The Spread of Imperial Court Music and the Role of Musical Instrument Dealers in the Late Early Modern Era: Dissemination and Marketing of “Tradition”

IWABUCHI Reiji

In the late early modern era, there was a significant development in Japanese culture; the financial difficulties of Court nobles and the rise of provincial literati as consumers formed supply-demand relationships, leading to the restoration of the authority of the Imperial Court as a “tradition.” The same went for Imperial Court music (gagaku), which spread to provinces as musician organizations were reviving. These movements in the early modern era are too important to ignore when examining the maintenance and transmission processes of Imperial Court music and dance performances (bugaku), which has now been designated as an intangible cultural asset and delivered in shrine ceremonies all over Japan.

This article pays particular attention to musical instrument dealers, who played a critical role in the spread of Imperial Court music by connecting gagaku performers and other people. More specifically, this study focuses on the Kanda family, a musical instrument maker and dealer in Kyoto, and reveals the following three points by examining diaries of gagaku performers and documents of provincial literati.

1. As craftsmen and merchants, the Kanda family often visited performers. Based on the relationships, the family expanded their customer base to include Court nobles, and by the late 18th century, they had become a regular trader to repair and replace the musical and dancing instruments held by the Imperial Court. In the modern era, they became involved in the reorganization of Imperial Court music as national music and the rediscovery and export of “tradition” during the nation state building process by the Meiji government, such as reproducing Shosoin treasures and displaying Imperial Court musical instruments at exhibitions.

2. Then, based on the trust built through business relationships with the Imperial Court and Court nobles, the family established connections with samurai families to sell and repair musical instruments while acting as an intermediary to help their customers hire musicians as trainers. The family’s customer base even included the literati class, throughout Japan regardless of location, for whom they played an important role. The family not only supplied and maintained musical instruments but
also helped literati find musicians to learn from. This study considers that instrument craftsmen and merchants were essential for Court nobles to operate and expand their family businesses, which did not apply only to Imperial Court music.

3. In relation to the supply of musical instruments, it is worth paying attention to the brokerage of period instruments, which were mainly sold to daimyo families. The appraisals and prices of such antiques were influenced by the opinions of the Kanda family. Many of period instruments that embody “tradition” in today’s world were “discovered” by musical instrument dealers in the Edo period.

Key words: Imperial Court music (gagaku), gagaku musicians, musical instrument dealers, merchants, craftsmen, Court nobles, family business, the Edo period, creation of tradition