

Music on the Stage



2. Asian Arts

September 25, 2024

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JAPANESE NOH DRAMA, which first appeared in the early 1400s, is the oldest continually-practiced drama form in the world. Studying *Noh*, and to a lesser extent the later Japanese art-forms of *Kabuki* and *Bunraku*, reveals a very different aesthetic from that prevailing in Western theater today, though it is one that casts light on the ritual origin of some even more ancient Western theatrical forms that are no longer practiced. Similarly the music that accompanies Japanese performances challenges assumptions that we may make about our own music today.

To some extent the title of this class, "Asian Arts," is a misnomer. In addition to an hour focused on Japan and another half-hour on Bali, we will make a brief visit to Africa. This is because a secondary purpose of looking at the ancient arts of other cultures is to observe their influence on modern artists in Europe or America, which will increasingly become the focus of the second hour. So each section on Japan, Bali, or Africa will end with one or more works from our contemporaries, whether writing for a church in the English fenland or a mega-musical on Broadway. *rb.*

A. Theater Outside Time

After a brief comparison of *kabuki* and *noh*, we look in more detail at some examples of the latter, and at a Britten opera based on a 15th-century *noh* text.

Kabuki: the *Two Lion* dance

Michishige Udaka: documentary, *The Spirit of Noh*

Mikata Shizuka: *Tomoe*, excerpts

Britten & Plomer: *Curlew River* (1964), excerpt

B. Theater of the Bizarre

One of the possible translations of *kabuki* is “bizarre,” and its plays are typically more colorful, flamboyant, and given to extremes of drama and movement; it is primarily theater for entertainment. After analyzing a single play we look at one example of how *kabuki* techniques continue to influence Western directors today.

Video: “Executing the *mie* gesture”

Video: The *Aragoto* masterpiece explained: *Shibaraku*

Puccini: *Turandot*, end of Act I (production by Andrei Serban)

C. Not Your Usual Puppet Show

A still-later form of Japanese theater is *Bunraku*, a means of storytelling using half-size puppets accompanied by a single *shamisen* player and a narrator known as the *tayo* who does all the voices.

Video: “Elements of *Bunraku*”

Stravinsky: *The Nightingale* (production by Robert Lepage)

D. A Gamut of Gamelan

The originally-sacred dances of Bali are typically accompanied by community orchestras known as *gamelans*. Their music, which consists of rapidly moving patterns of repeated phrases, has influenced Western composers throughout the 20th century, largely due to the pioneering work of musicologist (and Peabody graduate) Colin McPhee.

Video: *Legon* dances at Ubud Palace

Ravel: *Laideronette, Empress of the Pagodas*, from *Mother Goose*
(Martha Argerich and Lang Lang, pianos)

Film: *Colin McPhee: the Lure of Asian Music* (Michael Blackwood)

McPhee: *Tabuh-Tabuhan* (Dennis Russell Davies, conductor)

Video: Javanese Shadow Puppetry (Wayan Wija)

E. Out of Africa, more or less

To complete our background to the three modern clips which end the hour, we look at some traditional masks and dances of Africa, though not necessarily in traditional contexts. As the three closing works all have some connection to Africa and show the influence of Asian aesthetics, they make a fine way to sum up the themes of today’s class.

Various: Compilation of African dances

Riley: *In C Mali* (2014, Tate Gallery)

Kentridge: *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (museum installation, 2015)

Elton John: *The Lion King* (1997, directed by Julie Taymor), promo

Benjamin **Britten** (1913–76, *English composer*), Elton **John** (1947– , *English singer and composer*), William **Kentridge** (1955– , *South African artist and director*), Colin **McPhee** (1900–64, *Canadian composer*), William **Plomer** (1903–73, *South African writer*), Giacomo **Puccini** (1858–1924, *Italian composer*), Maurice **Ravel** (1875–1937, *French composer*), Terry **Riley** (1935– , *American composer*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian American composer*), Julie **Taymor** (1952– , *American director and designer*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/MusicStage
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