four years earlier, the National *Tsugaru shamisen* Osaka Contest seems to have had no need to justify its existing outside of the Tsugaru region. The contest's date and location instead might be seen to simply fill a void: while all of the older contests are held in April and May, this one is held four or five months earlier in November, five hundred kilometres south west of Tokyo – and one thousand kilometres southwest of Aomori – in Japan's second most populous region.

The schedule has the junior and senior categories run in the morning, followed by a mass group performance of “*rokudan*,” a short break, and an afternoon of the group and general men's and general women's categories, and finally the “Big Prize” and song accompaniment categories. The large group performance of “*rokudan*,” which anyone that has a *shamisen* is invited to join, adds a participatory dimension to the event that other contests do not have. This allows those who may not be ready to perform in a smaller group, let alone as a solo contestant, to take the stage with the assurance that any mistakes they might make will be covered up by the sheer

number of other players.

Participants in the first day's folk song contest are overwhelmingly local, but the second day, dedicated to *Tsugaru shamisen*, draws players from all over the country in equal numbers. This fact, combined with the number of respected judges at the contest, show that it is not unimportant; however, it is not generally thought to be as prestigious as Tokyo and Hirosaki.

5. The *Tsugaru Shamisen* National Contest in Kobe (2004 to 2014)

History

The *Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest In Kobe (*Tsugaru-jamisen zenkoku taikai in Kobe*) was meant to be a one-time event, held as a ten-year memorial of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, which occurred on January 17, 1995, and most directly affected the city of Kobe (Kitayama 2014). The date was set for the tenth of October: the tenth day of the tenth month to mark the ten years that had passed since the earthquake (Kon et al. 2009, 32). The first contest was held at Nagata shrine in central Kobe, and in its last years it was held at the nearby Kobe Harborland Center Building.

Daijō Kazuo, Kanagi's organizer, had a longstanding connection with this contest, which he called a “sister contest” to Kanagi, and occasionally delivered the opening greeting (Kon et al. 2009, 32; *Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [a]). The driving force behind the contest, however, was renowned *Tsugaru shamisen* player Sawada Katsuaki. He was born in Hirosaki in 1944, and moved to Tokyo in 1964 to work in the *min'yō* bars that were so popular with migrant workers from northern Japan at the time. By 1975 he had founded his own school, the Sawada-kai, and is one of the most respected living *Tsugaru shamisen* players (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [b]). His generation was the

first to play rock-infused *Tsugaru shamisen*, and he, in particular, is known for this (Oda 2009, 166). The website prominently displays the contest's moto: “*hotobashiru sakebi, tataki tsukeru jōnetsu. Rock ka jazz ka jongara ka.*” which might be translated as “An overflowing cry, passion with a beat. Rock, or jazz, or jongara.” and makes it clear that the contest favoured the modern style of playing over the traditional (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [b]). The contest's organizing committee announced earlier this year that the contest has been discontinued after an eleven-year run (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [c]). This is the first well-established contest to fold, and suggests that the proliferation of contests which began in the first decade of the new millennium has reached its peak.

Funding

Funding came from the same sorts of sources as the other contests, though there was a stronger emphasis on the government's role in funding the contest. In 2014 solo participants paid 4000 yen to enter and groups paid 2000 yen per member. The admission price for audience members was also 2000 yen (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [d]). The organizer and main sponsor of the contest was a non-profit called the “We Love *Min'yō* Association” (*NPO Min'yō Daisuki No Kai*). Awards were sponsored by: the ministry of education's science cabinet minister, Hyōgo Prefectural Governor, Kobe City, the Kobe City Education Executive Committee, The Hyōgo Prefecture Japanese *Min'yō* Association (*Hyogo ken Nihon Min'yō Rengō Kai*), the All-Osaka *Min'yō* Association, Nagata Shrine, the We Love *Min'yō* Association, the Kobe newspaper, Aomori Prefectural Governor, and Nagata Shrine's Area Rejuvenation Association.

Adjudication, Categories, Criteria, Participants

The panel of judges seemed to have been selected for competency, and were the same for 2010 and 2014, the two years for which I was able to get information on this aspect of the contest. They include veteran *Tsugaru shamisen* players Sawada Katsuaki and Okamoto Toshihito, who are also judges in Tokyo; Asano Yukio, a *min'yō* promoter; and three top *min'yō* singers, Shirato Hisao, Uchiyama Miyuki, and Kitsu Shigeri. The last two are women, still a rarity among *Tsugaru shamisen* contest judges (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [b]).

The five categories were similar to those in other contests: elementary school; middle and high school; seniors (over 50); general (either sex, no age restrictions); and groups. There was a women's category from 2005 to 2011, but women could also enter the general category, as Shirafuji Hikari did in 2010 when she won the contest.

The application page was fairly specific about the scoring process, something of which contestants were very appreciative. The piece could be based on any *Tsugaru min'yō*, and had to be under three minutes in length. Performances were judged on five criteria: performance technique and ability; volume or power; musical rhythm; compositional merit; and utilization of the specific characteristics of the *Tsugaru shamisen* (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [d]). Each of these was worth twenty points towards a perfect score of one hundred, and the highest of the six judges' scores was removed from the calculation. Contest pieces are *kyokubiki* based on any *Tsugaru min'yō*, but as elsewhere, for most competitors that means “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.”

The 2014 website stated that for 2015 it was going to accept a total of 120 applications for individual and group performances; in 2008 there were 125 solo entrants and eighteen groups,

and in 2009 there were 123 solo entrants and seventeen groups, suggesting that the contest was scaling back on the number of applicants towards the end (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [a]).

Awards, Winners, Distinguishing Features, Prestige

There were five or six awards in each of the five categories. As mentioned above, the top awards at this contest were linked to specific sponsors: first place in each category was called the Ministry of Education's Science Cabinet Minister's award; second place was the Hyōgo Prefectural Governor's award; third place was the City of Kobe Mayor's award; and fourth place was the Kobe City Education Executive Committee's award. That they were specifically linked to sponsors suggests that there were cash awards attached to each position, but, as at most contests, there was no indication of the amounts, which were almost certainly relatively insignificant given the expense of travel and lodging to compete in the contest.

The average age of winners in Kobe skewed slightly lower than those at other contests, at twenty-one and a half years old. Most winners were in their late teens and early twenties; the youngest winner was eighteen and the oldest winner was twenty-seven. Two women won the contest: Shirafuji Hikari in 2010 and Suzuki Rie in 2014, and there was only one two-time winner, Kojima Kōhei in 2012 and 2013.

As noted above, this contest was initially conceived of as a one-time event to cheer up residents of Kobe in the tenth year after the Great Hanshin Earthquake ravaged the city. As Kitayama Junichi, the head of the contest's executive committee, notes in his 2014 greeting on the contest's website “it proved so meaningful to so many who said that they would like to participate again the following year, and their many letters of thanks and encouragement

convinced us to continue,” and it has since become an annual event (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Contest in Kobe Executive Committee [e]). In that same greeting Kitayama insists that “the timbre of the *Tsugaru shamisen* has a vitality and healing quality which bestows health and vigour on the heart exhausted by the continuing reconstruction and rebuilding of the area,” bringing up the frequently expressed belief that there is a healing power to traditional Japanese music, which takes on extra meaning in the case of Kobe (ibid.). The flyer for the first contest contains the tagline: “*Tsugaru no kaze ima Kobe e*” (“A breeze from Tsugaru comes to Kobe”), metaphorically suggesting that the fresh country air of the Tsugaru region will reinvigorate the city (Kon et al. 2009, 32).

Kobe also distinguished itself as an explicitly modern contest, with Sawada Katsuaki's influence and the motto connecting it to modern western musical forms. There may be a connection between the favouring of modern playing, and the younger average age of winners. Both Shibata Masato and Kasai Yoshiyuki won Kobe at eighteen years of age, and later went on to win at Hirosaki in their mid-twenties. Kobe further distinguished itself through transparency: the criteria on which contestants were judged was more clearly expressed than at most contests, and raised the bar in this respect. As is the case with Osaka, players came from all over the country, and there were some important figures connected to the contest, but in the end Kobe might also be considered a second-tier contest.

6. Aomori's *Tsugaru shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle

History

The first *Tsugaru shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle (*Tsugaru-jamisen Nihon Ichi Ketteisen*) was held on the second and third of May in 2007 at the Aomori City Culture Hall in

central Aomori City.⁵¹ The *Tsugaru shamisen* National Association (*Tsugaru-jamisen Zenkoku Kyōgikai*) was established in 1990, with members from all over Japan. In 2006 it became a licenced NPO (non-profit organization), and founded the *Tsugaru Shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle the following year, in cooperation with other sponsors including Aomori City, The Aomori Merchants and Industry Association, the Aomori Tourist and Convention Association. The *Tsugaru Shamisen* National Association is a large organization which, as of 2015, included more than eighty affiliated groups, and continues to grow (*Tsugaru Shamisen* National Association [a]). In the NPO's mission statement it resolves to research the history of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, to disseminate Tsugaru culture throughout Japan through concerts, broadcasts, and publications, and to look to the future of *Tsugaru shamisen* through new compositions, while being mindful of its origins in Tsugaru folk songs (ibid.).

Aomori City is the capital of Aomori Prefecture and its largest city, but like most other municipalities in the area, including Hirosaki and Kanagi, it has been suffering from a slow decrease in population. At the last census in 2010 the population stood at 299,520: about 15,000 less than the figure from the 1995. The estimated population in 2014 was 290,646: a further loss of 9000 people in only four years (Brinkhoff 2015). Hayashi Mitsuo, the head of the *Tsugaru shamisen* National Association, mentions in his greeting in the first contest programme from 2007 the predicted 2010 completion of the Tōhoku bullet train line connecting Aomori City and Tokyo, and the hope that it will bring business and tourism opportunities to the city (Hayashi 2007, 2). He sees in this a chance for *machizukuri*, or “town building,” a variant of the term *satozukuri* revitalization effort discussed in the section on Kanagi's contest, above. As with many of the other contests, particularly in Aomori Prefecture, governmental and private organizations

⁵¹ The Hall has since been renamed “Link Station Hall Aomori” (Tsugaru Shamisen National Association [b]).

with a stake in the area are listed among the sponsors, and it clear that they see promoting *Tsugaru shamisen*, the most well-known aspect of Tsugaru culture at the moment, as part of the *satozukuri* effort.

Funding, Sponsors

The programmes list the *Tsugaru shamisen* National Association and the contest's executive committee as the chief organizers, and funding has been secured mainly through a large number of government, media, commercial and industrial sponsors and advertisers, but also through contestants' fees. Admission to the contest is free for spectators, though there is a 300 yen charge for the substantial programme. Solo contestants pay 5000 yen, and group members pay 2000 yen, though there is a 1000 yen discount for *Tsugaru shamisen* National Association members (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Association [b]).

The sponsors include many of the same media companies that sponsor the other contests in Aomori, as well as the typical sorts of prefectural and municipal offices that sponsor most of the other contests discussed in this chapter. Previous years' programmes and the 2015 website list the following sponsors: Aomori Culture and Sports Promotion Public Company, Aomori Prefecture, Aomori City, the Aomori Tourist Convention Association, NHK broadcasting (Aomori Office), Radio Aomori Broadcasting (RAB), Aomori Television Broadcasting Company (ATV), Aomori Asahi Broadcasting (ABA), FM Aomori, Aomori Cable Television, *Tōōnippō*, *Mainichi Tōhoku* newspaper, *Michinoku* newspaper, and Columbia Music Entertainment. Over and above these, more than fifty companies are listed in the fourth year's programme, including radio, television, industrial, agricultural, food and beverage, financial, and life insurance companies, tourist organizations and travel agencies.

Adjudication, Categories, Criteria, Participants

In the contest's early years there were ten judges, several of whom were the same top older players and heads of *Tsugaru shamisen* schools that served as judges in Tokyo. The list has included Oyama Mitsuō, Takahashi Yūjirō, Sawada Katsuaki, Kon Jūzō, Sugano Kōzan, Narita Takeshi, Hasegawa Yūji, Goshiki Ryūji, and Fukushi Toyokatsu, as well as *min'yō* scholars Matsuki Hiroyasu and Iida Kiyohiko, and Kōda Teruyuki, head of Columbia Music Entertainment's traditional Japanese music section.

By 2015 the number of judges had been reduced to seven, and some of the most respected original judges had either passed away (Takahashi Yūjirō) or were getting too old to continue the gruelling two-day schedule (Oyama Mitsuō and Sawada Katsuaki). The 2015 line up was slightly less prestigious than that of 2007, but all of the judges are respected players, and heads of their own schools. They are: Kudō Manji, Kon Jūzō, Sugano Kōzan, Oyama Mitsugu, Sasaki Mitsuyoshi, Kubō Masayuki, and Hasegawa Yūji (*ibid.*).

Since the first contest, the judges' scores have been recorded in real time for each contestant, appearing on a giant screen above the stage. This degree of transparency was unprecedented in these contests, and, as journalist Oda Mayusa has noted, raised the bar considerably on this point (Oda 2009, 178). Further, the highest and lowest scores are removed and an average is made of the remaining scores, ensuring a certain degree of impartiality.

The development of categories in Aomori followed the standard pattern: in the first year there was a general men's, a general woman's, a senior, a junior, a small group, a large group, and a “*Nihon ichi*” category, but by the fourth contest a B-level and C-level had been added, and these nine categories remain in place today. The rationale for adding a special *Nihon ichi* category is central to the conception of the contest: it is mentioned in the programmes' greetings, and on the

website in the organizer's mission statement, and a contest committee member I spoke with made a point of bringing it up with me (*Tsugaru shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle Executive Committee 2007; *Tsugaru shamisen* National Association [c]). As Kudō Manji writes in the 2007 programme, in recent years the solo improvisatory style known as *kyokubiki* has almost become synonymous with the term *Tsugaru shamisen*, so much so that its origins in accompaniment are in danger of being forgotten (Kudō 2007, 3). This contest was conceived in part to remedy the situation, so the overall winner of the contest has to compete in two separate sections: one for solo composition (*kyokubiki*) and one for song accompaniment (*utazuke*).

As in Kanagi, contestants need to be able to play the “big five *Tsugaru min'yō*,” but in this case they need to be able to play a solo composition, and an accompaniment version of each of them. The piece any given contestant plays is determined by selecting a card drawn on the stage.⁵² The fact that they in effect need to prepare ten pieces – a *kyokubiki* and *utazuke* version of each of the big five *Tsugaru min'yō* – makes this a particularly challenging contest. The scores for these two sections are added up, and the contestant with the highest score wins. In the event that no one gets an average score of above eighty points out of one hundred on each of the two sections, there is no winner of the contest that year. This has in fact happened twice in the contest's nine years.

The specific criteria by which contestants are judged is not clearly laid out in the programme or on the website; however, given that the contest was in part conceived to correct the drift away from the music's origins, it is safe to assume that it falls somewhere on the traditional end of the traditional-modern continuum.

The contest draws people from all over the country, and has set maximums of between fifteen

⁵² It should be noted that Aomori started this system in 2007, and Kanagi instituted it in 2008.

and twenty contestants for each of the seven solo categories, and a maximum of about ten groups in total (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Association [b]). It is open to both professional and amateur players, but the application requires contestants to write down a teacher or school with which they are affiliated.

Awards, Winners, Distinguishing Features, Prestige

There are generally five awards given out in each solo category, and up to five given out in both of the group categories, meaning one in three or four solo contestants will win an award, as will almost every team. The amounts of the cash prizes for the first contest were perhaps the highest ever given out at any *Tsugaru shamisen* contest: for the *Nihon Ichi* category 500,000 yen was awarded for first place, 100,000 for second place, 70,000 for third place, and 50,000 for fourth and fifth place. In other solo levels awards ranged from 50,000 yen to 10,000 yen for first to third place (*Tsugaru shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle Executive Committee 2007, 13). By 2015 most of the cash prizes were reduced by about half, with the overall winner taking home 300,000 yen (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Association [b]).

The ages of the winners or highest scorers, from the first to the ninth contest are fifty-four, thirty-one, forty-four, forty-five, thirty-eight, twenty, forty, sixteen, and thirty-two. The fact that these are much higher than any of the other contests covered in this chapter is likely due to the number and types of pieces that players are required to master in order to win this contest; many players of the younger generation have been focusing on solo playing, and have little experience accompanying singers, which has put them at a distinct disadvantage.

As mentioned above, there have been two contests so far in which no one managed to score the required eighty out of one hundred points in both of the *Nihon Ichi* sections. Technically,

then, there have been only seven winners in Aomori, and two of these have been women; this is by far the highest woman-to-man win ratio. It should also be noted that the contest stipulates that a person can only win the *Nihon Ichi* award once, and cannot compete again at the contest after winning, except as part of a group (*Tsugaru shamisen* National Association [b]).

The contest in Aomori has been extremely well-organized from the start, with an impeccable panel of judges, a state of the art facility, the largest cash prizes ever seen in this sort of contest, and a large number of sponsors. The programme exemplifies this aspect of the contest: it is professionally produced on heavy, glossy paper stock, and looks more like a magazine than a typical contest programme (see Illustration 4.07). In its twenty-eight pages, besides the usual list of competitors, judges, guest performers, and organizers, there are two full-page greetings by executive committee members, and another by the mayor of the city; a two-page history of *Tsugaru shamisen* by Matsuki Hiromitsu; and a five-page tourist-oriented review of festivals and historical and cultural points of interest in the prefecture, complete with relevant dates, websites, and phone numbers. For all of these reasons, Aomori can be seen, in one sense, as the corporatization of the *Tsugaru shamisen* contest. Even the contest's slogan – *waza no kiwami, chōten ni* (roughly “Those with the most skills battle at the summit”) – reads like advertisement copy in Japanese.



Illustration 4.07: *Tsugaru-jamisen Nihon Ichi Ketteisen 2007* programme

Aomori's contest is by far the most compelling one to watch, thanks to a giant screen above the stage (Illustration 4.08) that dynamically displays each player's performance, variously focusing in on the hands or face, or pulling out for a wider view. At most contests the audience is too far away to clearly see facial expressions, or subtle playing techniques, turning the contest into a largely sonic event with minimal visual stimulus. Even with very good players, there is a tendency for monotony to set in. The screen at Aomori, however, adds a human element, unexpectedly creating a drama from which is hard to turn away.



Illustration 4.08: Aomori's *Nihon Ichi* stage (“Sasaki Shinobi 2012...”)

This is the first contest to make the ability to accompany Tsugaru folk songs an integral part of winning the contest. As noted above, in this sense it is on the traditional end of the continuum. This aspect of the contest, requiring as it does, the mastery of ten pieces, is also likely responsible for the fact that its winners are much older on average than at any of the other contests. Lastly, the contest is noted for its transparency and stringent rules, which has meant that in two of its nine years the title of *Nihon Ichi* was not awarded. With its support from many influential people in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world, its location in the Tsugaru region, its transparent adjudication, and its very demanding requirements, Aomori has distinguished itself as a first-tier contest on par with Hirosaki and Tokyo.

7. All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest

The first All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest (*Zen Nihon Tsugaru-jamisen Kyōgikai Nagoya Taikai*) was held on August 12th, 2007 in central Nagoya, in the 1,146-seat Village Hall Theatre of the Chūkyō University Citizen's Hall, and has continued to be held annually at the same location, in late July or early August.

Funding

The contest is organized by the All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee, and as with most of the other contests, funding comes from several different sources including official sponsors, advertisers, entrance and participation fees, and merchandise booths. The sponsors listed in the 2010 programme and the 2015 poster are the same: Aichi Prefecture, Nagoya City, the Aichi Prefectural Education Committee, the Nagoya City Municipal Education Committee, and the Chūnichi newspaper. The entrance fee for audience members has been 3000 yen for at least the last five years; fees for participants are not listed in any of the documents I have been able to obtain, but are almost certainly in line with the other contests, or about 5000 yen for solo participants and 2000 yen for group members.

The 2010 programme is twenty-one pages long, and contains a schedule for the day; greetings from the representative of the organizing committee, a prefectural representative, and the mayor of Nagoya; biographies of all of the judges and guest performers; an explanation of the scoring system; a list of all of the contestants in each category; a list of the staff; and twelve pages of advertising for local and national *shamisen*-related products and services, as well as some local businesses.

Adjudication, Categories, Criteria, Participants

The same seven people have been judging this contest since it began: Sasaki Mitsuyoshi, Fukushi Toyoaki, Ishii Shugen, Sawada Katsunari, Kudō Takeshi, Takahashi Chikudō, and Odashima Tokuō. While not quite as prestigious as the line-up in Tokyo, they are all well-known *Tsugaru shamisen* players, and either heads of their own schools, contest winners from the 1990s, or disciples of influential players from an earlier generation.

The contest started with nine categories: elementary school, middle and high school, seniors, general men, general women, “A-class,” “duo,” large groups (over ten members), and small groups (ten members or less) (All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee [a]). Within a few years the seniors’ category had been split into senior men and senior women, and later the two group categories were consolidated into one. The A-level is the last category of the day, and winning in any of the other solo categories qualifies one to compete again in the A-class for the title of Nagoya champion. The “duo” category – the English word is used – is unique to Nagoya at the moment, and features some of the most inventive compositions to be heard at any competition, employing non-traditional scales and rhythms in the manner of the Yoshida Brothers, the duo that sparked off the mainstream *Tsugaru shamisen* boom in the 2000s.

Nagoya's is perhaps the most transparent contest at the moment, with a very clear list of ten criteria (listed in the section on Hirosaki, above) that contestants are judged on. Every contestant receives results from each judge for each of the ten criteria, and detailed scores for the present year's top contestants are posted on the contest's website (All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee [b]).

A similar but simplified set of criteria is used to judge group and duos, with an added category

to judge how the primary and secondary *shamisen* parts work together to create a whole composition. Each of the criteria is worth ten points, for a possible total of one hundred. A ten-point penalty is imposed on anyone going over time – three and a half minutes for the A-level, duo, and group categories, and two and a half minutes for all others.

Contestants in all categories are judged by the same or at least similar standards: the winner in the A-level in 2015 received a score of 84.8, while the score for the winner of the elementary school aged category was 63.14 (ibid.). Scores can also be quite close: the second place and third place scores were 83.94 and 83.9 respectively. In determining final scores, the highest and lowest scores of the seven judges are cancelled and the remaining five scores are averaged.

In 2010 there were 131 solo contestants, sixteen duos, and seventeen groups, and according to the programme, there were more applications than there were available spots. In 2015 the numbers were somewhat lower, at 122 solo contestants, eight duos, and thirteen groups. The 2010 programme includes each contestant's home prefecture, and it shows that while there were players from all parts of Japan, there was an obvious concentration of players from nearby. The 2015 programme does not include this information, so it is not obvious if the contest is drawing more participants from distant places.

Awards, Winners, Distinguishing Features, Prestige

There are generally six awards given out in each category, though there might be fewer in categories with a smaller number of contestants. In 2015 thirty-nine solo awards were given out, which means that one in three participants received an award, and in the duo and group categories the ratio was one to two. Neither the programme nor the website indicates whether or not cash prizes are awarded at any level.

The ages of the winners are similar to those of most of the other contests, ranging from seventeen to thirty-one, with an average of twenty-one and a half. Three women have won in the contest's nine years, which is considerably more than average.

The Nagoya contest's webpage lists what it takes to be its seven distinguishing features: the judges are all top-level *shamisen* performers; each criteria is separately rated; each judge's scores are displayed and published (rather than anonymously compiled); after the contest, each contestant is sent his or her scores; there is a “duo” category; there is a senior woman's category; and the winner of each category is automatically entered into the “A-class” (All-Japan *Tsugaru shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee [c]). To this might be added the fact that the judges themselves are part of the “entertainment” section of the event, playing *shamisen* and singing to display their competence. The contest's detailed scoring system has made it popular for players, as the feedback can be useful for improving their playing, but it seems to be a second-tier contest in terms of prestige.

8. Other Contests

There are a few other contests that should be mentioned here. The *Tsugaru Shamisen* National Association, the same group that started the contest in Aomori City in 2007, established the *Tsugaru Shamisen* Kyushu Contest in Yatsushiro (*Tsugaru-jamisen Kyushu Taikai* in Yatsushiro) in the city of Yatsushiro, in Kumamoto prefecture, on the southern island of Kyushu. It ran for at least two years (2009-2010), but it was not long lived and there is very little information on it available (Matsuki 2011, 156). The city of Takamatsu, on the island of Shikoku, held the *Tsugaru Shamisen* Group Performance Concours National Contest (*Tsugaru-jamisen Gassō Concours Zenkoku Takai*) for at least three years, from 2011 to 2013, which also seems to have met a quick

end (Katō 2013).

Kuroishi, a city in Aomori Prefecture, said to be the birthplace of the song “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” began a Tsugaru folk song contest with a *Tsugaru shamisen* component in 2012. It is called The Authentic Tsugaru *Min'yō* National Contest (*Honba Tsugaru Min'yō Zenkoku Taikai*), and is held on May the first each year, in an attempt to attract participants who are in the area for the other contests that week. It is backed by many of the same media companies as the other contests in Aomori prefecture, as well as Kuroishi City, the local chamber of commerce, and tourist, arts and *satozukuri* associations. Other sponsors include the Japan *Min'yō* Association (*Nihon min'yō kyōgikai*) and the Japan Native Place *Min'yō* Association (*Nihon Kyōdo Min'yō Kyōkai*) (Kuroishi Tourist Association).

The City of Ōtsu, just outside of Kyoto, and an hour from Osaka, began its two-day Middle of Japan Festival On Lake Biwa (*Nihon No Mannaka* Festival in [*sic*] *Biwako*) in late November of 2013. Like Osaka, the first day is a Tsugaru *min'yō* contest, and the second day is a *Tsugaru shamisen* contest. It is organized by the Japanese Traditional Folk Performing Arts Promotion Association (*NPO Hōjin Nihon Dentōshōgeinō Butai Geijutsu Shinkōkai*), and is in its third year (Japanese Traditional Folk Performing Arts Promotion Association).

Finally, another attempt has been made to establish a contest in Kyushu in 2014, this time in Miyakonojo City, Miyazaki Prefecture. On June 12, 2016 the *Tsugaru Shamisen All-Kyushu Concours* (*Tsugaru-jamisen zenkyushu concours*) held its third annual contest (*Daisankai Tsugaru-jamisen zenkyushu concours*).

III. Discussion

In this section I present a brief recapitulation of the spread of the national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests, summarize the aspects of the contests that were discussed in this chapter, and introduce the issues of gender and stylistic change. In the discussion of each these aspects and issues I compare my findings to those of other writers on other folk traditions in which contests play a large role. Specifically, I draw on writing by Chris Goertzen (1985, 1988, 1996, 2008) on American fiddling, Edward O. Henry (1989) on Irish music contests, and Sarah Loten (1995) and John G. Gibson (1998) on Scottish piping competitions.

The Spread of the National *Tsugaru Shamisen* Contests

The first modern *Tsugaru shamisen* contest was established in Hirosaki City in 1982 by several local *Tsugaru shamisen* authorities including the performer Yamada Chisato and the writer Daijō Kazuo. They struggled to keep it going through much of the 1980s, during which time there was a growth in the number of players, particularly in Japan's two main urban centres of Tokyo and Osaka. While the contest eventually proved viable, there were always questions about the transparency of the adjudication process, which seemed to favour Yamada's own students. In 1989 Daijō Kazuo established a new contest in the town of Kanagi, the purported birthplace of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, forty kilometres north of Hirosaki, stating at the time that this new contest would be fairly adjudicated and not favour any particular school. It was nine years before another contest was established, this time in Tokyo, as the number of young players continued to increase and questions about Hirosaki's adjudication failed to subside. Tokyo's contest was sponsored by the Japan *Min'yō* Association, and most of the influential *Tsugaru shamisen* players from the previous generation sat on its executive committee. With *Tsugaru*

shamisen becoming increasingly popular, this contest was set up to challenge Hirosaki's ability to choose the best young player in Japan each year. Within a few years it was able to do just this, forcing Hirosaki to begin to define itself as the dominant *traditional Tsugaru shamisen* contest. The winners in Tokyo's first few years were technically proficient players like Ishikawa Hajime and Yoshida Kenichi, who were deemed too unorthodox to win in Hirosaki but seemed to be the future of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

In 1999 *Tsugaru shamisen* legend Takahashi Chikuzan died, and Yoshida Kenichi and his older brother Ryōichirō, who had released a CD the previous year as the Yoshida Brothers, became the new face of *Tsugaru shamisen* in the wave of media nostalgia that ensued. This boom in mainstream popularity inspired many young people to take up the instrument, adding to the number of young players that had been slowly growing through the 1980s and 1990s. In 2002, in the midst of this boom, another national contest was established in Osaka. The contest in Tokyo had already broken the barrier against holding a national contest for this music outside of the region to which the genre was still strongly tied, and Osaka being the second largest city, was the obvious choice for the next one. Unlike Tokyo's, the contest in Osaka was not intended to challenge the dominance of any of the other contests, and in fact in its timing almost half a year away from the others, could be thought of as an off-season complement to the existing contests. In 2004, with the cooperation of Daijō Kazuo, head of Kanagi's contest, a one-off national competition took place in Kobe as part of a series of events commemorating the earthquake which had devastated the city ten years earlier. The contest received an overwhelming response and continued to be held annually until 2014. In 2007, as the *Tsugaru shamisen* boom reached its peak, two new contests were established: one in Aomori City in the same week in May as Hirosaki's and Kanagi's contests, and one in August in Nagoya, a large city located between

Osaka and Tokyo. On the judging panel at Aomori were many of the same respected older players who were judges at Tokyo, and with its location and the stringent tradition-based requirements it places on its contestants, it might be seen as a further challenge to Hirosaki by the *Tsugaru shamisen* power base that exists largely outside of the Tsugaru region. Nagoya likely suggested itself as the site for another contest because of its size and relatively easy accessibility from Japan's two main metropolitan regions. Set in late-July or early-August, it is likewise conveniently situated calendrically between Tokyo's early April and Osaka's late November contests.

Other national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests have been established since – Yatsushiro, on the southern island of Kyushu in 2009 and Takamatsu, on the island of Shikoku in 2011 – but disappeared within a few years, due perhaps in part to the end of the mainstream boom and in part to the large number of existing contests. In spite of this, another contest was established in Kyushu in 2014, and as of 2016 is still running. Recently established contests in Kuroishi City (2012) in the Tsugaru region and Otsu (2013) in the Kansai region both feature *Tsugaru shamisen* and folk singing competitions, the combination of which may be enough to make them viable in the long term. Kobe's folding in 2015 after eleven years seems to be further evidence that the proliferation of national contests has come to an end.

It was noted above that some form of *Tsugaru shamisen* contests occurred in the early part of the twentieth century, and that a long break occurred before Hirosaki's contest finally began in 1982. In musical traditions in other cultures, similar, if shorter breaks are found. American fiddling contests, apparently based on earlier Scottish models, were in evidence in the eighteenth century (Blaustein 1993, 260; Goertzen 1996, 354). These reappeared in the late nineteenth century sparked in part by growing nationalist sentiments, and waxed and waned in popularity

until the early 1930s when the style of fiddling featured began to seem too old-fashioned (Goertzen1996, 354). While contests never entirely disappeared, a resurgence occurred due to the folk movement in the 1950s and 1960s which continues to this day (Goertzen 2008, 36-9).

The World-wide Irish contest *Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann* began in 1951, though there were no doubt musical contests happening much earlier in Ireland. Within five years it had made a name for itself, and it continued to grow in the 1960s and 1970s until the number of competitors made it necessary for qualifying contests at county and provincial levels to be established (*Fleadh Cheoil* 2015). According to the organization's website, 400,000 people attended the competition in Derry in 2013 (ibid.).

John G. Gibson has written about the establishment of a Highland Society of Scotland in Edinburgh in 1784 to run highland piping competitions, and that by the 1850s these competitions had become a regular part of the highland games, first in Scotland, and very soon after in Canada and Australia (Gibson 1998, 120, 223). Due perhaps to its strong martial associations, piping and piping competitions did not flourish with the folk boom of the latter half of the twentieth century, but have continued to be held both independantly, and as part of highland games events world wide. The Scottish Pipe Band Association, for example, was founded in 1930, as their website states, “to meet the need for an authoritative governing body to organize and grade Pipe Bands, and to draw up rules and regulations for the effective running of Pipe Band competitions” (The Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association). In 1947 they organized the first World Pipe Band Championships, which have continued ever since.

Funding

Funding tends to come from the same types of sources for all of the national *Tsugaru*

shamisen contests, with local media companies and municipal and prefectural governments being particularly prominent. As one might expect, this is especially the case in Aomori prefecture, the birthplace of the music, though, for example, Osaka City, Kobe, and Nagoya are all sponsors of their respective contests. Other funding comes from companies located near each contest, businesses from all over Japan connected to *Tsugaru shamisen*, and associations located in various parts of the country whose membership identifies as enthusiast of the Tsugaru region. Entry fees for both contestants and audience members are another source of revenue at most contests, and likely go into the coffers of the sponsoring organization behind each contest.

Adjudication

Adjudication has been a point of contention since the very beginnings of these contests, and seems to hinge on three things: the competency of the judges, the specificity of the criteria by which contestants are judged, and the transparency of the final decision. Competency began to be addressed in 1998 with the Tokyo contest, which set up a panel of sixteen of the most respected players to judge the contestants. All of the contests from that point on set higher standards for their judges, and the days of contests judged by newspaper and radio executives soon came to an end.

In the 1930s, when newspapers first started sponsoring *min'yō* contests, this music was still very familiar to everyone, so having the branch head of a national newspaper as a judge would not have seemed out of line. By the 1980s, however, *Tsugaru shamisen* was unfamiliar to all but a very specialized audience. Goertzen reports the same problem in the smaller fiddle contests in the US whose judges are chosen “on the basis of probity and community status” (Goertzen 2008, 29). Hughes brings up cases in Ireland, South Africa and Japan where the competency of judges

coming from outside the tradition is a consideration. He relates an anecdote about a judge at a folk song contest in Japan who, on expressing his concerns about his abilities to the contest's organizers, was assured that they were not planning on counting his vote in the first place (Hughes 2008, 203)! Sarah Loten's description of a controversial move in the 1990s to institute qualifying exams for judges in the Ontario bagpipe contest circuit makes it clear that competence was a concern in that scene as well (Loten 1995, 20-21).

Criteria will be discussed in detail below, but at this point it can be stated that there is a general understanding of the sorts of things that judges are looking for, and these do not vary greatly between the contests. As was discussed above, the perceived unfairness of Hirosaki's judging practices was part of the motivation for founding the contests in Kanagi and Tokyo. While the results at these contests were arguably fairer, they were no more transparent. The contests in Nagoya and Aomori, both established in 2007, were the first ones to address transparency in a serious way. In Aomori the judges' scores for each contestant were tabulated in real time and projected on the large screen before the next contestant began playing. Transparency is taken even further at Nagoya, where each judge's score on each of the ten criteria for every contestant is made known. This has put pressure on other contests, with the result that by 2014 even Hirosaki began posting the averaged scores for the contestants who placed in each category.

Categories

While there is some variation between contests, categories are created on the basis of age (children, young adults, adults, seniors), skill (A, B and C levels), and in some cases gender. In almost every case, the number of categories grew in the first years of each contest, as the desire

to keep things simple was trumped by the strategy of motivating players by bestowing as many awards as possible. Most contests have at least one group category, and many have separate categories for large and small groups. Some of the contests have introduced an accompaniment category, and others have begun to determine the ultimate winner with a tournament that requires multiple performances.

Goertzen lists as few as three age divisions (under sixteen; sixteen to sixty-four; and sixty-five and over) in some major American fiddle contests, noting that smaller, local contests tend to have a greater number of age categories (for example: under eight; nine to twelve; thirteen to twenty-five; twenty-six to fifty-six; and over fifty-seven) (Goertzen 2008, 43, 28). This suggests that in the world of competitive fiddling, it is the smaller contests rather than the national ones that are responsible for nurturing young players. There may also be a guitar accompaniment category in which the guitarist, rather than the fiddler is the focus, and an elimination tournament to determine the ultimate winner that requires proficiency in several standard genres (*ibid.*, 45). The Texas State Championship has an “out of state” category, as many locals believe that there is “something about Texas playing that only Texans can do best” – a sentiment that many Tsugaru natives still hold about their own musical tradition (*ibid.*, 46).

In competitions held by the Association of Irish Musicians, there are typically four age categories: under twelve, twelve to fifteen, fifteen to eighteen, and over eighteen (Henry 1989, 78). The size of their main contest dwarfs anything in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world. Henry notes that “the 1984 *Fleadh Cheoil* program listed 129 separate competitions, 1,014 solo performances, 56 duet performances, 47 trio performances, and 124 band performances,” and this is after the number of competitors has already been progressively narrowed down in regional, county, and provincial contests (*ibid.*, 80).

Criteria

There is a general understanding of the sorts of things that judges are looking for, and these vary only slightly between the contests. There is a much greater variation in the degree to which contests are explicit about their criteria and the degree to which scores conform to these criteria, which are actually issues of transparency. Kobe listed five specific criteria, and Nagoya lists ten. The other contests are vague about exactly how contestants' performances are graded. In general, the contests based in Aomori prefecture are the most conservative: Hirosaki penalizes contestants for straying too far from its specific definition of tradition; Kanagi explicitly states that contestants should have a knowledge of the songs that are the foundation of instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* playing, but insists that continued development of the genre is also essential; and in terms of sheer knowledge of repertoire, Aomori is the most demanding contest of all, requiring its top-level competitors to master both solo and accompaniment versions of the big five Tsugaru folk songs. In comparison, Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, and Nagoya are less traditional and more concerned with the mastery and continued development of technique.

Loten includes facsimiles of very detailed score sheets in her study of solo piping in Ontario that list seven specific criteria and leave a lot of room for judges' comments (Loten 1995, 19, 20). Goertzen, on the other hand, finds that fiddling contests tend to be vaguer about their criteria: “judges were to evaluate performances on the bases of authenticity, rhythm and timing, and tonal quality and clarity (sometimes collectively called execution), as well as taste or creativity” (Goertzen 1996, 355).

As for the repertoire of performance pieces themselves, by and large they are *kyokubiki*, or solo pieces composed by the performer, based on the folk song “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” and run

from two and a half minutes for beginners to anywhere from three to four minutes, depending on the contest, for advanced players. Noting that the vast majority of competitors play a version of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*,” contest organizers became concerned that younger players were focusing on this one piece to the exclusion of all others. To counter this, contests have come up with a number of ways to encourage competitors to learn more repertoire or to accompany the songs on which all of the solo versions are based. Hirosaki and Osaka have added a song accompaniment category to their contests, Kanagi requires its A-level contestants to prepare *kyokubiki* versions of all of the big five *Tsugaru min'yō*, and Aomori requires both *kyokubiki* solo versions and *utazuke* vocal accompaniment versions for the big five of its A-level competitors.

Looking at other contest traditions, it becomes clear how limited the repertoire of *Tsugaru shamisen* contests is. Goertzen writes that at one representative American fiddle contest contestants have four minutes and ten seconds to play three tunes, selected from five genres (breakdown, waltz, rag, polka, and swing tune), and that the repertoire is limited to “only” a few dozen tunes in each genre (Goertzen 2008, 40, 44). What he says about the use of this “limited” repertoire in fiddle contests, however, applies even more strongly to *Tsugaru shamisen* contests: “Any yearning for musical variety is satisfied by the complexity of the arrangements of pieces rather than choice of what is seen as raw material. That many fiddlers are personally involved in arranging tunes results in enhanced understanding, commitment, and musicianship” (ibid., 44). Henry suggests a repertoire at least as large at national Irish music contests when he notes that entire genres (rather than specific tunes), like jig, reel, hornpipe, and slow air are admitted, while other genres are not (Henry 1989, 91).

Participants

Hirosaki continues to dominate the other contests in terms of sheer participant attendance numbers. It reached its peak in 2006 with 240 solo contestants and nineteen groups for a total of 449 participants. In 2015 there were still 229 solo contestants, and eight groups for a total of 302 participants.⁵³ The other contests average between 120 and 155 solo contestants, and fifteen to twenty-five groups. All of these contests operate at near-peak capacity, and are limited by how many players can be squeezed into one day of competition. Determining the total number of unique national-level solo competitors for any given year would require a complete roster from each of the contests, but I estimate that it is not much higher than 300, and certainly less than 400. The national contests draw competitors from all over the country, and while the number of players who attend every contest is probably very small, a lot of competitors attend several contests every year. Many *ryūha* have their own competitions which prepare lower level students for eventually entering a national competition. These are not regional qualifying contests like those held in Ireland, but no doubt have the effect of reducing the number of *ryūha* students who decide to compete nationally in any given year.

In terms of gender, today the numbers are fairly evenly split between men and women. This was not always the case: looking back at 1998 in Hirosaki, the first year that women had a separate category, there were a total of fifty-one contestants in the men's A and B-levels and only eighteen in the women's.

Goertzen reports that the largest fiddling contest in the US takes place over five full days of competition, and while he does not give numbers this clearly suggests more participants than the largest of the *Tsugaru shamisen* national competitions (Goertzen 2008, 38). In terms of gender,

⁵³ The actual number of distinct individuals is less than 449 and 302, as these numbers do not account for solo players who also participated in group performances.

he notes that “men outnumber women considerably, though the genders even out among the youngest participants” (ibid., 37). It is worth noting here that socializing plays a very important role for participants at these fiddle contests, and that unofficial jamming around campfires outside of the contest is the main reason that many people attend (ibid., 26).

As was noted above in the section on categories, the numbers of participants at international Irish music competitions is at least an order of magnitude larger than both *Tsugaru shamisen* and American fiddling contests. Henry estimates that competitors at all levels “number in the tens of thousands each year” (Henry 1989, 69).

Awards

In general the contests seem to have settled on a strategy of offering a large number of awards relative to the number of contestants as a way to motivate players. The large number of categories, and the awarding of trophies for first, second, third and in some cases up to sixth place, puts the possibility of winning something within the reach of many contestants. Most of the awards are symbolic – a small trophy and a certificate stating the winner's ranking – but even when actual cash prizes are offered, they are insignificant when compared to the costs of travel and lodging incurred in attending the contest. Instead, winning a low-level category, or placing at any level serves to motivate players to improve their playing, and winning a national title is often the first step to becoming a professional player.

Neither Goertzen, nor Henry, nor Loten write in any detail about the numbers of awards at contests or the amount of prize money offered, though Loten does mention that the cash awards in Ontario piping competitions were insignificant in the 1990s (Loten 1995, 21). Henry notes that winning the title of “all-Ireland champion” is useful in securing paying gigs, suggesting that even

in the world of Irish music competition, where spectators number in the hundreds of thousands every year, prize money is not a significant motivating factor (Henry 1989, 80, 69).

Winners

In general the winners of the contests tend to be young, with the average age in the early to mid-twenties. The youngest winner ever was fourteen, but winners in their mid- to late teens are not uncommon, while very few contestants have won beyond their early forties. The reason for this is that older, established players would have little to gain from winning, while losing could damage their reputation. In terms of age, the outliers are Kobe, which emphasized modern playing and skewed very young (the oldest winner there was twenty-seven) and Aomori, which requires a mastery of a large number of pieces and skews older (the oldest winner so far was fifty-four, and the average winner's age is thirty-six).

Until about the year 2000, Hirosaki was the only contest that really mattered – a win at Kanagi was only seen as a step towards winning Hirosaki – so multiple wins at Hirosaki was a player's way to distinguish himself. Early on there were double winners, but Shibutani Kazuo distinguished himself by being the first to win three times in a row, at which point he was forced to retire from the contest. Since then there have been five other three-time consecutive winners at Hirosaki. With the proliferation of contests, a new goal seems to have been established, with the best players collecting first place trophies from as many contests as possible. Shibata Masato has twelve championship titles in total, having won in Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, Nagoya, three times in Kanagi, and five times in Hirosaki before retiring in 2012. No one else has been nearly as successful but currently Kasai Yoshiyuki has a total of six championships at four different contests, and several other players have won at three or four different contests as of 2015, and

may win more.

Distinguishing Features

With so many contests, each seems to feel the need to distinguish itself from the others. Hirosaki, once its dominance was contested, began to rely on its location and long history for legitimacy. Kanagi had, from its inception, closely identified itself with Nitabō, the purported founder of the style; its recent adoption of an exciting tournament to decide the overall winner might be seen as a further attempt to distinguish itself from other contests. Tokyo is distinguished by the strong support of the most influential names in *Tsugaru shamisen*, and its strong adjudication. Osaka offers fair adjudication and an inclusive mass performance for players who may not be ready for the rigours of competition. Kobe billed itself as the contest for modern *Tsugaru shamisen*. Aomori utilizes a giant screen to add drama to each performance, and requires a mastery of core repertoire of its top-level contestants. Finally, Nagoya has set up a transparent adjudication process with ten clear criteria on which contestants are judged.

Prestige

Winning any of these contests allows a player to call him or herself a “national champion,” but, as was shown above, some championships are more prestigious than others. It was pointed out that Hirosaki was the most important contest until about the turn of the millennium, at which point the general consensus was that Tokyo successfully challenged its authority. More recently Aomori City's contest seems to be vying for the number one position with its bar-raising repertoire requirements. Significantly, these three contests are the only ones that do not qualify their title with a place name. Hirosaki, being first, did not need a qualifier, but Tokyo's ambition

to become the dominant contest is reflected in its name: refusing to add a qualifying place name, as Kanagi had, was no doubt seen as a challenge to Hirosaki. This intent is even more obvious in the case of Aomori's defiantly titled *Tsugaru shamisen* Japan Number One Deciding Battle.

Hirosaki's prestige is largely due to its location and the weight of its thirty-five-year history, and Tokyo derives its prestige largely from the backing of the Japan *Min'yō* Association and heads of many of the *Tsugaru shamisen* schools. The narrative for the time being is that Hirosaki is the most important traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* contest, and Tokyo is the most important modern *Tsugaru shamisen* contest. Aomori, with many of the same judges and backers as Tokyo and its emphasis on mastery of the traditional repertoire, can be seen as an attempt to challenge Hirosaki's dominance of traditional *Tsugaru shamisen*, though it is still too early to tell whether it will succeed.

Gender

Women were under-represented in the early years of the contest at Hirosaki, but not overwhelmingly so. The number of female competitors has steadily risen over time, and today they constitute between forty and forty-five percent of the competition entrants. Their success at competitions, however, has been progressing at a much slower rate. It was not until 2005 that a woman finally won a national competition, but since then it has become increasingly common. As of 2015, only Hirosaki has yet to crown a female champion. Tokyo has had five female winners, Nagoya has had three, and Kanagi, Osaka, Kobe and Aomori have each had two. These sixteen championships have been won by eight women: Nishimura Shinobu, Matsubashi Reika, Shibata Yuri, Shirafuji Hikari, Takeda Kanami, Habu Misao, Suzuki Rie, and Sugai Mayu.

A full examination of gender and *Tsugaru shamisen* is beyond the scope of this work; for now

it can be said that *Tsugaru shamisen* was traditionally thought of as a masculine genre, but that this is changing. It is loud, fast, and aggressive, in contrast to more conventionally feminine *shamisen* genres, like Kyoto's delicate and subtle genre *jiuta*, or the intimate *kouta* of the geisha. All of the earliest players of *Tsugaru shamisen*, the *bosama*, were by definition men, as was the subsequent generation of players in *min'yō* troupes, though they usually accompanied female singers. Historically, then, it is a strongly gendered tradition, so much so that in 2015 in Hirosaki, the terms *chikara-zuyoi* and *takumashisa* were still cited as essential components of a winning performance. While these terms can be translated, respectively, as the gender-neutral "boldness" and "courage," they carry deeply masculine connotations. However, just as *Tsugaru shamisen* is increasingly thought of as a national and even international music, it is losing its image as a strictly masculine genre.

According to Goertzen, American fiddling has a similarly male-dominated history, connected as it was to "drinking, carousing, and the devil" (Goertzen 1996, 357). He notes that at the contests in the 1990s, older fiddlers were overwhelmingly male, but that "half or more of the younger ones (were) female" (ibid.). Over a decade later, however, he notes that it is still rare for a woman to win a championship, and that "there seems to be something ineffable not yet shared between genders, something about guys with salty personalities learning from each other that adds the final aggressive polish to a breakdown" (Goertzen 2008, 111). This sentiment would not be unfamiliar to many *Tsugaru shamisen* traditionalists. Loten writes that at solo piping contests in the early 1990s "the participants were predominantly men" but that young girls were becoming more common in the lower levels (Loten 1995, 22). She explains the gender imbalance historically by noting its strong connection to the military, and socially by noting that "women interested in the Scottish arts" are much more likely to take up Highland dancing (ibid., 27).

Similarly, women interested in the folk music of Tsugaru, particularly if they planned to pursue it professionally, previously became singers as there was almost no hope of becoming a professional *Tsugaru shamisen* player.

Stylistic Change

Richard Blaustein has stated that “competition accelerates stylistic changes and standardization,” and this has certainly been the case at *Tsugaru shamisen* national competitions (Blaustein 1993, 269). He points to an increase in the technical refinement of playing as a common stylistic change. Comparing the type of playing that wins national *Tsugaru shamisen* competitions to more traditional or local styles, this increase in refinement is obviously at play here. Anthony Rausch asked a number of players from the Tsugaru region to characterize the traditional local style, and found that “most agree that it is not a perfectly pleasing sound, rather it is a Tsugaru sound – not too slick, not too clean, rough and not right on, but powerful and real” (Rausch 2006, 207). Beyond simple refinement, all of the contests discussed in this chapter promote stylistic innovation to some degree: even in conservative Hirosaki, at the 2015 awards ceremony, Sasamori Takefusa stated that winning performances should have something new in them, but not stray too far from the proper style.

As for standardization, Blaustein partially explains it as being the result of other contestants emulating winning performances; this has been expressed by many people I've spoken to who complain that all of the players sound the same these days. Blaustein also notes that in competition the “range of acceptable styles and tunes decreases” (Blaustein 1993, 269). The fact that most national competition pieces are versions of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*” shows that this is clearly the case here too.

Edward O. Henry has looked at the question of the effect of government funding on folk music in Ireland. He reminds the reader that folk music has been used to nationalist ends almost as long as these two concepts have existed, and that it “has remained an available tool for the projection of national ideology. Governments promote those kinds of music favouring the desired image” (Henry 1989, 68). Recognizing the potential it has for influencing the music, he cites an unpublished work by Mark E. Forry that shows how some folk genres in Yugoslavia were significantly changed under government sponsorship – a common occurrence, particularly in communist countries that use folk music to represent themselves internationally (ibid., 90; Slobin 2011, 59-63).

Henry concludes that government funding has not had the same sort of heavy-handed effect on folk music in Ireland, but that competitions can none-the-less “have unintended, far-reaching consequences” on the music. He points out that competitions in effect “legislate the style by the selection of winners and the enunciation of the criteria by which they are selected” (Henry 1989, 91). He notes that younger players model their playing on that of the winning players which they hear both at the contests, and through other media exposure that winners are granted access to (ibid., 92). He adds that the availability of portable recorders and commercial recordings has also affected the style in ways that are difficult to separate from the influence of contests, and quotes an older competitor who insisted that the access to recordings had greatly raised the standard of competition (ibid.).

Anthony Rausch has written about the effect of government funding on Tsugaru's unique style of lacquerware and compared it to the situation with *Tsugaru shamisen*. He found that the former enjoys governmental support at the national, prefectural, and local levels, which has resulted in standardization of processes, and a narrowing of the variety of products produced, but that

Tsugaru shamisen, in contrast, lacks significant government funding (Rausch 2006, 105). He notes that, if anything, “local municipalities are instead capitalizing on the music's popularity while offering very little tangible support” (ibid., 11). Rausch's findings suggest that the sort of governmental influence on folk music that has been observed in socialist and communist states has not occurred in the case of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

The effect of competitions on style has not gone unnoticed by contest organizers, and in Japan and elsewhere, attempts have been made to mitigate this unavoidable fact. In some Irish music competitions, slow airs were made a mandatory part of upper level competition when it became apparent that they were being neglected, and some American fiddle contests maintain a seniors' category partly to ensure that older styles favoured by aging players are not entirely lost (Henry 1989, 78; Goertzen 1996, 359). In the same way, it was noted that some of the national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests have instituted measures to ensure young players do not focus solely on instrumental versions of “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi*.”

Conclusion

In the first half of this chapter I provided an ethnographic description of a representative contest, and in the second half I traced the history of the seven major national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests. I discussed what I take to be the important aspects of each contest and at the end of the chapter summarized my findings. In this summary I created a generalized description of the state of national *Tsugaru shamisen* contests and compared this to that of contest traditions in other cultures.

Chapter Five: *Tsugaru Shamisen* Revival and Recontextualization

Introduction

The first section of this chapter details the almost one hundred-year history of *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals, and then focuses specifically on that history's two high water marks: the revival of the 1970s, and the millennial revival. The second section of the chapter considers these two revivals in relation to six major themes of music revival literature identified by editors Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Hill and Bithell 2014, 4). These six themes, which find expression to a greater or lesser degree in most revivals, can be summarized as follows: First, “revivals are almost always almost always motivated by dissatisfaction with some aspect of the present and a desire to effect some sort of cultural change” (ibid.). Second, elements of a tradition are subject to valuation by contemporary standards, and historical narratives are selectively remembered or misremembered. Third, decontextualization and recontextualization necessarily take place as a music moves from past to present, from one place to another, from one social group to another, and so on. Fourth, as recontextualization occurs, questions of authenticity and legitimacy are raised. Fifth, in order for a revival to be successful, new methods of transmission, dissemination and promotion of the music must be developed. Sixth, if a revival is successful, it will move in to a “post-revival” phase, which may take any number of forms (ibid.). Since these six points are presented in the order in which they typically occur, from the inception of a revival, through the various stages of change that necessarily occur, to the post-revival phase, the list might also be used to structure a examination of a given revival. I use it here to compare the two mainstream *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals: The revival that began in early 1970s and focused on Takahashi Chikuzan, and the revival that began in 2000 and focused on the Yoshida Brothers.

It must be recognized at the outset that, following Slobin (1983), the term “music revival” is inaccurate, in that it rarely involves bringing music back to life as the term suggests. More typically it involves something less dramatic - a rediscovery, or a resurgence of a music with a dwindling audience, for example. As Hill and Bithell point out, the term also obscures the fact that the thing that is “revived” is not identical to that which was in need of reviving, that revival necessarily transforms its object into something new (Hill and Bithell 2014, 5). I continue to use the term here with the understanding that it stands in for a host of processes including “reclamation, recovery, rescue, recuperation, restitution, restoration, renovation, reinvention, re-implementation, reactivation, re-traditionalization, re-indigenization, re-appropriation, resumption, resurgence, recycling, reproduction, revision, and re-creation” (ibid.).

The History of *Tsugaru Shamisen* Revivals

It is generally recognized that there have been two big *Tsugaru shamisen* “booms”: one in the 1970s and another in the 2000s (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 170). These are the high water marks for *Tsugaru shamisen* in Japanese culture, and refer to the two mass-mediated revivals, but in fact the genre has experienced an almost continual waxing and waning since the advent of commercial recording. This section delineates that history, filling in the details that show how the stage was set by smaller revivals without which the mass media revivals would have been unlikely to have ever occurred. I will generally refer to the first revival as “the 1970s revival” and the second as “the millennial revival,” though I occasionally refer to them by the ordinals “first” and “second.”

Chapter three noted that *Tsugaru min'yō* were being recorded as early as 1918, but it was not until the late 1920s that they came to be recorded with any great frequency (Matsuki 2011, 139-

140). At this time, the music was still thriving in its native area, but was introduced to a wider audience through recording; what happened may be described as a revival using the wider definition of “the adoption of arts and cultural practices outside the source cultural group” (Jabbour 2014, 117). In this period “larger organizations, especially local newspapers, well-funded performance troupes, and Tokyo-based record companies” took control of *min'yō* from all over the country, and essentially turned it into a form of commercial music, which, as Groemer notes, “should probably be labeled 'folk' only with great reservations” (Groemer 2012, 73).

Min'yō preservation societies (*min'yō hozonkai*) were springing up all over Japan at this time too, marking a clear shift in the way the music was being thought about (ibid., 77). Preservation societies were first formed in the backlash against westernization in the 1890s to protect traditional art and architecture, but the first *min'yō* preservation society, the *Seichō Yasugi Bushi Hozonkai* (Society for the Preservation of the Authentic Version of “*Yasugi Bushi*”) was established in 1911 (Hughes 2008, 213-14). This preservation society was not established to rescue the song from obscurity, but to protect it from perceived contamination. It specifically tied the introduction of “bawdy” lyrics into the song to the modernization of Japan, and saw its function as the preservation of the traditional, “morally pure” version of the song (ibid.). While the intent in this case is somewhat different than what folk song collectors like Cecil Sharp were doing in the West, it indicates a level of awareness about folk songs that had not previously existed.

Fewer recordings were made as the 1930s progressed, both because resources were directed towards the war effort and because *min'yō*'s inherently regional nature did not serve the narrative of a unified nation under the emperor. However it was during this period that solo *shamisen* performances of Tsugaru *min'yō* were developed by the players in travelling *min'yō* troupes of

northern Japan (particularly Shirakawa Gumpachirō), and the instrumental tradition that is today known as *Tsugaru shamisen* came into being (Matsuki 2011, 141).

Groemer cites a source from 1944 that reports that, since the 1930s, the sales figures for *min'yō* had been stronger in the Tsugaru region than anywhere else in Japan, and that Tsugaru *min'yō* were at that time the most commonly recorded *min'yō* in the country (Groemer 2012, 75). *Min'yō* singers from the north of Japan, too, had dominated the recording industry since the 1930s, and Hughes suggests that this is because the area's “relative isolation from the centres of modernization helped traditional folk song maintain its important role in daily life” (Hughes 2008, 141).

In the postwar era *min'yō* rebounded, with the government radio, and later television company NHK, producing a number of programs dedicated to the genre, like Narita Unchiku and Takahashi Chikuzan's *Min'yō kyōshitsu* (Folk song classroom) that began airing in 1954 (Matsubayashi 2000, 328). Hughes cites a number of surveys on listening preferences carried out by NHK between 1931 and 1971 which show between forty-four and forty-nine percent of respondents counted *min'yō* among the genres they enjoyed listening to (Hughes 2008, 146). The sole survey from the 1950s has sixty-eight percent of respondents enjoying the genre, which reflects the well-known fact that that decade was a boom time for *min'yō* (see Machida and Asano 1960; Osada and Chifuji 1998).

One manifestation of this boom was the proliferation in the mid to late 1950s of *min'yō sakaba*, or “folk song bars,” in Tokyo's Asakusa district. The economy was beginning to rebound and an unprecedented number of construction projects of all sizes drew workers from the countryside, particularly the Tōhoku region of northern Japan. Frequenting these folk song bars was one of the ways the migrant workers dealt with their homesickness. As the workers were

overwhelmingly from the north of Japan, so too was the music played at these bars, and *Tsugaru shamisen* featured prominently. *Tsugaru shamisen* giants Fukushi Masakatsu and Oyama Mitsugu moved to Tokyo in 1956 to work in folk song bars (Matsuki 2011, 142). Up and coming players like Takahashi Yūjirō also moved to Tokyo at this time, and were able to establish careers in this era of plentiful performance opportunities. Ill health prevented Shirakawa Gumpachirō from making the move; though he did not die until 1963, he made his last studio recordings in 1955 in Tokyo (ibid.).

Pop singer Mihashi Michiya is generally credited with laying the foundation of the “first” *Tsugaru shamisen* boom when he moved from pop songs to *min'yō*, the music he grew up singing. Midorikawa Takahisa writes that “the performance style of the thick-necked instrument known as the *Tsugaru shamisen* was introduced across Japan to *min'yō* fans, or at any rate the common people, by Mihashi Michiya” (Midorikawa 1995, 5). Matsuki specifically credits a two-night stint by Mihashi on September twenty-first and twenty-second, 1959, at the *Yurakucho Nihon Gekijo*, a famous theatre in Tokyo, for introducing Tokyo (and therefore the rest of Japan) to *Tsugaru shamisen* (Matsuki 2011, 143). The concerts, which were presented as a commemoration of “twenty years in *min'yō*” for the then twenty-nine year old Mihashi, featured both Kida Rinshōei and Shirakawa Gumpachirō on *Tsugaru shamisen*. Mihashi was exceedingly popular – in 1983 he became the first Japanese singer to have sold over 100 million records – and appeared regularly in the media (Groemer 2012, 92). By this time Shirakawa was not well, but Kida had many opportunities to appear with Mihashi on stage, television, and recordings, and his style of *tataki shamisen* became quite well known. From 1961, Kida was based in Tokyo, performing in folk song bars, teaching, and touring (Matsuki 2011, 143; Groemer 2012, 92).

In 1963 Takahashi Chikuzan released the first solo *Tsugaru shamisen* album on the initiative of Saitō Kōji, a young director at King Records. The senior staff initially opposed the idea, and initially had a conservative 2000 discs pressed, but within two years it had sold 70,000 copies (Matsubayashi 2000, 140). At the time, a *min'yō* record that sold three to four thousand units was considered a success, so clearly, while it could be said that Mihashi introduced *Tsugaru shamisen* to mainstream Japan, Chikuzan had tapped into a new record-buying audience. Chikuzan had worked as an accompanist to *Tsugaru min'yō* singer Narita Unchiku (1888-1974) since 1950, but with Narita's retirement had to figure out how to make it on his own. During his time with Narita he had composed a number of original *shamisen* accompaniments for old *Tsugaru min'yō* that Narita had previously sung a cappella, but had only begun creating solo compositions of the sort featured on the album from about 1960 (Matsubayashi 2000, 328).

The peak of the first *Tsugaru shamisen* revival, by which time Chikuzan would become a household name, was still about a decade away: in 1972 *Kambachi*, a televised performance set on a rustic soundstage, aired, and in 1973 Chikuzan began monthly concerts at the avant-garde theatre space Jean-Jean in Tokyo's hip Shibuya district, and began touring all over the country (Matsubayashi 2000, 329). His audience included *min'yō* fans of the sort that had been following *Tsugaru shamisen* since the late 1950s, but also a new young, urban demographic that generally preferred Western popular music. The boom might be said to have reached its peak with the release of *Tsugaru-jamisen hitoritabi* (*Tsugaru shamisen: solitary travels*), his autobiography, in 1975, or its 1977 movie adaptation, *Chikuzan hitoritabi*.

Alan Booth, a British writer and long-term resident of Japan who witnessed the 1970s revival first-hand, states “It began in the early 1970s but by 1980 it was over” (Booth 1995, 65). In 1982, in the aftermath of the revival, Yamada Chisato started the first national *Tsugaru shamisen*

contest. When asked why some two decades later, he said, rather dramatically “I just wanted people to remember – not just in Tsugaru, but in all of Japan – that there was such a thing as the *Tsugaru shamisen*. You didn't have to listen to it, as long as you remembered the words” (Sasamori and Westerhoven, 2005). The first contest had only nineteen participants, but through the 1980s the number of participants, and *Tsugaru shamisen* players in general, grew steadily. The contest had 140 contestants in 1986, and it was estimated that there were twenty to thirty thousand players at that time (Daijō 1998, 36; Asashō 1986). Matsuki writes that by 1988 “signs of a *Tsugaru shamisen* boom were beginning to be seen” (Matsuki 2012, 98). Certainly in the late 1980s and early 1990s the profile of *Tsugaru shamisen* was being raised in Aomori: a second national contest was founded in Kanagi, as was detailed in chapter four; memorial stones to the genre's pioneers were erected; the *Tsugaru-jamisen kyōgikai* (*Tsugaru Shamisen Association*) was established and produced *Tsugaru shamisen* events like mass performances that enlisted participants from all over Japan (ibid., 100-102). The number of players in the population centres of Tokyo and Osaka was also growing. People generally studied under a teacher who belonged to one of the big schools, or *ryūha*, founded by the likes of Kida Rinshōei, Oyama Mitsugu, or Takahashi Yūjirō in Tokyo, or Kyōgoku Toshinori in Osaka.

Despite all of this activity, the national profile of *Tsugaru shamisen* was at a low point. NHK, the national radio and television company, continued its mandate to support traditional music, so the music was being broadcasted regularly, but one had to search it out. When I was beginning to look for recordings in the early 1990s they were hard to find. A record store that prided itself on its wide musical selection might have one of the compilations put out by King Records, but the average shop carried nothing at all. Players have told me that if anyone had somehow gotten the idea to try to play during this period, it would have been difficult to go about getting an

instrument and finding a teacher. Nonetheless, the number of players did continue to grow: in 1999 there were 274 contestants at Hirosaki's contest and an estimated fifty or sixty thousand *Tsugaru shamisen* players nationwide (Daijō 1999).

On December 31st, 1997 Ryōichirō and Kenichi Yoshida appeared as the Yoshida Brothers on NHK's popular annual year-end music program *Kōhaku utagassen* (Red and white song battle), exposing a large audience to a new generation of *Tsugaru shamisen* players that many may not have known to exist. Earlier that year Takahashi Chikuzan had passed his title on to his student Takahashi Chikuyō, who then became known as *nidaimé* Takahashi Chikuzan (Takahashi Chikuzan II). The original Chikuzan had been struggling with cancer for several years at this point and it was not entirely unexpected when he died in February of 1998. Chikuzan's failing health may or may not have been what prompted the producers of the music program to have the Yoshida Brothers on, but it did put the brothers in a position to benefit from the many media tributes that appeared in the wake of Chikuzan's death. In 1998, Chikuzan's young urban fans of the 1970s were now in their late forties and early fifties – not much younger than Chikuzan had been during the boom – and the appearance of the young, urban Yoshida Brothers made for an odd, intriguing reversal. In their youth an exotic music played by an old man from an unknowable earlier era had captured their imagination, and there was something promising in the fact that now, in middle age, they were being reintroduced to it by these polite young boys.

Capitalizing on this timing, in 1999 Sony released *Ibuki*, the Yoshida Brothers' first CD, and like Chikuzan's first LP, it sold in numbers far exceeding a typical recording of its type. It won traditional Japanese music album of the year at the 1999 Nihon Golden Disk Awards, and in its first few years of release, it sold 90,000 copies against a genre average of 5000 (Matsuki 2011, 149; PacRim News, 2001). The second album, released the following year, sold over 100,000

copies and soon the young top stars were lining up for major label releases (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 170). These numbers fall far short of a successful pop release, the sales of which can number in the millions, but were very impressive for a traditional music genre. As Groemer notes about the millennial revival, “for the bulk of the population it remains a style that is more respected than financially supported” (Groemer 2012, 97). Even so, the sales figures are not a clear indicator of the profile the *Tsugaru shamisen* enjoyed at this time. In the early to mid-2000s, the music of the Yoshida Brothers, and Agatsuma Hiromitsu was used in commercials for beer, cars, fast food, and video games. *Tsugaru shamisen* was featured as background music on television programs, and two movies were made on the subject. I bought a low-end cellphone in 2005 that came pre-loaded with about twenty ringtones, one of which was labeled “*Tsugaru-jamisen*.” In the decade and a half since the millennial revival started, I have spoken to hundreds of people in a wide variety of situations whose level of engagement with the music ranged from complete disinterest to utter absorption. Almost every one of those people had heard of the Yoshida Brothers, knew the term “*Tsugaru shamisen*,” and recognized the characteristic sound of the music, but outside of the people connected to traditional music, as players or long-time fans, almost no one admitted to having bought even one *Tsugaru shamisen* CD. Most of them had only heard the music on a television show or commercial, and while almost all had a positive opinion of it, and were delighted to know that *I* was studying the music, they themselves were not sufficiently interested to add it to their music collection. As much as the 1970s revival relied on Chikuzan's image, a significant part of his fan base was new listeners. The millennial revival, on the other hand, was successful in making the whole country aware of the musical tradition again, but seems to have brought far fewer new fans to the music.

By the early 2000s, as Yamada had hoped, the term had made its way back into the lexicon,

and like Chikuzan in the 1970s, the Yoshida Brothers were a household name. The media were presenting this as a youth-centred music, and certainly the performers who were given media attention were young, but the audience was not particularly youthful. At a Yoshida Brothers concert I attended in 2001 in Kyoto, I estimated that ninety percent of the audience was over sixty. I came to learn that this was typical, and that for most of the postwar period, it has been this older demographic that supports traditional music. The actual financial supporters of this music were aging traditional music enthusiasts, many of whom had been fans of Chikuzan in the 1970s, or were at least old enough to remember Chikuzan and were now being swept along in the nostalgia of the revival, and players of the music, which, thanks to the contests, included a large contingent of young people. Neither my estimations of audience demographics at concerts, nor my extensive informal sampling of the general population, suggest that Japan's young people were drawn to the music in the numbers that they were in the 1970s revival.

Still, this mass media boom would have been impossible without the participant-driven but much smaller boom that was happening in the 1980s and 1990s, and there is no doubt that the general increase in awareness of the music attracted a significant number of new players, relative to the total number of players. Chikuzan's personality and music were something from an earlier time, and only a small percentage of his young urban audience made the leap to learn the instrument. The Yoshida Brothers, on the other hand, were much more relatable, and this, coupled with the national contests, relative availability of teachers and self-study materials like DVDs, and books, made taking that leap much easier. By the time the mass media-based revival started to wane around 2007, the number of players had increased across the country. The participatory revival that gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s provided the performers for the mass-mediated millennial revival, which in turn generated new participants. In 2016, while

the general public has lost interest in *Tsugaru shamisen*, many of these new participants have continued to play. A small number of players who came up through the contest system still manage to make a living as touring performers, and a much larger number perform and teach. A recent newspaper article notes that “According to a white paper on leisure, the number of enthusiasts of traditional Japanese musical instruments declined from 3.3 million in 1990 to 1.2 million in 2008,” or less than one percent of the population (Simplified *Shamisen* 2016). It is all the more striking that the number of *Tsugaru shamisen* players continued to grow in this period when the overall number of traditional Japanese musicians has drastically shrunk. It is impossible to say what will happen in the future, but it is clear that the music is being played by more people today than ever before.

Music Revivals: Six Themes

One: Motivations

The first point in Hill and Bithell's list considers the motivations of a revival. They state that most revivals are motivated in part by a “dissatisfaction with some aspect of the present”; this, not coincidentally, is also a key factor in the experience of nostalgia, which is connected to revival in ways that will be explored below (Hill and Bithell 2014, 4; Chase and Shaw 1989, 15). Hill and Bithell list some other possible motivations for revival, including “the bolstering of the identity of a ... nation,” “Nation-building,” and “anti-colonial struggles” (Hill and Bithell 2014, 11).

All of these are applicable to the situation in Japan leading up to the first revival: while Japan was not technically colonized, it was occupied by the US until 1952. Some have argued that Japan was colonized musically by American pop music in the early post-war period, and indeed

some of the biggest pop stars sang cover versions of American hits in English, a language in which neither they nor their audience had much fluency (McGoldrick 2010; Bourdaghs 2012, 54). It is not a stretch to imagine that some of the motivation to revive traditional forms of music could have come from being inundated by popular music sung in the language of the occupying power.

More generally, though, the economic growth of the postwar period, and the concomitant modernization had much of the Japanese populace looking back to the past, with a sense of loss that manifested itself as an interest in all things traditional. Marilyn Ivy points out in *Discourses of the Vanishing* that “interest in folklore and folklore studies boomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” and this extended to things like folk crafts, food, art, literature, and travel to areas that were perceived to still retain some of Japan's past (Ivy 1995, 59).

In chapter two I examined the circumstances under which Japan's modern identity was created, and it is clear that the same things that motivated intellectuals like Watsuji, Yanagita, and Yanagi to begin this undertaking in the 1920s was at work again in the 1960s and 70s. The sense that Japan had of catching up to the West and becoming part of the modern world in the early twentieth century was followed by a nostalgia for what it had lost to modernity, and the attainment of economic stability in the post-war period had a similar effect.

This sense of loss is part of the *Tsugaru shamisen* discourse. Writer Osabe Hideo's (b. 1934) influential short stories *Tsugaru Jonkara bushi* (1970) and *Tsugaru Yosare Bushi* (1971) were written in the lead up to the boom of the 1970s. Osabe was one of the urban taste makers who made *Tsugaru shamisen* cool. In an interview on the weekly NHK radio program *Nippon Min'yō* in 2001, Osabe related the story of his own rediscovery of *Tsugaru shamisen*. Originally from Hirosaki, he had moved to Tokyo to attend university, and stayed on, finding work as a

journalist. One night at a jazz club he happened to ask the resident drummer, an African American who had been in Japan for some time, if he had a favourite Japanese singer. The drummer responded that he thought Mihashi Michiya was great, and enjoyed his *Tsugaru shamisen* playing too, which surprised Osabe, who was expecting to hear the name of one of a handful of Japanese jazz singers. That this cool American could find something in a singer of old-fashioned Japanese pop and *min'yō* made him reconsider his own leanings. Until this time, like many migrants from the north, he had been embarrassed by his birthplace, and had internalized the Tokyoite's view of it as a backwater with no culture. After some soul searching he moved back to Tsugaru for a time to see it with fresh eyes, and wrote the stories that in 1973 won him the Naoki Prize, a prestigious literary award, and helped interest a generation of young Japanese people in the *Tsugaru shamisen*.

In his short story “Tsugaru Jonkara Bushi,” written in and set around 1970, the protagonist, a young journalist described as having “fallen into a slump,” is asked to review a Kida Rinshōei concert and to his own surprise finds something compelling in the music: “It had seemed to him that at the center of that harsh, wild music he could vaguely sense the wellspring of the passion that had begun to dry up inside him” (Osabe 2009a, 60-61). Here Osabe is hinting at the general sense of alienation that so often attends modernity. It is not unique to the postwar period in Japan, but the mass migration to urban centres and the attendant sense of rootlessness was no doubt being experienced on a wider scale than ever before.

The millennial revival, on the other hand, occurred in a period of economic downturn; Japan's ever-improving post-war economy, often described as a “bubble,” was said to have burst by 1990, but it took another decade for the repercussions to be widely felt. Just as the earlier revival could be connected to the economic growth of the early post-war period, the economic insecurity

at the beginning of the millennium could be said to have created another sort of “dissatisfaction with the present.” This did not escape the marketers of *Tsugaru shamisen* music. The liner notes for a 2002 CD from the brother and sister *Tsugaru shamisen* duo Fukui Ichidai and Fukui Tenbi state explicitly that while the *Tsugaru shamisen* first began to be noticed in Tokyo in 1964 (this is a reference to the Tokyo Olympics, which conventionally marks the beginning of Japan's postwar recovery), it was garnering new attention in the hard economic times of the late 1990s. The writer goes on to assert that “the heroic and compelling *Tsugaru shamisen*” is a “*healing sound*” (using the English phrase) for this era (Ōjima 2002).

Two: The Selective Use of History

As was noted in chapter two, the past is not so much remembered as actively produced, and the form it takes depends on the needs of the present. In much the same way, the history of a revived music is shaped by the times in which the revival occurs. These “received histor(ies),” state Hill and Bithell, in the process of being told and retold, undergo changes: “corrections are made and new errors introduced,” “inconvenient details are erased and rough edges smoothed off,” and gaps are filled with “educated guesses, assumptions, imaginative leaps” (Hill and Bithell 2014, 13). Further, competing interpretations can arise, and the past may be “selectively employed, manipulated, and at times even fabricated to add legitimacy to choices made in the present, to challenge established orthodoxies, or to dispute claims to particular histories or traditions” (ibid., 14).

In this section I first consider the ways in which the 1970s revival misremembered the genre's history, including drawing too strong a connection between the *goze* and *Tsugaru shamisen*, singling out Chikuzan as *the* representative living player, and romanticizing his difficult early

life. I then look at two notable recent revisions: the rise of the Nitabō legend, and the rediscovery of Igarashi Kiyoei, an important early player.

Takahashi Chikuzan was the focus of the 1970s revival, and the fact that he had been a *bosama*, and that *bosama* were supposed to have invented this music, meant that, for the mainstream boom at least, there was not much need to look further – he was the living connection to the beginnings of the music. Yamada Chisato connects Chikuzan's popularity to what he calls the “Discover Japan *furusato* boom” of the early 1970s, during which Japanese interest in its traditional culture peaked (Yamada 1978, 87). “Discover Japan” was an advertising campaign that Japan Railways started in 1970 to promote travel within Japan, and tapped into the growing interest in traditional Japanese culture at the time (see Robertson 1988, 18; Ivy 1995, 34-48). He includes Chikuzan, the *goze*, and other travelling performers as part of this boom, and notes that young people who had had no interest in *min'yō* nonetheless began listening to Chikuzan (Yamada 1978, 87).

The *Echigo goze*, the guild of blind itinerant female performers, predated *Tsugaru shamisen*, and were known to have travelled widely from their base in Niigata to the south, were at this time generally thought to have introduced *shamisen* to the *bosama* of Tsugaru. There was little evidence of this, and it may have been based on nothing more than the fact that members of both groups were travelling blind musicians. An NHK anthology of *min'yō* from Aomori published in 1956 discusses the *shamisen* techniques of the Tsugaru region, noting that there seem to be “an exceptionally large number of influences,” but does not include the music of the *goze* on the list, suggesting that this connection may have been conceived, or at least popularized, at some later point (Kawanishi 1956, 253). At any rate, the *goze* and the *bosama* were connected in the popular imagination. Ozawa Shōichi (1929-2012) was an actor, essayist, and popular media

personality in the 60s and 70s and did a lot on radio, on record, and in print to publicize the last itinerant performers of an earlier era, including story tellers, snake handlers, spirit mediums, sideshow performers, *goze*, *bosama*, and a great variety of musicians. In 1971 Ozawa released an influential seven-LP box set with copious liner notes entitled *Japan's itinerant arts*, which both reflected and promoted this vague connection (Ozawa 1999).

As discussed earlier, Mihashi Michiya sparked the mainstream interest in *Tsugaru shamisen* in the late 1950s, specifically the harder *tataki* (“striking”) style of Shirakawa Gumpachirō and Kida Rinshōei. The same 1956 NHK anthology states that Shirakawa is the undisputed top player, and Kida is mentioned as the other famous player of the time. A few paragraphs later Takahashi Chikuzan and Mihashi Michiya are also mentioned by name, but are clearly considered less important in the world of *min'yō* (Kawanishi 1956, 253). In 1963 Chikuzan released the first solo *Tsugaru shamisen* LP, which slowly increased the profile of the quieter *nejimi* style of *bosama shamisen* to mainstream Japan, but it still took the better part of a decade before the boom was really underway. That it focused on Chikuzan, rather than Kida, had a lot to do with Chikuzan’s perceived authenticity. Shirakawa and Kida had been the biggest names in the world of *Tsugaru min'yō* since the 1930s, and Shirakawa in particular had created many of the riffs that make up the core of the style today, and developed the very idea of solo *Tsugaru shamisen*, but Chikuzan had actually lived the life of a *bosama*. His ties to the past better fit the “Discover Japan” spirit of the times.

At the same time, other cultural forces were at play. As in North America and Europe, the early 1970s saw a (Western) folk boom, and a blues boom, and some of the same sensibilities that made these musical cultures appealing to a certain demographic applied to *Tsugaru shamisen* as well (*Blues, Nihon jōriku* 2015, 88). As Japan was getting rich and comfortable, it looked back

nostalgically at the not-too-distant past that seemed, from its present vantage point, harder but also simpler. This sensibility is obviously at work in some of Osabe Hideo's short stories, particularly in the romanticized description of the hard life of a *bosama*, and in his depiction of Kase no Momotarō as a drinking, gambling, travelling musical genius (Osabe 2009a, 62; Osabe 2009b, 107).

The biggest change in the received history of the millennial revival is the importance of Nitabō. He was not a particularly important part of the history of the genre until Daijō Kazuo began promoting him. He is completely absent from the short description of “the *shamisen* of the Tsugaru pieces”⁵⁴ in the 1956 NHK anthology mentioned above, which identifies Kase no Momotarō as the creator of this new way of playing (Kawanishi 1956, 253). Nitabō was not unknown – Shirakawa Gumpachirō had studied under him for three years, after all – but he was only thought of as a very good early player. He appears in Osabe Hideo's short story *Tsugaru Jonkara bushi* (1970) playing door to door in the late 1920s, and his playing is described as “much more complicated” than that of other *bosama* of the time (Osabe 2009a, 63-67). In *The tradition of Tsugaru min'yō* (1978), Yamada Chisato lists three men as being the first notable performers of Tsugaru *min'yō*: Kase no Momotarō, Tanesato no Matsutarō, and Dezaki no bō. He states that they were self-taught, and only played for the purpose of accompanying themselves, “with no melody or introduction” – in other words, without even short solo sections (Yamada 1978, 13-16). Nitabō is mentioned once later in the book, but only as a *bosama* who taught Shirakawa Gumpachirō; it is unclear whether or not Yamada was aware at the time that he also taught Kase no Momotarō and Dezaki no bō (ibid., 58).

Groemer points out that Daijō was not the first to single out Nitabō – Shirakawa Kanegorō, in

⁵⁴ The term “*Tsugaru shamisen*” was not yet in use at this time.

his book *Tales of old Kanagi* (1981), calls him “the virtuoso who created the sources of *Tsugaru-jamisen*” – but he has been his most vocal promoter (Groemer 2012, 60). From his numerous articles and books declaring Nitabō the originator of *Tsugaru shamisen*, to his founding of the National contest in Kanagi in 1989, to his part in establishing the *Tsugaru shamisen* museum in the same town in 2000 and the creation the animated movie *Nitaboh* in 2004, Daijō has done much to forward the Nitabō legend. When I first read about Nitabō in 1998 in the English adaptation of Daijō's *The birth of Tsugaru shamisen*, acquaintances in *Tsugaru shamisen* circles were quick to tell me that he was not generally recognized as the creator of the genre, but during my field work in 2010 I was surprised at how widely accepted the Nitabō legend had become. Henry Johnson, in writing that “the contemporary place of Nitabō is one that is sometimes questioned by some performers, scholars and enthusiasts alike,” (Johnson 2009, 84) drastically overestimates the degree to which the theory is accepted, but this further illustrates how successful Daijō has been. Between his books, the stone memorials in Kanagi, a display at the *Tsugaru shamisen* museum, and the animated movie, this revisionist history can appear quite convincing.

One positive development in the research on the genre's history is the recognition of Igarashi Kiyoei (1920-1952), an accompanist who worked alongside Shirakawa and Kida throughout the 1940s. He made his first recording in 1940, and died in 1952, drowning while trying to cross a swollen river on the way to a performance (Matsuki 2011, 75-77). He is almost entirely absent from writings on *Tsugaru shamisen* prior to Matsuki; he does appear in Groemer's monograph, but listed as “Igarashi *Shōei*,” Groemer's best guess on the reading of the characters that make up his given name after consulting with several experts in Hirosaki who were apparently unable to recall the correct pronunciation (Groemer 2012, 65). A television documentary from 2008 goes

as far as to say that he was among the four most important players of the time, with Shirakawa, Kida and Fukushi (ATV 2008; Yamamoto 2012). While this may or may not be true,⁵⁵ it is surprising that this important player was only accepted into the history of the genre almost sixty years after his death.

Three: Recontextualization and Transformation

The third point is that any revival necessarily involves recontextualization, or what Owe Ronström refers to as “*shifts* between different historic, geographic, social, and cultural contexts” (Ronström 2014, 45). Hill and Bithell note that the shift in performance environment is a common shift in folk musics, as they move from their original setting to the stage. This happened very early for *Tsugaru shamisen*, but what they describe as the “gradual process of professionalization, institutionalization, commercialization, and commodification” is ongoing (Hill and Bithell 2014, 17). They also point out that revivalists are often “partial outsiders to the chosen tradition rather than core culture-bearers” and may “incorporate further influences from other sources, resulting in new hybrid styles” (ibid., 16). This point plays out in interesting ways in the history of revival of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Section three is larger than the others in this chapter because it deals with some of the most important issues surrounding these two revivals. I first revisit the 1920s and 1930s when this music was first recorded to consider how *min'yō* in general was recontextualized by its initial professionalization, and then how context changed for *Tsugaru shamisen* with the move to Tokyo in the 1950s. Here I briefly look at stylistic changes and collaborations that resulted from

⁵⁵ A ranking chart of *Tsugaru shamisen* players from 1942 lists him as a second-tier player, but he is ranked fifth overall in a 1952 ranking chart, behind Shirakawa, Kida, Fukushi, and Chikuzan (Matsubayashi 2000, page 101; Takada 2010).

exposure to outside musics. Next I look at the contextual shifts that Chikuzan himself experienced in moving from *bosama* in the pre-war period to accompanist in the 1950s and solo player and cultural icon in the 1960s and 70s. I discuss how the young demographic in his audience developed, how the mainstream conception of *Tsugaru shamisen* was altered to make Chikuzan its representative player, and how Chikuzan's image was carefully shaped to maximize his appeal to the new demographic. Moving on to the millennial revival, I review how temporal, and spatial shifts have changed who plays the music, and what the music represents: as it becomes a national music it ceases to strongly index Tsugaru, as young performers become its focus it ceases to index tradition in the same way, and as the number of women players increases it ceases to index masculinity for much of its audience. I again consider the stylistic changes that result from this new recontextualization, and finally analyze some images of the Yoshida Brothers to show the ways in which the millennial revival's conception of *Tsugaru shamisen* differs from that of the first revival.

A large subset of *min'yō* were originally work songs, with names that reflect the work to which they were sung; rice planting, grain threshing, *sake* making, packhorse leading, wood gathering, and net hauling, to name a few stock types, are part of the *min'yō* repertoire in most parts of Japan. Naturally these songs underwent significant changes when they were adapted by professional performers who added instrumentation and embellished or even completely changed their melodies. But beyond this most obvious sort of recontextualization, even songs that were sung purely for entertainment by itinerant performers like the *goze* and *bosama* were recontextualized in various ways in the 1920s and 1930s.

First, the music itself was, of course, not originally thought of as folk music. Hughes points out that the *goze* sang *uta* (songs) rather than *min'yō* (folk songs) (Hughes 2012, 84). Groemer

writes that Chikuzan made the same point, and that the travelling troupes that he and Shirakawa and Kida belonged to were called *utakai* (“songfests”) even into the 1940s, rather than, for example, *min'yō taikai* (*min'yō* competitions) (Groemer 2012, 53). This began to change, as noted above, in the late 1920s, as record companies and other large organizations took control of the music, and in the very act of making it “presentable,” turned it into a commercial form. Groemer cites a local historian writing in 1933 about the way *min'yō* was changing: “until the late 1920s, performers of *min'yō* had 'stamped their feet on the stage like barbarians,' but now women in stylish hairdos and outfitted in kimono and complete with family crests were being paraded around town in automobiles before concerts and rendering everything 'commercial’” (ibid., 79).

Second, beyond the stage presentation, the content of the songs was altered in an attempt to make them more presentable. *Min'yō* all over the country were being held up as a wholesome alternative to other genres, and bawdy verses were replaced with respectable if sometimes bland or banal lyrics (Hughes 2012, 78-81; Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). Further, in the lead up to the Second World War, it was recognized that *min'yō* could be used to promote nationalism, but should first be stripped of overt signifiers of regionalism. A 1934 *Tō-ō nippō* newspaper article praised local *min'yō*, but suggested that the lyrics should be sung in standard Japanese: “‘Jonkara Bushi’ had been considered a bad song because ‘it was improperly pronounced and reeked of the countryside.’ But now, he continued, ‘the songs of the homeland have overcome such defects and have demonstrated their deep spiritual affinity with the people’” (Groemer 2012, 81).

By the post-war period, then, *min'yō* was a well-established commercial genre, albeit one whose image obscured this fact. The *Tsugaru shamisen* players who moved to Tokyo in the late 1950s were professional musicians moving where they could find work; the raucous atmosphere

of Tokyo's *min'yō sakaba* (folk song pubs) was probably not much different from that of the venues they had played in northern Japan. In fact, thanks to the mass migration of workers from the North to Tokyo, part of their audience would not have changed at all.⁵⁶ Clearly the players who came to Tokyo following Mihashi Michiya's introduction of *Tsugaru shamisen* to a national audience were not rural amateurs who had been playing by the fireside. Still, there was some kind of shift in the fact that they were performing this music for non-Tsugaru people, and were outside of Tsugaru themselves. Matsuki quotes Kida on how his playing changed when he was away from Tsugaru for too long: “When I am in Tokyo, the *shamisen* gets bad (*mainegu*); with the cold (*sabumikko*) in Tsugaru the soul (*tamushiko*) gets into the sound” (Matsuki 1994, 3).

Hill and Bithell note that recontextualization often involves musical change, that even core culture-bearers can change their style as a result of being exposed to new music. As a relatively new musical form, *Tsugaru shamisen* has been continually evolving: the recordings of Umeda Hōgetsu from the 1920s are often not much different than typical *min'yō shamisen* accompaniment, but Shirakawa's recordings from a decade and a half later are markedly more inventive. Beyond the natural development of the music as a result of continual performance in the *utakai*, however, it seems likely that Shirakawa and others were being influenced by other music as well. Takada has claimed that some of Shirakawa Gumpachirō's riffs were inspired by listening to jazz in the early postwar period, and Chikuzan spoke about the influence of a variety of other musics on his playing (Takada 2010a; Matsuki 2011, 145). More obvious musical experiments also occurred: Mihashi Michiya recorded with a popular Latin band known as the Tokyo Cuban Boys; Kita Rinshōei played with percussionist Ichikawa Akira and jazz/rock fusion

⁵⁶ For that part of the audience the recontextualization involved a significant shift: they were listening to the music of their birthplace at a distance, in much the same way that international immigrants have always done – nostalgically.

band Count Buffalo; Yamada Chisato played with jazz drummer Elvin Jones and a Hungarian folk group, and Takahashi Yūjirō and others recorded *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces with orchestral accompaniment (Matsuki 2011, 145; Booth 1995, 71; Various 1984). These musical collaborations had a minimal effect on the style of traditional playing, but they contributed to an atmosphere which allowed for further experimentation to happen, and which eventually led to the new styles that emerged in the millennial revival.

The shifts that occurred in connection with the 1970s revival, which are all part of making Chikuzan the face of *Tsugaru shamisen*, are significant and dramatic. First, there are the various stages of Chikuzan's career, as a *bosama* and occasional accompanist in the 1920s and 30s, then in the postwar period as an accompanist with Narita Unchiku's *min'yō* troupe, and finally, from 1964, as a solo player who attained an unprecedented level of fame. It is worth restating here that the profession of *shamisen* player was not at all respected until quite late. Yamada Chisato's story of his father's anger in finding out that he wanted to be a professional player is not uncommon for musicians of his generation (Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). Groemer notes that even in 1962 a television broadcast featuring Chikuzan led some conservative *Tsugaru* residents to exclaim “how dare they drag a beggar into our homes!” (Groemer 2012, 8). If being a *shamisen* player earned one little respect, being a *bosama* was literally a source of shame; Daijō recounts the anger and embarrassment he encountered from the surviving relatives of *bosama* he tried to question in the early years of his research (Suda et al 1998, 123). The stigma of that early period of his life was such that Chikuzan listed his occupation as “masseur,” rather than “musician” until the early 1970s (Hughes 2008, 85).⁵⁷ Coming to terms with that period, using the stories from that time as part of his solo act, and eventually producing an autobiography must have

⁵⁷ From 1944 to 1949 he trained as a masseur – a respectable occupation for a blind person at the time – but seems to have practiced for only a very short time before going full time with Narita (Groemer 2012, 302-304).

involved great personal struggle.

The courage to do this may have come in part from the shift in his audience that occurred after the release of his solo album in 1963. As noted above, young people with no interest in *min'yō* began listening to Chikuzan at this time (Yamada 1978, 87). Growth in this demographic seems to have been kick-started in 1964 when he began playing concerts for *Kinrōsha Ongaku Kyōgikai* (Workers Music Council), a music-appreciation society with 220 chapters and 650,000 members nationwide, and referred to by the abbreviation *Rō-on* (Groemer 2012, 308). Chikuzan had said that as accompanist playing in noisy bars he could hardly hear himself play, and that it was hard to care too much when playing for that sort of crowd. When he began to play for the attentive *Rō-on* audiences, he could not help but take his playing more seriously (Sato 2010, 112). Kuramitsu Toshio asked a number of young people at a Chikuzan concert in the early 1970s why they were there. One person replied that he was a big fan of country and western, particularly the banjo, which is similar to the *shamisen*. Another said he was raised on rock, so did not know why he liked it, and still another said that *Tsugaru shamisen* has “exactly the same feeling” as modern jazz (Kuramitsu 1976, 211-212). Kuramitsu may have chosen these particular examples to show the breadth of musical interests in Chikuzan's audience, but I have heard his basic point repeated by numerous people from that era: *Tsugaru shamisen* was finding a new audience.

Terauchi Takeshi, an influential rock guitarist since the 1960s, released an album of instrumental “surf guitar” versions of Japanese *min'yō* in 1966, which included a version of “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” (Terauchi 1966). Several players I've spoken to who were in their teens and early twenties were affected by this album. Some who were already playing *min'yō* felt validated by it, and said it made *min'yō* seem cool. A few players from Aomori have told me that

they were actually more interested in guitar until that point, but that Terauchi's version of “*Tsugaru jongara bushi*” ignited some local pride in them and pushed them into learning *shamisen*. Sasaki Takemi echoes this in the liner notes for Oyama Mitsugu's *Tsugaru shamisen* tribute to the music of the American surf rock group the Ventures, stating that that specific track got many young electric guitar fans interested in *Tsugaru shamisen* (Sasaki 2004).

As noted above, Chikuzan's becoming the face of *Tsugaru shamisen* required that some important historical points be ignored. First, Chikuzan was a *bosama* by training, which meant he played the lighter *hiki* style of playing, rather than the powerful *tataki* style exemplified by Kida Rinshōei. The latter had become the model for *Tsugaru shamisen* through the need to be heard over the powerful singers and the audience in the *utakai min'yō* shows of the first half of the twentieth century. Chikuzan said in his autobiography that he “was not really connected to the *utakai* world,” meaning that he had played them, and did similar sorts of accompanying performances with Narita Unchiku, but was something of a marginal character in the *min'yō* world (Takahashi 1991, 125). Narita Unchiku's relationship with the *utakai* world is also somewhat confusing: Yamada Chisato ambiguously describes Narita's position in the *min'yō* world as “exceptional,” and his route to the career of professional singer as a long and circuitous one (Yamada 1976, 83). Today he is called the father of *Tsugaru min'yō*, and indeed he rescued many almost forgotten but now canonical songs, but it has been said that his contemporary *utakai* singers like Kansei Kuniko and *Tsugaru Suwako* saw him more as a scholar than a fellow performer (Takada 2010a). All of this points to the fact that from the perspective of a *min'yō* fan, Chikuzan was simply not a representative *Tsugaru shamisen* player, which is why Yamada Chisato ties his success to the “*Discover Japan*” boom of the 1970s (Yamada 1978, 87).

By now it should be clear that the image of Chikuzan that the media were presenting to

mainstream Japan was that of a person from that vanishing “real Japan” that is contrasted with modernity in chapter two. The original images on his LPs are almost always black and white, and he is often depicted in a way that *others* him. Compare the covers of Sony's first two Chikuzan LPs (on the left), released in 1974, with their CD counterparts (on the right) from the late 1990s (Illustrations 5.01 and 5.02). The LP covers, though striking, are a bit frightening, particularly compared to the updated and far more humanizing images on the CD covers.



Illustration 5.01: LP (SONY SODL-17) and CD (SONY SRCL 3491)



Illustration 5.02: LP (SODL-19) and CD (30DG 5048)

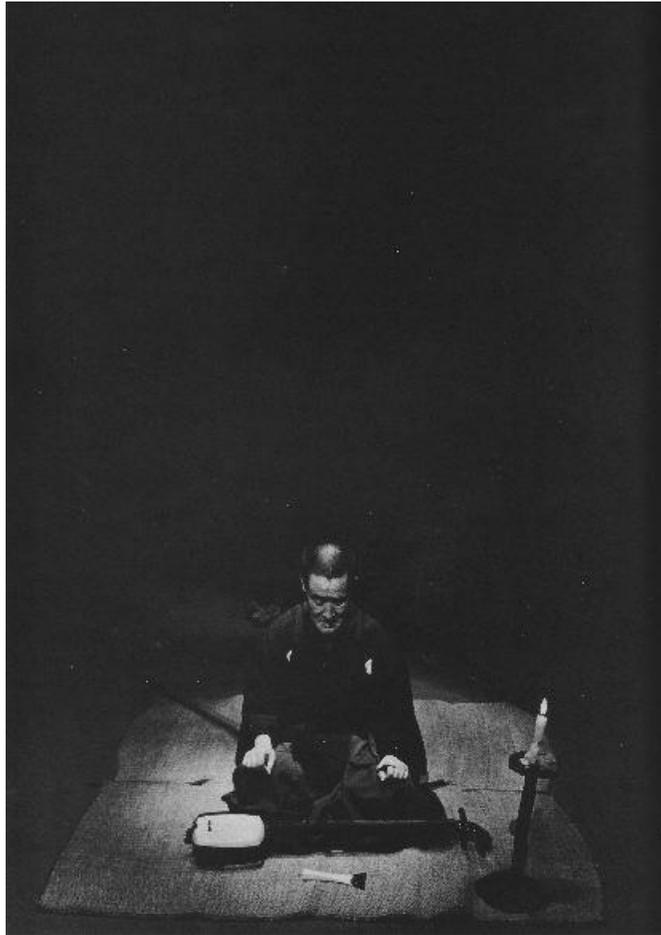


Illustration 5.03: Takahashi Chikuzan in *Kanbachi* (Yamada 1976, 13)

Perhaps the most representative image of Chikuzan from the 1970s revival comes from *Kanbachi* (“Cold plectrum”), a 1972 made-for-television program of a staged performance (Illustration 5.03). This same image was used as the cover of the LP, VHS tape, and DVD produced from the program. Though the program is in colour, the image is monochrome, like most of those used on the covers of his recordings, which in itself suggests pre-modernity in a way that colour images do not. At first glance we see Chikuzan kneeling in the traditional *seiza* position on straw matting. He is lit by a single candle and there is a *shamisen* placed in front of

him. On closer inspection it becomes obvious that the scene is lit from a spotlight overhead, and that the candle is a prop; in fact the entire scene has been carefully constructed to present Chikuzan in a rural, pre-modern environment. In concert Chikuzan generally played seated in a chair, but the staged set here is pointedly *authentic*. The scene is not only candle lit, but lit by a traditional Japanese candle that flares at the top. The mats are not *tatami* mats, which still function as flooring in at least one room of many modern homes, but the more rustic sort one finds on the floor of a farmhouse. The thick wooden stick lying just behind him to his right indexes Chikuzan's blindness, but it too is a prop; he uses a modern white cane in daily life.

It is clear that this is an image of a staged event, attempting to reproduce the sort of rural setting this music might have originally been heard in. Historical accuracy is not the point, though: Chikuzan is wearing a formal kimono rather than the kind that would have been worn by *bosama* in the earlier part of the twentieth century. This type of black crested kimono is associated with the traditional arts, and has been associated with folk music performance since Hirano Genzaburō wore the formal dress at a *min'yō* competition in 1911 (Hughes, 2008, 114). It was originally worn to assert that folk music was as valid a form of musical expression as art musics like *nagauta* and *jiuta*. In the 1970s, and still today, it lends dignity to a performance, and here it affords Chikuzan the kind of respect he had only recently begun to enjoy. As a still image, it says more than the original program might have intended about how carefully constructed Chikuzan's image actually was. Chikuzan was presented as the “real deal,” as Booth wrote, and in many ways he was, but as is generally the case, the authentic facade that was constructed for him does not stand up to scrutiny, as will be discussed further in section four on authenticity.

The recontextualization of the image of *Tsugaru shamisen* in millennial revival was the result of the changes brought about by the 1970s revival. Many of these changes are due to the national

Tsugaru shamisen contests, the first of which was founded in 1982, relatively soon after the first revival ended. Ronström writes of shifts that occur between temporal, geographic, and social contexts in which revivals take place, all of which are relevant here. Temporally, the millennial revival occurred twenty years after the 1970s revival finished, but almost thirty years after it started, and more than forty years after Mihashi Michiya re-introduced *Tsugaru shamisen* to the nation. If much of the stigma attached to *bosama shamisen* had been removed by the time of the first revival, by the millennium it was nothing more than a point of historical interest. Further, in the 1970s revival the focus was on the surviving original players, who were old men, but by the millennium all of the original players, and some of the next generation had passed away, and this seems to be a contributing factor to the youth-centred nature of the second revival.

Geographically, changes occurred both in where the influential players are from and where the music is played, and because of this the music no longer indexes a particular place for most Japanese people. Almost all of the influential players up until the 1970s were from Aomori, or as was the case with Takahashi Yūjirō and Kyōgoku Toshinori, neighbouring Akita Prefecture. Most of the young people drawn to Chikuzan's playing could not imagine actually learning *Tsugaru shamisen*, as there was nothing in their immediate environment to suggest that it was possible. As Alan Booth writes, the songs were “unsingable, just as the *Tsugaru shamisen* was unlearnable and the lives of its blind maestros inimitable” (Booth 1995, 71). In Osabe Hideo's short stories about *Tsugaru shamisen*, as interested in the music as the protagonist is, it never crosses his mind to learn how to play (Osabe 2009). While it was a passive experience for most, particularly outside of Aomori, some people were learning to play: Oyama Mitsugu established a school in Tokyo in 1963, Kida Rinshōei did the same in 1970, and most of the players of that generation followed suit (oyamakai.com; Suda et al. 1998, 110). By the early 1980s there were

enough young players that the possibility of a national contest could be entertained. The advent of the contests brought the first generation of important players from outside the Tsugaru area; most of the winners have not been Aomori natives. As was described in chapter four, through the 1980s the number of players continued to grow in the two big urban regions around Tokyo and Osaka. In the 2000s, as contests began to spring up around the country, and it became accepted as a matter of course that someone from the far south of Japan might play as well as someone from Tsugaru, the importance of the Tsugaru region was greatly reduced.

The first players of the contest generation that were not from Tsugaru were constantly reminded of the fact with some version of the question “How can you hope to play *Tsugaru shamisen* if you are not from Tsugaru?” Kinoshita Shinichi won the Hirosaki contest in 1986 and 1987, and grew up in Wakayama prefecture, but like many players he became enamoured of the culture of the Tsugaru region. He writes that as a teen “I thought ‘I want to go to Tsugaru. Live in Tsugaru, eat Tsugaru food, speak in the dialect of Tsugaru, I want to die in Tsugaru’” (Kinoshita 2003, 35). But he eventually realized that pretending that he was from Tsugaru would not make his playing any better; instead, he moved to Tokyo where there were more playing opportunities. He reasoned that he could master the spirit of *Tsugaru shamisen* and develop his own style just as well from Tokyo. Like Kinoshita, most of the players from this new generation came to terms with not being from Tsugaru. Players from the earlier generations were often marketed with images of Tsugaru on their album covers, like Tsugaru folk crafts, the floats of the *nebuta* summer festival, apples, or scenery, and sometimes used words from the Tsugaru dialect as song titles, but the new generation of players have generally avoided these references. As a result, the link between *Tsugaru shamisen* and the Tsugaru region has been further weakened. Talking to young players over the last decade, I have noticed that many have never visited the Tsugaru

region, and have no particular interest in doing so. Likewise, having spoken to hundreds of Japanese people about *Tsugaru shamisen* since the millennial revival, I have found that people young enough to be unaware of Chikuzan do not readily connect the music with the Tsugaru region.⁵⁸ For them it evokes first a vague notion of tradition, then Japaneseness, and even, somewhat paradoxically, modernity, but never Tsugaru in any significant way.

In terms of shifts in social context, those of age and gender are particularly notable. Whether it is the result of the youth-centred nature of mass culture, or the fact that the winners of the contests are generally in their late teens or early twenties, the millennial revival was focused on young players. Record companies have tended to promote players in their twenties, and the protagonists of the animated movie and two comic series that came out of the revival are even younger, perhaps to make them more relatable to their intended audience. The representatives of the two mainstream revivals, Chikuzan and the Yoshida Brothers, make this shift abundantly clear. As for gender, there are a lot more women playing *Tsugaru shamisen* today. As discussed in chapter four, the relative numbers of men and women at the contests has changed dramatically since the 1980s, and are almost evenly divided today. Historically, the profession of *bosama* was restricted to men, and from the early days of the *utakai min'yō* shows women tended to sing and men tended to play *shamisen*. Likewise, the aggressive *tataki* playing style of *Tsugaru shamisen* favoured in the *utakai* was unequivocally considered to be masculine, but over time, perhaps through the sheer number of women players, while the style is as percussive as ever, it is no longer strongly gendered for most people. In chapter four I noted that women have now gone on to win all of the national contests except Hirosaki, which continues to use the terms *chikara-*

⁵⁸ Johnson mistakenly writes that *Tsugaru shamisen* continues to index the Tsugaru region, but he seems to have done most of his research in the region itself, or among the community of *Tsugaru shamisen* players for whom this still holds true (Johnson 2005, 2006).

zuyoi (muscular) and *takumashisa* (brawniness) to characterize the style. It seems that masculinity is still considered an essential component of the music in this most conservative contest.

As was noted in chapter four, the contests have produced stylistic changes: playing is more precise, but has also become standardized. Daijō Kazuo writes in the liner notes to the first Yoshida Brothers CD that the rigours of competition forced players to develop a style of playing that focused on form and lacked heart, and that as the founder of the second contest, this was something he had long been concerned about (Daijō 1999).

The other pronounced way that the music has changed is in the hybrid forms that have developed, particularly since the Yoshida Brothers' first CD. Chapter three discussed how the first influential players who grew up outside of Tsugaru recorded hybrid music: Sato Michiro's avant-garde jazz fusions, Takahashi Chikuzan II's blues and world music experiments, and Oyama Mitsugu II's orchestral arrangements are all examples of what Hill and Bithell describe as partial outsider's tendency to incorporate influences from other sources. Since the Yoshida Brothers' first CD, hybrid forms have proliferated.

In contrast to the 1970s revival, the millennial revival inspired many more people to play the *shamisen*. This can be explained in part by the fact that the young players who were the face of the second revival were much more relatable than Chikuzan had been, and in part by the network of teachers, and other pedagogical tools that had developed since the first revival. The latter has to do with the infrastructure of transmission, which will be discussed in section five.



Illustration 5.04: *Ibuki*, 1999

If the image of Chikuzan from *Kanbachi* can be said to represent the 1970s revival, the cover of the Yoshida Brothers first CD *Ibuki* (Illustration 5.04) does the same for the millennial revival. The cover design, far more stylish than that of a typical traditional recording, was likely created with a wider audience in mind. It visually mirrors the album's contents with its signifiers of both tradition and modernity. The information on the cover is presented in a mix of Japanese characters and the Roman alphabet. The Japanese characters are arranged in a traditional vertical fashion – rather than horizontally as it is generally printed today – in a multi-coloured vertical

strip of the sort seen on pre-modern woodblock prints, and reads: “*Ibuki*,” “*Tsugaru-jamisen*,” “Yoshida *kyōdai*.” At the bottom of the page, in a simple white font the words “IBUKI,” “Ryōichirō Yoshida,” and “Kenichi Yoshida” are arranged horizontally, set in a transparent box and contrasted against the backdrop of a black kimono. John F. Sherry and Eduardo G. Camargo convincingly argue that the use of the Roman alphabet in Japan indexes notions of “modernity,” “urbanity,” “cosmopolitanism,” and “prestige” (Sherry and Camargo 1987, 178). The tension between tradition and modernity in the written information is echoed in the photo of the brothers. The photograph is black and white, recalling the images from many of Chikuzan's album covers, and the brothers are dressed in the same sort of black crested kimono as Chikuzan wore in performance. The kimono and the *shamisen* at the centre of the image are strong symbols of tradition, but the brothers' hairstyles are pointedly contemporary (or were in 1999).

Only two tracks on *Ibuki* (“Modern” and the beginning of “*Ibuki*”) contain any non-traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* playing, but with its success each subsequent album contained more experimentation. The titles of most of their subsequent albums are single English words – *Move*, *Soulful*, *Storm*, *Frontier*, *Renaissance*, *Rising*, *Prism*, *Horizon* – all of which evoke their efforts to do something new with the instrument. The Yoshida Brothers' marketing makes no attempt to index Tsugaru, neither in their album titles, nor in their covers, most of which feature the brothers in various modern-looking kimono (Illustration 5.05), nor in the song titles. 2009's *Prism* literally takes Tsugaru out of the standard “*Tsugaru aiya bushi*” and calls it simply “*AIYA*.” All of their albums feature a careful balance of traditional and modern elements. In general the English titles sharply contrast the traditional Japanese dress, but notice that on *Hishō*, the only album with a Japanese title since *Ibuki*, they are wearing Western dress. These covers have none of the signifiers of Tsugaru that most earlier *Tsugaru shamisen* albums feature, and consistently

find ways to put traditional elements in a modern light, visually representing what the Yoshida Brothers attempt to do with their music.



Illustration 5.05: Yoshida Brothers CD covers

Four: Authenticity, Authority, and Legitimacy

The fourth point is that recontextualization requires that the legitimacy of the group purporting to be the culture-bearers be established, and that this often involves invoking authenticity. Authenticity is a famously thorny topic (see Taruskin 1984; Kerman et al. 1992; Kivy 2002 for the authenticity debate in early music scholarship), but rather than rehash the debate, Hill and Bithell look instead at the three basic types of authenticity that are invoked to establish legitimacy in revivals. These are product-oriented authenticity, which may involve early manuscripts, repertoire, and the production of sound; person-oriented authenticity, which might consider people of particular regions, bloodlines, and artistic lineages to be more authentic; and process-oriented authenticity, which may consider the ways in which processes of transmission,

creation and even reception of the music confer authenticity. In this section I consider how the three types of authenticity come into play in the first and second revivals.

As the history outlined at the beginning of this chapter suggests, authenticity became a concern when Chikuzan was put forward by the media as the representative of *Tsugaru shamisen*. From around 1970 the media picked up on the difference between the percussive *tataki shamisen* style and the lighter *hiki shamisen* as represented by Kida and Chikuzan respectively (Matsuki 2011, 64). Chikuzan clearly won out in terms of mainstream popularity, though the *tataki* style that had been developed in the *utakai min'yō* shows of the pre-war era continued to be favoured in the *min'yō* world and eventually in the *Tsugaru shamisen* contest world as well. This seems to have been less about one style being favoured over another, and more about what Chikuzan represented, or in Hill and Bithell's terms, it was a person-oriented rather than product-oriented authenticity that resonated with people.

As Alan Booth points out, Chikuzan was seen as “the real thing”; as a blind person who had lived the life of a *bosama*, it was difficult to doubt his credentials (Booth 1995, 71). His album liner notes, autobiography, and the movie based on his life make frequent reference to the hard life he lived. A typical passage reads:

From the time I was fifteen or sixteen we walked to all kinds of places. We didn't eat much, but we didn't get sick. We ate bad things, like three-day old *takuan* pickles. We ate what we received in our travels; you wouldn't call it luxury. Then, as a young twenty-three or twenty-four-year old, I lived like a dog, always outside, but I got used to it, and the cold didn't feel so cold to me. We never rode trains. Everyone walked. We stayed in flophouses. There were lice and fleas. (Sato 1989, 3)

The CD images shown above present Chikuzan as somewhat frightening and unknowable. I have spoken to customers in *min'yō* bars and audience members at *Tsugaru shamisen* concerts who saw Chikuzan as university students, and their memories of him are as a dark and slightly

scary figure.

Chikuzan was certainly a *bosama*, but it is unclear what exactly the *bosama* contributed to what we think of today as *Tsugaru shamisen*. In his autobiography he says that his teacher had very little to teach him, and he mentions learning from the much-recorded early player Umeda Hōgetsu when they met in the northern island of Hokkaido (Groemer 2012, 249). Daijō states that *Tsugaru shamisen* was developed by sighted players. For example, while the *bosama* played relatively quietly, the dynamic *kyōjaku* (loud-soft) playing style wherein the player alternates hitting the strings at the edge and in the middle of the *shamisen*'s body was developed in the *utakai min'yō* shows (Daijō 1993, 38). As noted in the previous section, Chikuzan was not strongly connected to the *utakai* world, and what connection he did have was through Narita Unchiku, whose path in the *min'yō* world was not at all typical. In Yamada Chisato's history of *Tsugaru min'yō* Narita is not mentioned until quite late in the book, and Chikuzan is included, almost grudgingly, in the last few pages. Interest in him is described as being part of the general curiosity about traditional itinerant artists during the “*discover Japan furusato boom*,” and while his popularity is not downplayed, it seems as though Yamada, the *min'yō* insider, is contesting Chikuzan's status as the *Tsugaru shamisen*'s ambassador (Yamada 1978, 87).

As we have seen, the first national *Tsugaru shamisen* contest was established shortly after the 1970s revival ended, and eventually led to a participatory revival that fed into and off of the mass media-based millennial revival. These contests were very influential in determining product-oriented authenticity in this period. Beyond determining the legitimacy of players on the strength of their playing, the contests themselves contested each other's legitimacy, as was seen in chapter four. Daijō Kazuo established the contest in Kanagi, calling into question the judging practices at the original contest in Hirosaki, and deriving legitimacy from its location in Nitabō's birthplace.

Next, within a few years of its founding, the contest in Tokyo had taken Hirosaki's place as the most important national *Tsugaru shamisen* contest. Part of the reason for Tokyo's ascendancy was that it addressed the dissatisfaction with Hirosaki's adjudication process, which seemed to many to favour players connected with Yamada. It was also sponsored by the *Nihon Min'yō Kyōkai*, the largest and most influential *min'yō* organization in Japan, and used many of the best players from the older generations as judges. Hirosaki responded by rebranding itself as the contest for traditional *Tsugaru shamisen*, in contrast to what it deemed the modern *Tsugaru shamisen* of Tokyo, invoking, as Kanagi had before it, a kind of lineage-based authenticity based on place. Other contests, like Nagoya and Aomori, used transparency of the scoring procedures as a way to gain legitimacy, while still others, like Kanagi and Aomori, raised the bar on what was required of contestants.

Hill and Bithell note that “One common trend is to idealize persons hailing from remote regions that are believed to have been isolated from some of the conditions that caused cultural change in the revivalist's population centers,” and this has been the case with *Tsugaru shamisen* (Hill and Bithell 2014, 20-21). Watsuji's concept of *fūdo*, discussed in chapter two, concerning the effect of climate on culture is part of this. Groemer recognizes this when pointing out that while geography does shape culture, “the most commonly accepted ideology of Tsugaru claims much more than this. It suggests, often through metaphor and implication, that Tsugaru climate and geography determine unalterable, ineffable essences of Tsugaru natives who in turn express these essences in their music” (Groemer 2010, 100). When Kida Rinshōei said that his playing lost something from living in Tokyo, or Agatsuma Hiromitsu said that you need to be raised on the water of Tsugaru in order to really play, they are echoing this sentiment (Matsuki 1994, 3). Kinoshita Shinichi's idea of moving to Tsugaru to fully learn the spirit of the music is an

extension of this concept; it suggests that simply by living in Tsugaru a player might improve his playing, and is still quite prevalent. Kinoshita and many of his contemporary players who are not from Tsugaru were told that they would never be able to truly play the music, but this stance has lost much of its force in recent decades, mainly because the winners of the contests are rarely Tsugaru natives (Kinoshita 2003, 35).

Hill and Bithell point out that lineage is another way that artists can establish authenticity, and while this is important in the *min'yō* world in general, it is much less important with *Tsugaru shamisen*. In the *ryūha* system, one is generally affiliated with one's *ryūha*, or school, for life.⁵⁹ I have noticed that most advanced *Tsugaru shamisen* players downplay their affiliation with one particular school, or make a point of saying that they studied with several people. Part of the reason for this may be that “stealing” techniques from other players, or learning from watching and listening is considered better than being taught. Kida famously admitted to secretly spying on Shirakawa Gumpachirō to learn new riffs, which, for players at least, places process-oriented authenticity above lineage-based, person-oriented authenticity (Groemer 2012, 86).

Two important ways that Hill and Bithell say that process-oriented authenticity can be established is through transmission and creative processes. They note that for traditional musics oral transmission is often privileged over learning from books, and learning in a guru-apprentice relationship is often considered more valid than learning in an institutional setting (Hill and Bithell 2014, 22). They also state that authenticity established through the creative process “may be perceived as being less traditional or pure, as depicted in Baumann's (1996) model of purism versus syncretism as contrasting revival approaches” (ibid., 23). In the *Tsugaru shamisen*

⁵⁹ Jay Keister goes in to great detail about the importance of the *sensei*, or teacher, in the traditional Japanese musical genre of *nagauta* in his 2004 monograph *Shaped by Japanese Music*. The loyalty to one's *sensei* and school is the norm in traditional Japanese arts, and *Tsugaru shamisen* is very much an outlier in this respect.

tradition, the distinction is not so clear cut, since creativity is valued even among purists.

In terms of transmission, as noted above, “stealing” riffs from other players has a long history in *Tsugaru shamisen*. Yamada Chisato taught his students simply by playing, just as Fukushi, his teacher, had taught him. As Matsuki writes: “Fukushi Masakatsu didn’t spoon feed his students, taking them each by the hand. The only way is to steal it, to pick it up by ear and eye. They gathered in the musicians’ room, or at the side of the stage, watching and listening” (Matsuki 1994, 3). Hasegawa Yūji (b. 1951) studied with Kida Rinshōei at a folksong bar in Tokyo, and recalled that Kida “only drank, and did not teach *shamisen* techniques,” but occasionally listened to Hasegawa to tell him if he was on the right track (Yamaya 2001, 2). Along these lines, there are still a number of teachers who patiently teach techniques, but do not use tablature, expecting students to memorize each new piece in its entirety. This method takes much longer but it is thought that each piece is learned more thoroughly. Oyama Mitsugu published the first tablature for *Tsugaru shamisen* pieces in 1977, and today the use of tablature is widespread, if frowned on by the aural tradition hold-outs (Matsuki 2011, 86). Recording lessons has been common in both camps as well in the decades since the advent of affordable and portable cassette recorders.

As for the premium put on creativity, as has been stated several times previously, Nitabō is thought to have often said something along the lines of “imitation is something even a monkey can do,” and “imitation will not create *shamisen* music” (Daijō 1998, 57). Both those who see Nitabō as the originator of *Tsugaru shamisen*, and those who are more sceptical, subscribe to the idea that one must do more than simply imitate other players. Yamada Chisato falls in the sceptics’ camp: he said “Daijō appears to have turned Nitabō into some sort of hero ... Sure, Nitabō existed, but there were lots of others as well,” yet still maintained that bringing something new to a performance was necessary to win the contest at Hirosaki (Sasamori and Westerhoven

2005). This sentiment has allowed for the genre to openly continue evolving, unlike most other traditional Japanese musical genres.

The degree of originality that is acceptable is the question. Max Peter Baumann, in his article “Folk Music Revival: Concepts Between Regression and Emancipation,” contrasts revivalist tendencies of purists, who pursue “old’ local or regional traditions with reference to the authority of particular sources defined through a certain time span and a particular connection to the surrounding context” with those of syncretists who “recreate or revive folklore with reference to modern musical expression” (Baumann 1996, 81). When asked about the music of the Yoshida Brothers, Yamada said “What they play is not pure *Tsugaru Shamisen*” (Sasamori and Westerhoven 2005). It is unclear in that particular interview whether he was speaking about the hybrid music on their recordings, which often employs western instruments and chord progressions, or their way of playing traditional pieces, which, to the casual listener, are indistinguishable from Yamada's own recordings. I have, however, heard it said from the stage at Hirosaki's contest, that what certain players are playing is “not *Tsugaru shamisen*,” meaning that it is too far outside the acceptable parameters of the genre. At the same time, Hirosaki and most other contests also explicitly or implicitly include “originality” as one of the criteria of a winning performance (All Japan *Tsugaru Shamisen* Competition: Nagoya Contest Executive Committee 2010, 5). These contests are by nature conservative: contestants have to be able to show mastery of certain established elements of the style, but the degree to which they can move beyond the established style varies from contest to contest, and changes over time. As chapter four showed, there is a purist tendency in the adjudication at all of the national *Tsugaru Shamisen* contests, but Hirosaki's could be said to have defined itself as the guardian of (one version of) tradition.

On the other end of the continuum are the hybrids which players like the Yoshida Brothers

have been producing for the last fifteen years. Baumann explains that with syncretism, “the main concept becomes fusion by adapting new arrangements, new group formations, new instruments, even new patterns from other traditions,” and how this is expressed with *Tsugaru shamisen* will be considered further in the section on post-revival, below (Baumann 1996, 81).

It might be worth taking a moment to clarify what constitutes acceptable originality in the *Tsugaru shamisen* community. Of course there is no consensus on this point, and opinions range from those of strict purists who hold that no one is playing “real” *Tsugaru shamisen* anymore to syncretists who consider anything played with the characteristic force and speed qualifies as *Tsugaru shamisen*. Outside of these extremes, there is general agreement on certain kinds of originality that are allowed, and others that are not, and then there is a contentious area that exists between these.

Most people would agree that the innovations of Shirakawa Gumpachirō and the *utakai* players of the 1930s and 1940s are acceptable, and in fact essential to what we think of today as *Tsugaru shamisen*. Comparing the 1920s recordings of Umeda Hōgetsu and those of Shirakawa a decade or two later, we note that, in addition to the very existence of solo rather than accompanied playing, the dynamic range has increased dramatically, and a catalogue of new riffs has worked its way into the accompaniment. Then in the early 1960s Takahashi Chikuzan began working on solo compositions based on *Tsugaru min'yō* outside of the “big five” pieces that had been acceptable until that point. I have not heard of anyone objecting to that innovation at the time, and today solo improvisatory pieces based on the *Tsugaru min'yō* repertoire are common practice today, so this can also be safely described as acceptable. In the same way, since that time many new riffs have been introduced either through recordings or from the contest stage, and the ones that were sufficiently compelling have been adopted into the ever-evolving tradition.

Likewise, there is general agreement on what sort of playing is not considered to be *Tsugaru shamisen*. In terms of the riffs just discussed above, typically, if a riff includes scalar or rhythmic material that clearly falls outside of the tradition, or if it implies a western harmonic base, it will not likely be adopted into the tradition. More clear-cut are the recordings that feature collaborations with musicians from other genres that include extended use of non-traditional material, like western scales, rhythms, and harmonic progressions. Included in this group are *shamisen* arrangements of Bach or the Beatles: while many people do not object to these pieces (at least ideologically if not aesthetically), they do not consider them to be *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Lastly, there is a grey area of playing styles about which there is not a general consensus. The standard of what is acceptable at the national contests varies between contests, and between years at the same contest. An example of the former case came up earlier, with Yoshida Kenichi winning in Tokyo while being considered too unorthodox for Hirosaki. An example of the later is Shibata Ai, Hirosaki's woman's champion in 2015 and 2016, whose performance would have been considered too unorthodox for that contest ten years earlier. Outside of contest settings the standards are less strict, but while there is more room for originality, there is not necessarily agreement on how much more. The best example here are the sorts of recordings the Yoshida Brothers popularized, like “Modern” and “*Kodo*,” that feature just two *shamisens* but incorporate non-traditional elements.⁶⁰ Some would argue that this style brings the *Tsugaru shamisen* forward by maintaining a significant amount of traditional material, but including scalar and/or rhythmic material that is clearly from outside of the tradition. It could be argued that this is not so different than what Shirakawa did in the 1930s and 1940s, and that they are expanding what *Tsugaru shamisen* can be without abandoning its essentials. The more conservative counterargument is

⁶⁰ See Appendix G for excerpts of transcriptions of two pieces: “*Tsugaru jonkara bushi (shin bushi)*,” a traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* piece; and “*Kodō*,” a modern composition by the Yoshida Brothers.

that this kind of playing strays too far from the essence of the style, so cannot be called pure *Tsugaru shamisen*, though many in the *Tsugaru shamisen* community might be comfortable recognizing this as a modern sub-genre of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Five: Transmission, Dissemination, and Promotion

The fifth point is that the recontextualized music spurs the development of new methods of transmission, dissemination, and promotion. Not only new audiences, but new performers are needed if a revival is to grow, and earlier methods of transmission may not be practical for new players. In cases where a music first becomes commercial, the changes in dissemination and promotion can be drastic, but are less so with *Tsugaru shamisen*, commercial recordings of which were first made in 1918.

As described above in the section on process-oriented authenticity, methods of transmission changed when the *Tsugaru shamisen* players who moved to Tokyo in the late 1950s and early 1960s began teaching. Some, like Kida Rinshōei, “taught” as they themselves had learned, simply by allowing would-be students watch them play, but others worked more directly with the students. While other genres of *shamisen* music were taught using one form or another of written tablature, *Tsugaru shamisen* was generally learned without this aid. In 1977 Oyama Mitsugu published the first book of *Tsugaru shamisen* tablature, and while there are some schools that still teach without this sort of aid, today most students use some written form when learning new pieces. The introduction of tablature has changed the way the music is experienced: it enables students to learn pieces more quickly, and allows students who do not want to pay for lessons to learn on their own. A further effect is that it sets the form of a piece; even today, some teachers who forgo tablature seem incapable of playing a piece exactly the same way twice. Hill and

Bithell note that audio recordings improve the transmission of subtleties in the music that are lost in written form, but that they can “lead to a loss of variation, and a degree of standardization and homogenization” (Hill and Bithell 2014, 25). This almost certainly happened with *Tsugaru shamisen* too, but was exacerbated by the widespread use of tablature.

It was noted above that the term *Tsugaru shamisen* did not come into use until the late 1950s; Matsuki notes that in 1965 an instrument explicitly labeled *Tsugaru shamisen* began to be sold in Tokyo under Kida Rinshōei's guidance (Matsuki 2011, 144). As with the introduction of tablature as a method of transmission, the conception of an instrument set apart from other types of *shamisen* no doubt altered the way that players thought about the genre in subtle ways.

By the time of the first *Tsugaru shamisen* boom, the infrastructures of dissemination and promotion were largely established; as chapter three showed, the same companies that had been recording *min'yō* began recording *Tsugaru shamisen* solo albums, and analogous scenarios occurred with radio, television, and publishing companies. In terms of promotion, the rising popularity of *Tsugaru shamisen* in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged some players to perform abroad for the first time: Kida traveled to the US, Canada, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan in the late 1960s, and others, like Yamada and Chikuzan followed in the 1970s (ibid., 144-145).

In the aftermath of the 1970s revival, Yamada Chisato started the first national contest, and over the next twenty years it became the most important medium for the promotion of *Tsugaru shamisen* among players. In this period better pedagogical tools were also developed: first books of tablature added accompanying CDs, then instructional video were developed. In 2004, Kinoshita Shinichi released a book and CD that used pedagogical techniques that anyone familiar with popular guitar instruction manuals would recognize (Kinoshita 2004). For those familiar with western instruments and looking to learn *Tsugaru shamisen*, the explanations,

exercises, and layout of the book would have made this a far less imposing task than did earlier books of tablature. These earlier books invariably presented nothing but full songs, and expected a degree of familiarity with the tradition that most of the new wave of learners of the early 2000s did not have. Widespread internet access from the early 2000s made self-study even easier: YouTube provided an unprecedented variety of instructional and performance videos, and online forums provided support and community that had previously only been available by studying under a teacher.

The standardization, homogenization, and loss of variation that Hill and Bithell say comes with audio recording also tend to be the result of competitions. The trend of “*shamisen* without heart,” that Daijō Kazuo noted in 1999 only became more pronounced with the upsurge in players that occurred during the millennial revival (Daijō 1999). As was noted in chapter four a common observation concerning the contests is that there are more technically proficient players than ever, but that everyone sounds the same.

In terms of dissemination, the same record companies that supported the earlier generation of players continued to support the latest one. The big change in the millennial revival has been the internet, specifically YouTube. As was noted in chapter three, mp3 sales have yet to take over physical media, but a search using the term *Tsugaru-jamisen*, in Japanese characters, on YouTube produced 103,000 hits in early 2016.

In terms of promotion, from the late 1980s, the contests were key in developing a large base of participatory fans, and the contest's sponsoring body, the *Tsugaru-jamisen kyōgikai* (*Tsugaru Shamisen* Association), also produced *Tsugaru shamisen* “festivals,” events which included large group performances (Matsuki 2011, 101-102). At the largest of these, 841 people performed at the Tokyo Dome in 1999 (*ibid.*, 148). At the turn of the millennium, the Japanese Ministry of

Education mandated that some form of Japanese traditional music education be included in the primary and secondary curricula (de Ferranti 2002, 198). While neither the form this was to take, nor the genres to be covered, were specified, the *Tsugaru shamisen* was naturally among the possible candidates. I have had many young Japanese tell me that they learned about the *Tsugaru shamisen* in school, but have heard from many others that they did not. The internet is also widely used for promotion today. Most of the existing contests have websites, as do many of the *Tsugaru shamisen* schools; the Oyama School, always at the forefront of things, has a very professional looking website in Japanese and English (oyamakai.com). A great number of players have websites with information on their competition wins, touring schedule, and CD releases, and many use blogs or Facebook to keep fans abreast of their latest activities.

In the participatory revival that pre- and post-dates the mass mediated millennial one certain shifts occurred in the way the music was promoted as well. Many traditional Japanese musical instrument sellers who I have spoken with noted an increase in sales of *Tsugaru shamisens* in the mid- to late 1990s, and another increase in the early 2000s, prompting them to feature these instruments more prominently in their shops. In 2003 I noticed that some guitar shops in Tokyo and Osaka were selling *shamisens* that were lower in price and quality than anything that a traditional shop would carry. These were certainly aimed at people who had no previous connection to the music, and would have had no idea where to find, or how to assess, the quality of an instrument. This was my first indication that the mass-mediated revival might actually be attracting new players, and that the young performers in the media were inspiring some people to pick up the instrument. The participatory revival also produced a short-lived specialty magazine, *Bachi-Bachi*, which ran from July of 2004 to September of 2007 and covered various aspects of the *Tsugaru shamisen* world (Tanaka and Oda 2009, 174).

In the mass mediated millennial revival the image and sound of *Tsugaru shamisen* was widely used. The music of the Yoshida Brothers and Agatsuma Hiromitsu was featured in commercials for beer and cars, and *Tsugaru shamisen* was regularly used as background music on television shows, particularly when something “Japanese” was being depicted – when the characters in a drama visited a famous site-seeing spot, or the stars of a reality show went to a traditional restaurant. While promotion of the music was rarely the goal of these activities, the result of this exposure was that *Tsugaru shamisen* was once again part of the national consciousness.

As has been noted elsewhere, two movies were made, an animated film on the life of Nitabō, and a live action comedy-drama following a young guitarist's attempt to win a national *Tsugaru shamisen* contest (*Nitaboh*, 2004; *Overdrive*, 2004). Two comic books also featured the *shamisen* prominently.

Nazuna no neiro (Nazuna's timbre), the story of an elementary school girl who plays *Tsugaru shamisen*, ran in serial form for about three years from 2007 in a monthly comic anthology, and the collected stories were published in three volumes (Nawoko 2008, 2009). Another, *Mashiro no oto* (The sound of pure whiteness), is a typical serialized high school drama, but features several key protagonists who play *shamisen*; it has been running since 2010 and, as of early 2016, it has been collected in fifteen volumes (Ragawa, 2010).

Six: The Post-revival Turn: Revival Legacies

The sixth point concerns the post-revival phase. They note that revivals can occur in “boom and bust” cycles, but that when a mainstream revival is over, the music may “retain a niche identity apart from the mainstream but with (its) future seemingly secure in the hands of a new subculture or affinity group,” as has been the case with *Tsugaru shamisen* (Hill and Bithell 2014,

28). In these cases, they argue, the revival can be said to have succeeded, and enters the post-revival phase. At this stage revivalists may have split into “fundamentalist and progressive factions,” with the latter creating spin-off genres and practices (ibid., 28-29).

We have seen that the 1970s revival was characterized by fans who were content to listen to Chikuzan, who could not conceive of learning to play the music, and that by 1980 public interest had moved on to new things. When Daijō Kazuo wrote in a 1985 article, however, that “in recent years there has been a bit of a *Tsugaru shamisen* boom,” he was not referring to the Chikuzan-centred revival, but a new one in which people were playing rather than just listening (Daijō 1998, ii). He noted that the number of players was growing at an accelerated rate, more so in the urban centres around Tokyo and Osaka than in Tsugaru itself. What he was actually describing might be better termed the post-revival phase of the 1970s revival. While mainstream culture had stopped paying attention, Chikuzan was still very active, as were the members of the next generation, and in addition, a new generation of non-Tsugaru-born players was emerging. This new generation of players developed alongside the national contests, and the growth of the contest phenomenon was one measure of the continued viability of the genre.

By the late 1980s the contest in Hirosaki was firmly established, after some years of struggling to survive, then in 1989 the contest in Kanagi was established, and in 1998 Tokyo's contest was founded. The existence of another large contest was evidence of a healthy scene, but it also indicated that what Hill and Bithell describe as “fundamentalist and progressive factions” existed (Hill and Bithell 2014, 28). As was detailed in chapter four, when Tokyo became the dominant contest in 2000, Hirosaki repositioned itself as the traditional contest, and for a few years participants competed in one contest or the other, in effect identifying themselves as fundamentalists or progressives.

The millennial revival was characterized by a young, forward-looking image whose large media profile greatly overshadowed the music's actual commercial success. The audience for the music was made up largely of fans from the earlier revival, and members of the concurrent and still ongoing, but much smaller, participatory revival. The mass media revival reached its peak in the mid to late 2000s, and is now clearly in the post-revival phase.⁶¹ It is unclear where this particular post-revival will lead, but it is possible to detail some of the ways that the revival changed the *Tsugaru shamisen* landscape.

First, the image of *Tsugaru shamisen* changed. Where Takahashi Chikuzan represented the 1970s revival, which was part of an entire cultural movement looking back nostalgically at a vanishing traditional Japan, the Yoshida Brothers were the representatives of the modern, forward-looking millennial revival. Further, both in the mainstream and the participatory imagination, the music's connection to Tsugaru, its place of origin, was largely erased.

Second, there are more players than ever before, which is not surprising given that it has moved from a local to a national and even international music. The contests have also seen that there are many more young children and women playing the music. This is due in part to conscious promotion of those demographics at the contests, and in part to the de-emphasis of the traditional association of masculinity with *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Third, the practice of creating non-traditional *Tsugaru shamisen* music has been solidly established. It has been noted that *Tsugaru shamisen*, unlike many older traditional genres, has very consciously continued to develop, and that many players from the earlier generations recorded albums featuring collaboration with jazz musicians and western orchestras. The bulk of

⁶¹ In the spring of 2016 I spoke with a fifteen-year old exchange student from Japan who was not familiar with the term "*Tsugaru shamisen*," and it struck me that a new generation is just now coming up that, as Yamada Chisato had feared, does not even know the word.

the recorded music from that era, though, is essentially traditional in nature, while the above-mentioned collaborations make up a very small, and frankly gimmicky, part of the whole. A part of the body of recorded material of the last decade and a half is entirely traditional. This includes complete albums by more tradition-minded players, and selected tracks by more progressive players. These recordings are easily distinguished from the classic recordings of the 1950s, 60, and 70s – they are faster and cleaner, and contain new riffs – but are considered essentially traditional. A larger part of the body of recently recorded material, however, is non-traditional, using Western compositional techniques and/or instruments. The Yoshida Brothers are the representatives of this group, as most of their recordings are non-traditional, but, as noted at the end of chapter three, there are a number of other individuals and bands developing new musical styles with roots in *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Fourth, *Tsugaru shamisen* has been undergoing a greater degree of internationalization since the beginning of the millennial revival. There is a more thoroughgoing attempt than ever before to use *Tsugaru shamisen* internationally as a representative music of Japan. More players have been playing abroad more regularly than before the millennial revival, often on tours partially sponsored by the Japanese government.⁶² Toronto, for instance, has seen performances by the Yoshida Brothers, Asano Shō, Nishi Hajime, Yamaguchi Kōji, Tadano Noriko, Oyama Yūtake, and Hanawa Chie in the last decade. The only performance in Toronto I have been able to confirm prior to the millennial revival is one by Takahashi Yūjirō's troupe in 1987 who was at the time one of the most influential living players (Nakatsubo 1987). The Japanese government was no doubt keen to use the youthful, vibrant image of the millennial revival's *Tsugaru shamisen* to represent contemporary Japan to the world. The gaming company Nintendo also

⁶² The Japan Foundation, a promotional agency of the Japanese government, is listed on the programs of most of the performances referenced in this paragraph.

recognized the appeal of the *Tsugaru shamisen* as both thoroughly modern and thoroughly Japanese when it chose to use a Yoshida Brothers composition in its launch campaign for the Wii console in North America in 2006.

On the strength of sales in Japan, and with the intention of marketing the *Tsugaru shamisen* as a world music, both the Yoshida Brothers and Agatsuma Hiromitsu had several albums released in the US in the 2000s; prior to this, *Tsugaru shamisen* music was very hard to find in North America. There is a small but growing international community online. A website called Bachido.com hosts a lively discussion board, offers internet instruction, and sells instruments and accessories. Its founder, Kyle Abbott, has teamed up with Nitta Masahiro, one of the stars of the millennial revival, and together they have put together groups that competed in Hirosaki's contest, and have organized two “*shamisen* camps” aimed at this international audience, one in Tokyo and one in California. Most recently, an animated movie called *Kubo and the Two Strings*, in which the titular character plays *Tsugaru shamisen*, was released in August of 2016 (Knight 2016). This may reflect the presence of *Tsugaru shamisen* in a number of Japanese *anime* and video games that have made their way to an international audience since the millennium.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the history of *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals, from the early recording era, through the post-war *min'yō* revival, Chikuzan's rise in the 1960s culminating in the 1970s revival, the development of national contests in the 1980s and 1990s, and finally the revival of the 2000s. The remainder of the chapter considered the two major mass-mediated revivals in terms of Hill and Bithell's six common themes of writings on revivals, a summary of which will be presented in chapter six, as they constitute the principle conclusions reached in this dissertation.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In the early 2000s I noticed a shift occurring in how *Tsugaru shamisen* was perceived in Japan, and this dissertation is essentially my attempt to make sense of that shift. Chapter five deals with the specifics of the two mainstream revivals between which this shift occurred, and the earlier chapters contextualize those revivals. Chapter two summarizes a body of literature concerned with the concepts of tradition and modernity in Japan, concepts which are key to the shift discussed in chapter five, and chapters three and four address specific lacunae in *Tsugaru shamisen* scholarship. In this conclusion I will first review the objectives of this dissertation, then discuss the significance of some of the principal conclusions, and finally consider some possible areas of future scholarship that I was unable to adequately address in the present work.

Overview of Study

Chapter two considers the general idea of modernity, how it is tied to the rise of the nation-state, and how the conception of the traditional is shaped by an ever-evolving idea of what is modern. Japan's modern identity was shaped by a number of influential thinkers in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the continuing discourse that they initiated still informs the average Japanese person's idea of what it is to be Japanese. This discourse sets a nexus of concepts – urban, modern, inauthentic, Westernized – against an opposing group of concepts – rural, traditional, authentic, non-Western – that leaves most Japanese people feeling alienated from what they have been brought up to believe is the true Japan. As Christine Yano writes, there is a conception of an “internal exotic,” a rural Japan that is on the one hand authentic, but on the other, clearly an *other* for most, if not all, of the Japanese population (Yano 2002, 172). Finally, in preparation for a more detailed discussion in chapter five, chapter two introduces the idea that

a shift has occurred in terms of the ways in which *Tsugaru shamisen* indexes the concepts of tradition and modernity.

Chapter three traces the recording history of *Tsugaru shamisen*. This chapter lays the foundations for a more complete cataloguing of the recording history of the genre, and illustrates the dramatic divide between the recordings of players from earlier generations and those born after the mid-1950s, providing background for the discussion on revivals in chapter five. The recording history of *Tsugaru shamisen* is still only vaguely understood: we know that the first *Tsugaru min'yō* was recorded in 1918, only eighteen years after the very first recordings of Japanese music were made, but the history after that point has been covered in only the most cursory manner. Reasonably informed fans can name the “three big players” – Shirakawa Gumpachirō, Kida Rinshōei, and Fukushi Masakatsu – but have likely never heard any recordings by Fukushi, and are probably unaware of just how few distinct recordings of Shirakawa, the “god of *Tsugaru shamisen*,” actually exist. In this chapter I consulted track listings on numerous compilation albums available in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s to determine whose recordings had been deemed worthy of being re-released for posterity. I looked at facsimiles of documents that ranked players in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and compared these lists with the names from the above-mentioned compilations to show that most of the players who were highly ranked are not found on any of the *Tsugaru shamisen* compilations released in the last thirty or so years. While the major labels have little interest in rectifying this situation, some collectors have started compiling CDs from private collections of 78 rpm records. Due to questions of legality, however, these independent compilations contain almost no historical information, and nothing that ties a specific track to its original label. Clearly there is much work still to be done on this subject. The other purpose of the chapter is to highlight the stark contrast

in the recorded repertoire of the earlier generations of players and that of contemporary players: the former group generally stuck to a rather small group of canonical pieces, while the recorded output of latter group is largely made up of non-canonical pieces.

Chapter four looks at the National *Tsugaru shamisen* contests, which have been the single largest influence on *Tsugaru shamisen* for the last thirty-five years. This chapter adds to the body of scholarship on music competitions, and examines the proliferation of these national contests, providing background information for further discussion in chapter five. In researching this chapter I realized that the body of literature on music competitions is quite small, and that almost no studies detailing their particulars exist. Chris Goertzen, in his writing on American fiddling contests (1985, 1988, 1996, 2008) is the only scholar who comes close to sketching a comprehensive picture of a specific scene. After a detailed description of Hirosaki's thirty-fourth contest in May of 2015, I trace the history of the country's seven major national contests. I consider the struggles for power that ensue between some of these contests, and the ways in which they differ from one another, including how they are funded; who is chosen to adjudicate and by which criteria; who participates; what sorts of categories are offered in which to compete; and what kinds of awards are presented to winners. The chapter ends with a comparison of these Japanese contests and traditional music contests in other cultures, considering topics like gender and the contests' effect on style change.

Chapter five first outlined the century-long history of *Tsugaru shamisen* revivals in Japan, and then focused specifically on the two mass-mediated revivals of the 1970s and the 2000s. A six-point model set out by Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell structures the exploration and comparison of these two revivals, which ultimately shows how the mainstream representation of *Tsugaru shamisen* in Japan has changed. The development of the two revivals is detailed, and

particular aspects of each are brought into focus by looking at: the motivations behind the revivals; the ways in which they each altered the history of the genre to suit their respective presents; the recontextualization that the tradition underwent in each revival, and the ensuing struggles for legitimacy; the development of new methods of transmission, dissemination and promotion of the music; and the post-revival phases in each case.

Principal Conclusions Reached

My central argument is that a shift occurred in the way that *Tsugaru shamisen* is perceived in Japan, that in mainstream culture it once represented traditional, rural Japan but came to represent the Japan of the twenty-first century. The early chapters of the dissertation provide the context and background information necessary to make this argument, making sense of Japanese modernity, and tracing the changes in repertoire and the emergence of the contest as a major part of the *Tsugaru shamisen* world. Chapter five develops the argument using the six common themes of revival scholarship to compare the revivals of the 1970s and the millennium. In the following paragraphs I summarize the results of this comparison, and include some comments on their implications.

First, the motivations of the two revivals: while a multitude of factors are responsible for any new cultural development, in both of these revivals a sense of loss can be counted among them. The 1970s revival was part of a general trend of nostalgia for vanishing traditions, the result of a strong economy and a society that was changing too quickly. The second revival, in contrast, was perhaps partly due to the insecurity brought on by a decade-long economic downturn. The nostalgia brought on by this insecurity might be for the vague pre-modern past that *Tsugaru shamisen* represented, or for the time of the previous revival, when the economy was strong and

the future looked bright.

Second, each revival dealt differently with the history of *Tsugaru shamisen*. The 1970s revival focused on Takahashi Chikuzan, a living piece of history, and romanticized the hardships he faced in the pre-war period. This is a common theme in his autobiography, it is depicted in the movie made of his life, and it comes out in the stories that Osabe Hideo wrote about early *Tsugaru shamisen* players. In the millennial revival the tendency to simplify the ever-receding past was evident in the rise of the Nitabō legend. As the origins of the genre become more distant, the temptation to mythologize gets stronger. These myths gain credence as institutions with vested interests give them support: the *Tsugaru shamisen* museum in Goshogawara City lends legitimacy to the claim that Nitabō was the founder of the genre, and the city, in turn, hopes to attract tourists to this and other related sites.

Third, the genre was recontextualized by each revival. In the lead-up to the 1970s revival, the genre was introduced to mainstream Japan by Mihashi Michiya in the late 1950s, around which time the term “*Tsugaru shamisen*” was coined. As late as 1956 it was still referred to as “the *shamisen* of the Tsugaru songs” (Kawanishi 1956, 253). This renaming does two things: it underscores the local nature of the music, and it separates solo playing from accompaniment. It is at just the time that the music gains a national audience that it is given this pointedly localizing name, and while “*Tsugaru shamisen*” today can refer to song accompaniment, it first and foremost refers to solo playing. Giving a name to solo playing in some way legitimizes it, leading to Chikuzan’s recording of the first album of solo playing in 1963, and then to the sale of an actual instrument called a *Tsugaru shamisen* in 1965 in Tokyo (Matsuki 2011, 144). Each of these is a step towards establishing the genre as it is known today. For the mass-mediated revival of the 1970s, though, *Tsugaru shamisen* was essentially Takahashi Chikuzan, and Chikuzan

represented Japan's vanishing traditions. For many Japanese people, Chikuzan was simultaneously at the centre of what it was to be Japanese, and a marginal, unknowable *other*. He was an "internal exotic," to borrow Christine Yano's term, and listening to him allowed modern, urban Japanese to participate in his perceived authenticity (Yano 2002, 172).

If Chikuzan and, by extension, *Tsugaru shamisen*, was simultaneously essentially Japanese and an *other* for most Japanese people in the 1970s, the millennial revival recontextualized *Tsugaru shamisen* as both traditional and modern. The conflicting signifiers on the cover of the first Yoshida Brothers album – Japanese and Western characters, traditional clothing and modern hairstyles, the monochrome image that indexes the past, and the youth of the brothers that indexes the future – graphically illustrate the recontextualized genre's ability to contain these opposites. This recalls Watsuji's idea of Japan's "double character" – modern on the surface but maintaining an essential Japaneseness underneath – introduced in chapter two. The attraction of the image of *Tsugaru shamisen* in the millennial revival was that this quintessentially Japanese instrument was also undeniably modern. It is important to reiterate here that in the mass-mediated millennial revival, *Tsugaru shamisen* is really nothing more than an image: the music is of minimal importance. Whether the Yoshida Brothers are playing a traditional or a hybrid composition, the general effect is the same. Most Japanese people do not engage with the music, for them *Tsugaru shamisen* has been distilled down to a few key, instantly recognizable characteristics: the percussive attack of the plectrum, the astringent timbre of the strings amplified by the skin sound table, and a few characteristic lightning-fast riffs. A few moments of this is all that is needed to create a sound environment that evokes a feeling of modern Japaneseness.

Fourth, product-, person-, and process-oriented authenticity were invoked in various ways to

establish legitimacy in these revivals. The 1970s revival invoked the authenticity of Chikuzan and his early life as a mendicant *bosama* as a link to the purported beginnings of *Tsugaru shamisen*. This was taken at face value by the mainstream culture of the time, but there were problems with this view. First, as *min'yō* performers at the time recognized, whatever its ultimate origins, the *Tsugaru shamisen* playing style as it was understood in the 1970s was developed by sighted players in the *utakai min'yō* shows of the teens, 20s, 30s and 40s, and no longer resembled the relatively quiet style that Chikuzan continued to perform. While the *bosama* are credited with being the originators of the style, it is not at all clear what part of the existing sound they contributed.

Since the millennium, the most important way for a player to establish her legitimacy is to win a string of contests, but there has also been a simultaneous struggle between the contests themselves to establish legitimacy. The contests in Aomori Prefecture can invoke a certain authenticity based on their location, while others invoke the person-oriented authenticity of respected judges and sponsoring organizations, or the product-oriented authenticity of transparent adjudication practices, or placing more stringent requirements on contestants.

In terms of players themselves, legitimacy derived from being born in Tsugaru has been greatly diminished in the last few decades, as most of the influential players are from outside the region. Nor is there much legitimacy derived from belonging to a respected school; mastering the playing style that wins contests trumps all other claims to legitimacy. Finally, regarding Baumann's idea of purists – who find authority in reproducing old ways of playing – and syncretists – those expressing themselves in new ways through the music – the latter have been in the dominant position since the millennium, both at the contests and even more so in the hybrid styles that make up the majority of *Tsugaru shamisen* music recorded in the last decade

and a half.

Fifth, changes in practices of transmission, dissemination, and promotion have occurred. The basic routes for selling music had been established prior to the revivals; most major recording companies had divisions that dealt with traditional Japanese music, and *Tsugaru shamisen* was handled by these divisions. In the millennial revival, though the Internet had been widely adopted in Japan, record companies continued to rely on physical media to sell music. As of 2016, the amount and variety of *Tsugaru shamisen* music on CD dwarfs what is commercially available for download. On the other hand, the number of recordings available for free on YouTube is several orders of magnitude larger than what is on CD. For *Tsugaru shamisen* players, tablature became available during the first revival, which contributed to the process of standardization, a process which was accelerated in the lead up to the second revival as contests became a major part of the *Tsugaru shamisen* world. A major difference between the two mass-mediated revivals is the way that people engaged with the music. In the first revival it seems that a much larger part of the population actively listened to the music: *min'yō* fans were very familiar with the sound of traditional Japanese instruments, but even for younger fans of jazz, blues, bluegrass, and rock, the sound was not prohibitively unfamiliar. In the millennial revival, while almost everyone in Japan was exposed to the music, an exceedingly small percentage of the population actively sought it out.

Sixth, the post-revival periods: The first revival had hardly finished when Daijō Kazuo noted an increase in the number of players in the urban centres, and not long after that the first national *Tsugaru shamisen* contest was established in Hirosaki City. In the two decades after the first revival the contests nurtured a generation of skillful young players which gave the second revival its young, forward-looking image. This was a key characteristic of the second revival, and

became part of its legacy when that revival was finished, as the contests continued to provide a stream of new young winners. The smaller participatory revival that was nurtured by the contests continues to the present, and seems in no immediate danger of disappearing. This has meant that not only a larger number, but a greater variety of people are playing *Tsugaru shamisen* than ever before, including people from all age groups and skill levels, hobbyists, professionals and aspiring professionals from all over the country. Women make up a much larger percentage of players than they did when the contests were starting out, and are competing and winning at the highest levels at a rate that would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. The changes in player demographics have changed the way *Tsugaru shamisen* is thought about: where it was previously thought of as a rough and masculine music of the Tsugaru region it is now generally thought of first as a high-energy form of traditional or tradition-based Japanese music. Hybrid forms make up a large part of the body of music recorded since the millennium, and it is frequently the music used to represent Japan internationally.

Directions for Future Research

This dissertation is largely concerned with the shifts that occurred between the two mainstream revivals of *Tsugaru shamisen*. Exploring that shift necessitated a presentation of the concept of Japanese modernity, and a tracing of the histories of the recordings and contests connected to this music. There are a number of areas and issues raised in this dissertation which merit further study. These include gender and *Tsugaru shamisen*, certain aspects of the genre's recording history, musical analysis of early and recent recordings, contest research, and the international reception of *Tsugaru shamisen*.

Gender was only discussed briefly, and mainly in relation to the national contests. The history

of *Tsugaru shamisen* is dominated by male players, and the traditional aesthetics of the playing style are described in masculine terms. It was only once contests were established in other parts of the country, and the music began to lose its association with the Tsugaru region, that women began to be accepted as serious competitors. It was not until 2005 that a woman won a national contest, but in the following decade every contest except Hirosaki, the oldest and most conservative contest, has crowned a woman as champion. Adjudication panels are still predominantly male, as are the executive committees of the contests and other organizing bodies. Likewise, female heads of schools are relatively rare. Gender inequality in the *Tsugaru shamisen* world is obviously connected to the general lack of gender equality in Japanese society, so perhaps the advances that women have made in the contests in the last decade have wider implications.

The recording history I have presented here is a foundation for a larger project. Information on recording is scarce, and since very few albums remain in print for more than a few years after their initial release, there is no easy way to trace a given artist's catalogue. For various economic reasons, Japanese record companies have tended to produce new compilations of previously recorded *Tsugaru shamisen* music rather than re-release entire albums by individual players. Even for avid listeners who purchase these compilations, since no information about recording or original release dates is given, the individual recordings exist outside of historical context. There are a small number of serious collectors who have devoted time and money to hunting down 78rpm discs and LPs who have begun to piece together a more complete recording history of the genre, but a comprehensive discography will require the cooperation of various record companies, collectors and researchers. If this can be accomplished, one of the results will be a much clearer picture of how the genre developed, and continues to develop.

In this dissertation I purposely avoided anything like a detailed musical analysis, as a large part of my MA thesis was devoted to this topic, but more work could certainly be done in this area. A greater understanding of the development of *Tsugaru shamisen* as a solo style could come from careful analysis and comparison of the available early recordings. A cataloging of techniques and riffs used in Umeda Hōgetsu's rather basic accompaniments from the 1920s, and Shirakawa Gumpachirō's accompaniments and first solo recordings from the 1930s and 1940s would be very useful in mapping the genre's development. There is also the matter of the move away from traditional repertoire in recordings, particularly since the millennium. For the purposes of the present study, the musical particulars of the new repertoire are not very important. The incorporation of compositional techniques and instrumentation of western popular music are generally executed in a straightforward manner and require little in the way of explanation. However, certain pieces by the Yoshida brothers and newer players like Ki&Ki exist somewhere between traditional and popular music, and analysis of some of these pieces could be worthwhile.

Chapter four provided a detailed description of the contest culture that has been a big part of the *Tsugaru shamisen* world for three decades. While researching and writing that chapter I was struck by how little has been written about contests, and was often left wondering whether a particular facet of the contests was specific to Japan or occurred elsewhere as well. Thanks to the writing of Sarah Loten on piping competitions and Chris Goertzen on fiddle contests, for example, I saw that a history of under-representation of women in certain kinds of contests was not peculiar to Japan. All of these contests require virtuosity on a traditional instrument, and outside of Western art music, this has until recently been something that drew many more men than women. Goertzen's writing in particular has a breadth and depth that allowed me to

compare various aspects of the two contest traditions, and provided insights about their commonalities and differences. As mentioned in the introduction, I was made aware of Sherry Johnson's excellent 2006 dissertation on fiddle contests in Ontario too late to use it in this work. This exhaustive 600-page study includes chapters on Ontario fiddle contest history; an ethnographic description of a contest; contest structure and infrastructure; identity, community and meaning as they relate to contests; judges as gate-keepers; and stability and change in Ontario fiddle style. More writing at this level of detail is needed on traditional music competitions.

At the end of chapter five I mentioned that *Tsugaru shamisen* has been gaining popularity outside of Japan. As this study is concerned with the recontextualization of *Tsugaru shamisen* in Japan, I did not consider the reception of the music in other markets. Domestic releases of Yoshida Brothers CDs in Korea and Taiwan, for instance, seem to be part of a general interest in J-pop, while in the US the Yoshida Brothers are marketed as world music. The instrumental nature of the music certainly limited its audience in Japan, but in the international market, and particularly in the English-speaking world, where foreign language lyrics are a barrier, this may be an advantage. Further research could be done on what draws listeners outside of Japan to this music, and what the music means to them.

Appendix A: Selected *Tsugaru Shamisen* Player Chronology

Akimoto Nitarō (Nitabō)	秋元二郎 (二太坊)	(1857- 1928)
Furukawa Kinosuke (Kinobō)	古川喜之助(喜の坊)	(1866-1922)
Fukushi Unosuke (Akabō)	福土卯之助(赤坊)	(1866-1922)
Morita no Gensuke (Yoneya Gensuke)	森田の源助(米谷源助)	(1873-1940)
Ōta Chōsaku (Chōsaku no bō)	太田長作(長作坊)	(1875-1949)
Takamatsu Toragorō (Tora no bō)	高松寅五郎(寅坊)	(1878-1935)
Era Tatsugorō (Desakibō)	江良辰五郎(出嶺坊)	(1880-1943)
Sudō (given name unknown) (Kamebō)	(亀坊)	(1883-1934)
Suzuki Toyogorō (Umeda Hōgetsu)	鈴木豊五郎(梅田 豊月)	(1885-1952)
Kurokawa no Momotarō (Kase no Momo)	黒川の桃太郎(嘉瀬の桃)	(1886-1931)
Toda Jūjirō (Toda bō)	戸田重次郎(戸田坊)	(dates unknown)
Kasai Takejirō	葛西竹次郎	(1893-?)
Maeda Takesaburō	前田竹三郎	(1894-?)
Fukita Sanshōei	吹田三松栄	(dates unknown)
Satō Tsunakichi	佐藤 茂助坊(aka Shigesuke bo?)	(dates unknown)
Yamawaki Seizō	山脇清蔵	(dates unknown)
Miura Seiichi	三浦正市	(dates unknown)
Nagao Kunimasa	長尾邦正	(1902-1986)
Kusumi Kiichirō	楠美喜一郎	(1904-?)
Hasegawa Eitarō (Hasegawa Eihachirō)	長谷川栄太郎(長谷川栄八郎)	(1905-1973)
Mitsumata Iwatarō (Mitsumata Senryū)	光股岩太郎(光股巖流)	(1907-1970)
Kusumi Sōsaku		(1907-?)
Sasaki Shigekichi (Sasaki Hangetsu)	佐々木繁吉 (佐々木繁月)	(1908-1996)
Shirakawa Gumpachirō	白川軍八郎	(1909-1962)
Takahashi Sadazō (Takahashi Chikuzan)	高橋定蔵(高橋竹山)	(1910-1998)
Mikami Chūzo		(1910-?)
Tanaka Rinjirō (Kida Rinshōe)	田中林次郎(木田林公栄)	(1911-1979)
Murayama Jirōichi	村山次郎一	(1911-?)
Fukushi Masao (Fukushi Masakatsu)	福土政雄(福土正勝)	(1913-1969)
Ishizawa Taketarō	石沢竹太郎	(dates unknown)
Fukui Kōichi (Fukui Tendō)	福居高一(福居天童)	(1914-1993)
Hasegawa Taketarō	長谷川竹太郎	(1917-1992)
Kudō Hidetarō	工藤秀太郎	(1918-?)
Igarashi Kiyoei	五十嵐清栄(五十嵐清栄)	(1920-1952)
Inōue Yumito	井上勇美人	(1922-1992)
Oyama Mitsugu	小山貢	(b. 1930)
Kitazawa Michiya (Mihashi Michiya)	北沢美智也(三橋美智也)	(1930-1996)
Yamada Chisato	山田千里	(1931-2004)
Takahashi Yūjirō	高橋裕次郎	(1934-2012)
Sasaki Kō	佐々木孝	(1935-1999)
Kyōgoku Toshinori	京極利則	(b. 1938)
Sawada Katsuaki	澤田勝秋	(b. 1944)
Fujita Junichi	藤田淳一	(1947-2001)

Nagamine Kenihchi	長峰 健一	(b. 1949)
Hasegawa Yūji	長谷川 裕二	(b. 1951)
Takeda Suguru	竹田 傑	(b. 1953)
Yoshino Fusako (Takahashi Chikuzan II)	吉野房子(二代目高橋竹山)	(b. 1955)
Oyama Mitsugu II	小山 貢	(b. 1957)
Sato Michihiro	佐藤 通弘	(b. 1957)
Okada Osamu	岡田 修	(b. 1957)
Ishii Shūgen	石井秀弦	(b. 1959)
Kinoshita Shinichi	木乃下 真市	(b. 1965)
Kamiya Takafumi	神谷 茂良	(b. 1968)
Takahashi Chikudo	高橋竹童	(b. 1970)
Shibutani Kazuo	渋谷 和生	(b. 1971)
Kevin Kmetz		(b. 1972)
Agatsuma Hiromitsu	上妻 宏光	(b. 1973)
Kurosawa Hiroyuki	黒澤 博幸	(b. 1973)
Matsuda Kōgyō	松田 隆行	(b. 1973)
Habu Misao	土生みさお	(b. 1973)
Matsubashi Reika	松橋 礼香	(b. 1976)
Hashimoto Kazuhiko (Sawada Katsunari)	橋本和彦(澤田 勝成)	(b. 1963)
Yō (Shindō) Shōtarō	踊(進藤) 正太郎	(b. 1977)
Yoshida Ryōichirō	吉田良一郎	(b. 1977)
Sasagawa Kōjin	笹川 皇人	(b. 1978)
Yoshida Kenichi	吉田 健一	(b. 1979)
Oyama Yutaka	小山 豊	(b. 1981)
Yabuki Kazuyuki	矢吹 和之	(b. 1983)
Hanawa Chie	埴 知恵	(b. 1983)
Nitta Masahiro	新田 昌宏	(b. 1984)
Shibata Masato	柴田 雅人	(b. 1986)
Suzuki Rie	鈴木 和枝	(b. 1987)
Kasai Yoshiyuki	葛西 頼之	(b. 1989)
Asano Shō	浅野 祥	(b. 1990)
Shirafuji Hikari	白藤 かり	(b. 1990)
Takeda Kanami	武田 佳泉	(b. 1990)
Yamashita Yasutaka	山下 靖喬	(b. 1991)
Fujii Reigan	藤井 黎元	(b. 1992)
Sonohata Kimihisa	蘭 皇寿	(b. 1993)
Kojima Kōhei	小島 康平	(b. 1993)
Sugai Mayu	須貝 麻由	(b. 1998)

Information about the early players on this list is compiled from a number of sources, including lineages charts in Groemer (2012, 64-65) and (Matsuki, 2011), and the following sources (Daijō, 1984, 83, 123, 218) (Daijō, 1993, 41, 47, 56, 63) (Suda et al, 1998, 101) (Hughes, 2008, 170) (Groemer, 2012, 324, 336). Players whose names appear in bold are known to have recorded. Players born after 1950 are too numerous to list, so I have only included those who have made recordings and/or won multiple contests.

Appendix B: Recorded Repertoire of Early Players

Artist	Chikuzan	Others	Total
Group 1 (539)			
<i>Tsugaru Jongara bushi</i>	31	159	190
<i>Tsugaru Yosare bushi</i>	30	63	93
<i>Tsugaru aiya bushi</i>	21	54	75
<i>Tsugaru ohara bushi</i>	13	45	58
<i>Tsugaru sansagari</i>	14	34	48
Generic improvisation (<i>Kyokubiki</i>)	31	44	75
Group 2 (275)			
<i>Yasaburō bushi</i>	12	26	38
<i>Tsugaru ondo</i>	17	20	37
<i>Tosa no sunayama</i>	9	28	37
<i>Ajigasawa jinku</i>	11	25	36
<i>Tsugaru jinku</i>	5	20	25
<i>Ringo bushi</i>	6	16	22
<i>Tsugaru tanto bushi</i>	2	16	18
<i>Tsugaru waiha bushi</i>	6	9	17
<i>Tsugaru shiogama jinku</i>	1	16	17
<i>Kuroishi yosare bushi</i>	4	13	17
<i>Tsugaru ganin bushi</i>	3	8	11
Group 3 (46)			
<i>Kase no yakko odori</i>	4	6	10
<i>Tsugaru bayashi</i>	1	7	8
<i>Tanabe oshimako bushi</i>	5	-	5
<i>Tawarazumi uta</i>	5	-	5
<i>Kenryō bushi</i>	1	3	4
<i>Hohai bushi</i>	0	4	4
<i>Ariran hensōkyoku</i>	2	-	2
<i>Torajo sama</i>	1	-	1
<i>Nambu tawarazumi uta</i>	1	-	1
<i>Tsugaru Shiogama ohara bushi</i>	1	-	1
<i>Tsugaru no senritsu</i>	1	-	1
<i>Tsugaru Iwaki tozan bayashi</i>	1	-	1
<i>Nambu aiya bushi</i>	1	-	1
<i>Nambu umakata sansagari</i>	1	-	1
<i>Naohai bushi</i>	1	-	1

Compiled from sixty-six albums, twenty-one of which are Takahashi Chikuzan solo albums, and forty-five of which are albums by other artists. 860 pieces in total.

Appendix C:
Recorded Repertoire of Representative Recent Players

Artist	Yoshida	Agatsuma	Kinoshita	Nitta	Total
Group 1					
<i>Tsugaru Jongara bushi</i>	10	7	4	7	28
<i>Tsugaru Yosare bushi</i>	3	3	2	1	9
<i>Tsugaru aiya bushi</i>	4	3	2	2	11
<i>Tsugaru ohara bushi</i>	2	1	3	2	8
<i>Tsugaru sansagari</i>		1	1	2	4
Other (new titles)	127	76	21	50	274
Group 2					
<i>Yasaburō bushi</i>	1	1	1		3
<i>Tsugaru ondo</i>		1	1	1	3
<i>Tosa no sunayama</i>	1	2	1	3	7
<i>Ajigasawa jinku</i>	1	1	1		3
<i>Tsugaru jinku</i>	2		1		3
<i>Ringo bushi</i>	2		1		3
<i>Tsugaru tanto bushi</i>	2		1		3
<i>Tsugaru waiha bushi</i>		1	1		2
<i>Tsugaru shiogama jinku</i>			1		1
<i>Kuroishi yosare bushi</i>			1		1
<i>Tsugaru ganin bushi</i>			1		1
Group 3					
<i>Kase no yakko odori</i>			1		1
<i>Akita nikata bushi</i>	3	1			4

Compiled from 39 albums, by the Yoshida Brothers (17), Agatsuma Hiromitsu (11), Kinoshita Shinichi (5), and Nitta Masahiro (6) 342 pieces in total.

Appendix D: Early *Tsugaru Shamisen* Player
Recordings and Ranking Charts

78 rpm	Min'yō	Tsugaru	Artist	1942	1952	1967
17	-	13	Shirakawa Gumpachirō	O	O	X
1	2	37	Kida Rinshōei	O	O	O
1	-	-	Fukushi Masakatsu	O	O	O
4	9	47	Takahashi Chikuzan	O	O	O
14	-	-	Umeda Hōgetsu	O	O	X
3	-	-	Igarashi Kiyoei	O	O	X
-	-	-	Inōe Yumito	O	O	X
-	-	-	Kudō Tetsurō	O	O	O
-	-	-	Sasaki Hangetsu	O	O	O
1	-	-	Yamada Shūkichi	O	X	X
4	-	-	Hasegawa Taketarō	X	O	O
-	-	-	Fukita Sanshōei	X	O	O
-	8	2	Yamada Chisato	X	O	O
-	5	5	Oyama Mitsugu	X	O	O
-	-	-	Watanabe Shōgetsu	X	O	O
-	-	-	Akimoto Kyō	X	O	O
-	-	-	Muramoto Shōichi	X	O	O
-	-	3	Sasaki Kō	X	X	O
-	6	-	Kudō Kikushi	X	X	O
-	-	24	Takahashi Yūjirō	X	X	X
-	-	20	Sawada Katsuaki	X	X	X
-	-	19	Mihashi Michiya	X	X	X
-	-	5	Fujita Junichi	X	X	X
-	-	3	Kanbara Masao	X	X	X
-	-	2	Kinomoto Shinjūrō	X	X	X
-	-	1	Kyōgoku Toshinori	X	X	X

Recordings: The three columns on the right indicate the number of recordings by each artist that I have found on 78rpm records (ending around 1958), *shamisen*-accompanied min'yō anthologies, and instrumental *Tsugaru shamisen* anthologies. For ease of reading, I use dashes in place of zeroes.

Ranking Charts: The three columns on the left indicate which players were considered notable in 1942, 1952, and 1967. An "O" indicates that they were listed in that year's chart, and an "X" indicates that they were not (Matsubayashi 2000, 101; Takada 2010; Matsuki 2011, 125).

Appendix E: Map of National *Tsugaru Shamisen* Contests



Appendix F: History of Contest Winners

Tsugaru-jamisen Zenkoku Taikai (Hirosaki City, May 2-3, 1982)

- 1982-1983: Sato Michihiro (25-26)
- 1984: Nagamine Kenichi (35)
- 1985: Okada Osamu (28)
- 1986-1987: Kinoshita Shinichi (20-21)
- 1988-1989: Takeda Suguru (35-36)
- 1990: Shibutani Kazuo (19)
- 1991: Hashimoto Kazuhiko (Sawada Katsunari) (28)
- 1992-1994: Shibutani Kazuo (21-23)
- 1995-1996: Agatsuma Hiromitsu (21-22)
- 1997-1999: Shindō Shōtarō (20-22)
- 2000-2002: Matsuda Kōgyō (27-28)
- 2003: Sasagawa Kōjin (26)
- 2004-2006: Asano Shō (14-16)
- 2007-2008: Shibata Masato (20-21)
- 2009: Sasagawa Kōjin (32)
- 2010-2012: Shibata Masato (23-25)
- 2013-2015: Kasai Yoshiyuki (24-26)
- 2016: Yamanaka Nobuto (41)

Tsugaru-jamisen Zen Nihon Kanagi Taikai (Kanagi Town, May 4-5, 1989)

- 1989: Agatsuma Hiromitsu (15)
- 1990: Oda? Atsushi (20)
- 1991: Sawada Katsunari (27)
- 1992: Ushimaru Tetsurō (27)
- 1993: Sawada Katsuharu (28)
- 1994: Kamiya Takafumi (25)
- 1995: Kamiya Takafumi (26)
- 1996: Ishii Shūgen (36)
- 1997: Ishii Shūgen (37)
- 1998: Yoshida Kenichi (18)
- 1999: Yoshida Kenichi (19)
- 2000: Nitta Masahiro (16)
- 2001: Nitta Masahiro (17)
- 2002: Kurosawa Hiroyuki (29)
- 2003: Kurosawa Hiroyuki (30)
- 2004: Kurosawa Hiroyuki (31)
- 2005: Nishimura Shinobu (17) W
- 2006: Shibata Masato (20)
- 2007: Shibata Masato (21)
- 2008: Shibata Masato (22)
- 2009: Yonezawa Norihide (30)
- 2010: Kasai Yoshiyuki (21)

2011: Takeda Kanami (21) W
2012: Shibuya Kōhei (30)
2013: Horio Taima (41)
2014: Itō Tetsuya (23)
2015: Saitō Saki (22) W
2016: Katō Yūsuke (22)

Tsugaru-jamisen Concours Zenkoku Taikai (Tokyo, April 4-5, 1998)

1998: Ishikawa Hajime (18)
1999: Yoshida Kenichi (19)
2000: Suzuki Kenji (21)
2001: Takahashi Kō (25)
2002: Nitta Masahiro (18)
2003: Shibata Masato (16)
2004: Tsubaki Masanori (23)
2005: Abe Kinzaburō (20)
2006: Yonezawa Norihide (27)
2007: Matsubashi Reika (31) W
2008: Shibata Yuri (22) W
2009: Yamashita Yasutaka (18)
2010: Abe Ginzaburō (22)
2011: Sonohata Kimihisa (18)
2012: Hikida Taichi (21)
2013: Habu Misao (40) W
2014: Yabuki Kazuyuki (?)
2015: Suzuki Rie (28) W
2016: Sugai Mayu (18) W

Zenkoku Tsugaru-jamisen Concours Osaka Taikai (Osaka City, November 28-29, 2002)

2002: Hirohara Takemi (25)
2003: Shibata Masato (16)
2004: Yonezawa Norihide (25)
2005: Abe Ginzaburō (17)
2006: Matsunaga Kenji (27)
2007: Satō Toshiharu (34)
2008: Kasai Yoshiyuki (19)
2009: Yamashita Yasutaka (18)
2010: Sonohata Kimihisa (17)
2011: Sonohata Kimihisa (18)
2012: Habu Misao (39) W
2013: Kinoshita Shōhei (18)
2014: Suzuki Rie (27) W
2015: Katō Yūsuke (21)

Tsugaru-jamisen Zenkoku Taikai in Kobe (Kobe City, October 10, 2004)

2004: Shibata Masato (18)
2005: Nagamura Kōji (20)
2006: Matsunaga Kenji (27)
2007: Kasai Yoshiyuki (18)
2008: Shimoikura Makoto (27)
2009: Satō Michiyoshi (22)
2010: Shirafuji Hikari (20) W
2011: Sugiyama Daisuke (18)
2012: Kojima Kōhei (19)
2013: Kojima Kōhei (20)
2014: Suzuki Rie (27) W

Tsugaru-jamisen Nihon Ichi Ketteisen (Aomori City, May 2-3, 2007)

2007: Fukushi Toyoaki (54)
2008: Yō Shōtarō (31)
2009: No winner best score: Satō Toshihiko (44)
2010: Satō Toshihiko (45)
2011: Satō Toshiharu (38)
2012: Fujii Reigan (20)
2013: Habu Misao (40) W
2014: Sugai Mayu (16) W
2015: No winner best score: Yabuki Kazuyuki (32)
2016: Kanno Yūto (20)

Zen Nippon Tsugaru-jamisen kyougikai Nagoya Taikai (Nagoya City, August 12, 2007)

2007: Matsubashi Reika (31) W
2008: Shibata Masato (22)
2009: Fujii Reigan (17)
2010: Shirafuji Hikari (20)
2011: Sonohata Kimihisa (18)
2012: Yabuki Kazuyuki (29)
2013: Kamiyama Eitoku (20)
2014: Katō Masanori (20)
2015: Sugai Mayu (17) W
2016: Yabuki Kazuhito (31)

Multiple winners

Twelve wins: Shibata Masato

Six wins: Kasai Yoshiyuki

Four wins: Shibusaki Kazuo, Yō Shōtarō

Three wins: Agatsuma Hiromitsu, Nitta Masahiro, Matsuda Kōgyō, Asano Shō, Yabuki Kazuyuki, Kojima Kōhei, Suzuki Rie, Sugai Mayu

Two wins: Sato Michihiro, Ishii Nobugen, Kinoshita Shinichi, Kamiya Takafumi, Kurosawa Hiroyuki, Habu Misao, Fujii Reigan, Yamashita Yasutaka, Sasagawa Kōjin, Shirafuji Hikari, Sonohata Kimihisa, Matsubashi Reika

Appendix G: Transcriptions

I. Traditional Piece: Oyama Mitsugu's "Tsugaru jonkara bushi (shin bushi)" (excerpt: page one of two)(Oyama 1991, 12)

津軽じょんがら節 青森県
(新節) その2

ニ上リ

押し撥記号

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. It consists of nine staves of music. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, triplets, and dynamic markings such as accents (acc), slurs, and breath marks (v). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-3. A bracket labeled '押し撥記号' (push/pull sign) is placed above the first staff. A bracket labeled '8va' indicates an octave shift in the third staff. A bracket labeled '不定数' (indefinite number) is placed above the sixth staff. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs. Below the eighth and ninth staves, there are rhythmic patterns represented by 'ト' (Ta) and 'ン' (N) characters, indicating the drum accompaniment.

ト トン トン トン . ト トン トン . ト トン ト

トン トン トン . . トン トン トン . ト トン ト

トン . ト トン ト トン トン トン] . ハ ア

II. New composition style: Yoshida Brothers' "Kodō" (from *Renaissance*. Sony Music Entertainment SRCL-5978. 2004. Transcribed by Gerry McGoldrick, 2017)

KODO

Yoshida Brothers

The musical score for "KODO" is presented in five systems, each consisting of two staves. The time signature is 2/4. The first staff of each system contains the melody, which begins with a quarter rest followed by eighth-note patterns. The second staff of each system contains the accompaniment, which is a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The score is written in a clean, professional style with clear notation and rests.

2 KODO

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "KODO". It consists of two systems of music, each with two staves. The first system has a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The second system also has a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The music is written in a rhythmic style with many slurs and accents, suggesting a fast, repetitive pattern. The title "KODO" is centered above the first system. The number "2" is in the top left corner.

This is a transcription of the opening twenty-eight seconds of the three-minute and thirty-seven-second piece entitled “*Kodō*” (鼓動, “Beat”). It has been transcribed one semitone lower than the original recording. Tuning is relative rather than absolute in this tradition: the low string is tuned to the tonic (Eb in the recording, D in the transcription), and the second and third strings are a fifth and an octave, respectively, above it. The tempo of the piece in the recording is 150 beats per minute. In terms of typography, the slur marks represent glissandos, which I was unable to render in the score due to software limitations.

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