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## **Decentering Gagaku. Exploring the multiplicity of contemporary Japanese Court music**

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## CHAPTER 4

### “THE *GAGAKU* OF THE SOUTHERN CAPITAL”

#### PRACTICING *GAGAKU* LOCALLY IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN<sup>1</sup>

Entering the field was easy. In May 2013, on a meteorologically impeccable spring day, I sat down with Professor Kasagi Kan'ichi, leader of Nanto gakuso, and with Mr. Suzuki Haruo, from the Tokyo-based group Nippon gagakukai. The coffee shop, just outside Nara's Kintetsu train station, was busy but quiet –not at all an oxymoron in this country. Kasagi *sensei* was extraordinary in his composure: soft and polite voice, quiet eyes suggesting genuine curiosity, a smile that made me think of a child. The meeting was organized long before my arrival in Japan. Suzuki *sensei*, who was an acquaintance of a former supervisor, had agreed to intercede for me, in the hope that I would be taken in as a “special student” by Nanto gakuso.

The choice had fallen on Nanto gakuso for a number of reasons: first and foremost, because the group had a special bond with *shintō*, evident from its participation in the

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on two fieldwork experiences among the members of Nanto gakuso, conducted between April 2013 and March 2014 and again between October 2015 and September 2016. Some of its contents have been previously touched upon in (Giolai 2016a; and 2016b).

most important rituals of the many shrines and temples of Nara. I was interested in exploring the role of *gagaku* in the life of a contemporary major Japanese shrine, and to learn whether there were any parallels between the way *shintō* and *gagaku* were practiced. Beside its close ties to the Kasuga Taisha shrine, and thus to *shintō*, Nanto gakuso had another characteristic that made it uniquely suited for my investigation of the life of *gagaku* outside the court: it was located in the ancient historical capital of Japan, Nara. From its very name, which incorporates the word *nanto*, “southern capital”, the group seemed to take pride in being alternative to the centralized new tradition of Tokyo’s Imperial Household musicians.

At the time, these elements led me to believe that Nanto gakuso would provide a starker contrast between ‘yesterday’ and ‘today’ than any other amateur group in Kansai. However, I was not sure whether ‘Nara *gagaku*’ was representative of broader local, regional or even national trends, or if I would be able to take it as a model of ‘Japanese non-professional *gagaku* practice’. I was certainly open to the idea of establishing connections with other groups and conduct comparative research. But I was also convinced that it would be crucial to reach an ‘insider’s perspective’ by becoming a *gagaku* apprentice within a specific group, and I had reasons to believe that choosing that group from the outset would both determine the orientation of my research and limit my chances to work with other practitioners. But there is also a limit to the things one can predict before one actually gets there: entering the field always requires a ‘breach’, often provided by personal contacts with a “gate keeper” (Bernard 2006, 356–59). I was no exception. And the gates opened for me led to Nanto.

Given the prearranged nature of the encounter with Kasagi *sensei*, there was hardly anything for me to say or do. Suzuki *sensei* compressed my life into two short sentences: my initial Ph.D. project was exposed in all of its vagueness; my former “training in Western flute” was brought up<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the conversation landed on the fact that I was hoping to train in *gagaku*, perhaps in the *ryūteki* flute. Whether this was for pleasure or for research purposes, or a mixture of the two, was something left unsaid. In fact, *the* request was never stated out loud. Kasagi seemed attentive, if somewhat detached. Within the span of three or four sips of coffee, the conversation could move on to different

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<sup>2</sup> I studied transverse flute professionally for over ten years and graduated from a small Italian Conservatoire in 2009.

topics: upcoming concerts, this year's shrine celebrations, the usual pleasantries. On my end of the table, I did my best to silently fade from view.

Before sending us off at the train station, Kasagi *sensei* told me he would take the matter to the Rijikai, the administrative board of Nanto gakuso, and that I could probably join the weekly rehearsals from the second week of June, if not earlier. Would I also be interested in witnessing a ritual, called *Hōgakusai*, the attendance of which was normally restricted to the members of the group and their families? Needless to say, I was more than interested: I was excited. So, on June 8, I went to Kasuga Taisha. At around 5 pm; when the last visitors stepped outside the main pavilion, escorted by *miko* priestesses wearing colorful hair decorations of wisteria flowers, preparations for the ritual began – and I had that feeling for the first time. The forest's mysterious atmosphere, the silent gravel, the sense that you could hear the trees breathe in<sup>3</sup>. The shrine was empty. Ours. Mine, too. I felt the thrill of exclusivity, the privilege of being there. And somewhere in there, I felt a sense of familiarity, a quietness of sorts. Then came the music, the costumes, the fire in the braziers as the light of day went out (FIG.4.1 AND 4.2). Then, when the ritual was over, a different soundscape set in: the forest in the dark; steps on the gravel; cheerful goodbyes. In just a few minutes, the shrine was behind me and I was back on a train, among sleepy high school students and salarymen staring vacuously at their phones. But the sounds of *gagaku* wouldn't let go: I could still hear it resonate, enfolding me like an invisible substance muffling the normal sonic impact of reality. The ritual left me floating and suspended. Entering the field was wonderful. It was a thrill, a confirmation, a surfeit of emotions I was eager to explore.

Just one week later, in a building not far from the same Kintetsu Nara station, fifty-odd members of Nanto gakuso were getting ready to start the weekly practice. Thin, wooden sliding doors (*fusuma*) separated the rooms, but this provided very little actual acoustic isolation. I could hear the conversations overlap in the next room, as practitioners flocked in. Suzuki *sensei* had lent me a plastic replica of a *ryūteki* flute, and I had bought the scores online, together with an introductory book on how to play the three wind instruments of *gagaku* (see Sasamoto 2004).

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<sup>3</sup> In 1998, the “Kasugayama Primeval Forest” that surrounds Kasuga Taisha was inscribed in the World Heritage List as part of the “Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara” (see <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/870.pdf> accessed August 13, 2016).



FIGURES 4.1 AND 4.2. Two moments of the *Hōgakusai*. June 8, 2013 (Pictures by the author).

At that point, I was still struggling with notes' names and fingers' positions, all the while trying to decipher the score's indications on meter and mode. Sitting at the back of the room, I suddenly felt overwhelmed: the piercing sounds of *ryūteki* and *hichiriki*, mixed to the practitioners' voices, created a thick wall of incomprehensible noise. I looked around, and everyone was busy doing something: chatting, taking out their scores and recorders and pencils...only I was sitting still, not knowing exactly what to do. I felt suddenly uncomfortable, markedly out of place. Japanese, English and Italian musical terms amassed in my head as I kept looking down at my tiny notebook, as if an answer could magically surface from the blank page. The sonic contours of my unraveling ethnographic experience were very different now: confusing, almost aggressive, unwelcoming. The teacher sat behind a low desk, everyone bowed and the class began. Struggling to find the right page, I browsed the scores frantically. A woman sitting next to me silently offered to help. I handed her the small book, and in the blink of an eye she had given it back, the title of the piece staring at me: three characters I was not sure how to pronounce. I smiled and thanked, but deep inside I asked myself: "How can I even begin to understand what it means to be one of you?".

#### **4.1 "YOU DON'T JUST DO WHAT YOU LOVE": BEING AN 'AMATEUR' IN NANTO GAKUSO**

Academic research on amateurism generally belongs to the broader framework of sociological studies of art and sport. These tend to emphasize the processes of socialization at play within non-professional groups, as well as the complex role of class, gender and ethnicity in the pursuit of specific amateur activities (e.g. Meyer 2008; Coakley 2014; Hanquinet and Savage 2016). Despite this shared sociological background, however, the figure of the amateur has been left largely untheorized: most descriptions resort to the naïve distinction between "professionals" and "non-professionals", and definitions are often equivocal or inconsistent (see Stebbins 1977, 583–84; Gray 2013, 19–20). In fact, a widespread negative characterization of amateurs reduces them to individuals lacking some of the features and requirements of professionals. The absence of a significant monetary intake for the amateurs' activities and the limited amount of time at his or her disposal are but the most-often cited examples of such a deficiency

(Stebbins 1977, 585). Similarly, amateurs are sometimes contrasted with “hobbyists” on the basis of the existence, for the former, of a pursuable professional career which the latter cannot have access to: as pointed out by Stebbins, “one cannot be an amateur butterfly-catcher or matchbook collector; no opportunity for full-time employment exists here” (1977, 588). Moreover, comparisons with work also characterize sociological definitions of the broader category of “leisure”, generally understood as bringing together the activities of amateurs, hobbyists, volunteers, devotees and dabblers under a single rubric (Stebbins 1992; 2014; Scraton 2011). Indeed, leisure is seen as an activity which typically “provides individuals with the opportunity for relaxation, the broadening of knowledge, and social participation” beyond other obligations (such as work and family) (Scraton 2011, 351). In brief, despite its relevance to the sociological field, amateurism is often simplistically portrayed in opposition to work, with little or no effort put into producing a subtler understanding of the phenomenon.

Even though Stebbins has every right to claim that such “unidimensional definitions fail to communicate the essence of amateur and professionals”<sup>4</sup> (1977, 585), the fact remains that binary judgments are common among amateurs themselves. In the case of Nanto gakuso, for instance, Kasagi has stressed that “all the members have their own professional activity, and none of them makes a living from performing *gagaku*. In other words, they are *not professionals*” (2008, 68 emphasis added). Similarly, a male practitioner in his forties<sup>5</sup> once told me that “Only the court musicians can eat from playing *gagaku*. We are *gagaku* enthusiasts (*aikōka*), but we don’t really think about becoming professionals (*puro*)”<sup>6</sup>. These examples are important reminders that the line between emic and etic concepts can be blurred<sup>7</sup>, and that it is sometimes necessary to “de-socialize the amateurs” (Hennion 2015, 271), given that they often knowingly or unknowingly appropriate the vocabulary they expect scholars or ‘experts’ to employ when referring to them. Thus, any discussion of the role of court music’s practitioners must be wary of the dangers intrinsic to superficial sociological approaches, while at the same time resisting taking for granted the categorizations of the actors themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Though of course it is doubtful that anyone could find such an “essence”. Indeed, positing it may itself be quite pointless.

<sup>5</sup> All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, February 2014.

<sup>7</sup> On the classic anthropologic pair emic/etic, see (Fetterman 2008; Geertz 1974).

In this sense, recent research in the sociology of music represents a more reliable and increasingly coherent platform for the study of amateurs. Drawing inspiration from such diverse influences as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, anthropology and, above all, science and technology studies (STS), scholars such as Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion have worked extensively on the uses of music in everyday life, coming to a radical reconsideration of the role of the amateur in the dynamic “co-construction” of music and society (Shepherd and Devine 2015, 10; see in particular DeNora 2000; 2014; Hennion 2005; 2015 [1993]). In *Music and Everyday Life* (2000), for example, DeNora claims that “musical materials provide parameters that are used to frame dimensions of experience” (2000, 27), ultimately suggesting that the careful examination of those dimensions of experience<sup>8</sup> leads to a reconsideration of music as “an ally for a variety of world-making activities” (2000, 40). Appropriating James Gibson’s influential concept of “affordance” (2014, 119), she also shows how music is often perceived as “analogous or homologous” to individuals’ “modes of being” (DeNora 2000, 122) and how, for this reason, it can be conceptualized as “a technology of the self” (DeNora 1999; see also 2000, 45–74). Hennion, on the other hand, starts from a severe critique of Bourdieu’s sociology of taste<sup>9</sup>, and proposes instead to work toward a “pragmatics of taste” resting on an inclusive “theory of passion” that accounts for the ways amateurs create specific attachments to the world (see Hennion 2005). Accordingly, he defines amateurs in the broadest possible way as “‘users of music’, that is, active practitioners of a love for music, whether it involves playing, being part of a group, attending concerts or listening to records or the radio” (Hennion 2001, 1)<sup>10</sup>. In this view, “taste is a ‘performance’: it acts, it engages, it transforms and *makes one sensitised*. In this event, or this becoming, if music counts, it will end up indefinitely transformed through the contact with its public, because it depends of, and is *ultimately undistinguishable from, the chain of its modes of execution and appreciation, and of our training to attend to it as such*” (Hennion 2008, 43 emphasis added).

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<sup>8</sup> What she significantly refers to as “ethnomethodological ethnomusicology” (DeNora 2000, 155).

<sup>9</sup> Such approaches are summarized with the lapidary sentence “taste is culture’s way of masking domination” (Hennion 2005, 132). For a review of the debates surrounding Bourdieu’s influential contributions to the sociology of art and music, see (Prior 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Stebbins too noted that, etymologically, the amateur is “one who loves”, but specified that the activity the amateur is engaged in is “rarely an unalloyed joy”, and that therefore this definition should be carefully qualified (1977, 590).

Especially important for Hennion (and for the following analysis of court music's practitioners) is the fact that the amateur is not simply subject to an invisible and impalpable "power of the music": to the contrary, he or she actively resorts to a potentially infinite series of material and immaterial means to construct and mediate a relationship with the object of his or her passion (Hennion 2012, 251). The process of *sensitization* that results from this mediated relationship is a central characteristic of amateurism as a whole: indeed, practitioners of an art learn to perceive it in certain ways through bodily techniques that are inseparable from specific, negotiated emotional responses. In this way, sensing exceeds Cartesian binary distinctions between body and mind, subject and object, abstract and concrete (see Lock and Farquhar 2007). Thus, embracing Hennion's theoretical view necessarily means recognizing the significance of to the so-called Actor-Network Theory<sup>11</sup>, in particular when it comes to the idea that both amateurs and researchers are caught up "in a dense *material-semiotic network*" (Law 2004, 68 emphasis in the original). The contributions of DeNora and Hennion are particularly significant in that they both acknowledge the reflexivity of actors that had long been silenced by sociologists, urging us to take seriously the apparently mundane dimension of everyday practices.

Even accepting Hennion's loose definition of amateurs as "users of music", however, the necessity to provide an ethnographic portrait of Nanto gakuso's members clashes with difficulty of translating the very term 'amateur' in Japanese. The issue is not merely one of linguistic incommensurability: as already mentioned, members of the group show a penchant toward presenting themselves as 'nonprofessionals', in so doing internalizing the analytical jargon of sociology. And yet, while doing so they also resort to a set of words that exceeds the professional/nonprofessional binarism. In general, the term *puro*, borrowed from the English "professional", is opposed to either *shirōto* or *amachua*, itself a borrowing from "amateur". Because it generally refers to "someone who has no experience with something" (Shinmura 1993, 1315), *shirōto* is perceived by members of the group as having derogatory connotations. Therefore, *amachua* is more widely used. Here is how one of my key informants, a man in his mid-thirties who has been playing in the group for nearly twenty years, reacted to my simple exposition of Hennion's use of the term:

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<sup>11</sup> For concise but insightful overviews of this perspective, see (Latour 1999; and especially Mol 2010).

INTERVIEWER: So you know, “amateur” comes from this French verb, *aimer*, which means “to love”. I guess that’s an important part of being a member of a group.

RESPONDER: Well, certainly most people would agree that we love *gagaku*, though of course it sounds a bit strange to put it like this...[smiles] I mean, we do love it, but we don’t really say things like “I love *gagaku*”, you know? You don’t just do what you love<sup>12</sup>.

While on the one hand he seems to approve of my use of the term amateur, this young man also highlights the fact that making reference to the category of ‘love’ might in itself be problematic. This is hardly surprising, considering how much the concept of love is subject to divergent cultural interpretations. More importantly, however, his words also suggest that linking ‘passion’ to ‘practice’ may not be enough to account for the ways in which *gagaku* practitioners think about themselves.

That passion or emotional engagement is an important shared dimension of Nara’s *gagaku* performers is reflected by their use of another term, *aikōka*, which incorporates two characters that express love or deep care about things or persons and is often used in the sense of ‘aficionado’, ‘devotee’, ‘enthusiast’. When a man in his forties noticed that “Only the court musicians can eat from playing *gagaku*”, and that, in contrast, Nanto gakuso was an association of *aikōka*, what he was hinting at was the fact that despite the disparity in economic gain between ‘professionals’ and ‘nonprofessionals’, the latter can be just as much invested in performing *gagaku* as the former. Similarly, one of the group’s ‘veterans’ once told me that “Imperial Household musicians are good and fine, but it’s all a bit routine-like. This way is more interesting, and it’s good to see so many people playing because they like it”<sup>13</sup>.

Yet another possible rendition of the word amateur is the term *jissensha*, or ‘practitioner’, also sporadically used by members of Nanto gakuso. Even though I initially tended to favor this word, I soon realized that *jissen* (practice) and *jissensha* are technical terms rarely employed by research participants<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, after a presentation I gave in front of the group at the end of my first year of fieldwork in 2014, a woman in her forties,

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, December 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, February 2014.

<sup>14</sup> In Japan, studies of “practice”, including the lively debate on the so-called “theory of practice” famously outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), invariably use this term (e.g. Tanabe 2003; Tanabe and Matsuda 2002).

who also played the *ryūteki*, approached me and told me that while she liked the title I chose for my presentation (*The Practice of Gagaku in Contemporary Japanese Society*) she wondered what I meant by ‘practice’. When I replied that I simply meant the manifold activities of the members of the group, she thought for a second and dismissively mumbled: “Yes, yes, I guess you can call that ‘practice’ ...”<sup>15</sup>. The skepticism in her tone spoke volumes to the gap between *their* conceptualizations and *mine*: a gap I was trying to fill, not widen. Indeed, the episode reveals a certain split between emic and etic understandings reverberating in the use of the words ‘amateur’ and ‘practitioner’. Below, I will employ both as virtually interchangeable, even though I acknowledge that ‘practitioners’ rarely refer to themselves as such<sup>16</sup>. Of course, Hennion’s definition is so broad that many types of practitioners, including professionals, could be termed ‘amateurs’, fitting in their characterization as “users of music”. Still, the defining trait of Hennion’s practitioners is their *passion*. *Gagaku* practitioners complicate this line of reasoning, while at the same time being fully describable as amateurs. Indeed, the correct way to express the interrelation of these two dimensions would be to call them ‘amateurs-practitioners’.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the choice of the word ‘amateur’ to describe these performers is in line with the terminology adopted by Japanese *gagaku* specialists working on topics related to the present one (Minamitani 2005; Terauchi 2011; Ota 2016). Minamitani Miho, in particular, has spoken of the “network of amateurs” (*aikōka no nettowāku*) that characterized Edo-period *gagaku* practice in Kansai. Therefore, while the main reasons to employ the term are the precedent set by the sophisticated sociological investigation by Hennion, and my informants’ own use of it, I also believe that there is no harm in using the word ‘amateur’ in reference to music-makers whose activities are deeply informed by participation in local ‘religious’ rituals. Indeed, in this specific context I find much more troubling to be forced, for lack of a better word, to resort to the category of ‘religion’ –not least because such a notion informs Euro-American understandings of what a ritual might entail (psychologically or even just experientially) for those who take part in it. Choosing a different word on the basis of the fact that ritual

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<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, March 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps there is nothing particularly surprising about this: the fact that most high-school teachers do not refer to themselves as ‘educators’, for instance, does not lessen the explanatory force of the concept as it is used by different actors.

activities are not routinely understood as something an ‘amateur’ could engage in would run the risk of portraying the people involved in a way that may be overly effected by prejudices as to what constitutes a ritual in the first place. Simply stated, not all rituals are religious, and not all its participants should be considered ‘officiants’. The only theoretical requisite dictated by the use of the term amateur is the willingness on the part of the researchers to keep the concept open to accommodate new and unexpected configurations. We need a toolkit flexible enough to “keep the metaphors of reality-making open” (Law 2004, 139 emphasis removed)

Extended dialogue in the field and the occasional informal discussion spurred by a glass of *nihonshū* have revealed that when they refer to themselves, members of Nanto gakuso resort to a ‘differential rationale’: in effect, their choice of a word actively ‘blocks out’ the overtones implied by the others at their disposal. By doing this, they manage to convey more precisely a specific kind of self-identification vis-à-vis larger realities, such as the world of *gagaku* as a whole (when they call themselves *aikōka* in opposition to the Imperial Household musicians); the distinction between professionalism and amateurism (when they contrast *amachua* with *puro*); or the involvement in a specific, well-regulated activity (when they opt for *jissensha*). In other words, by selecting a particular term practitioners can emphasize what they are not (“We are amateurs, not professionals”) or make clear what they value in the broader world of court music (“We are music lovers, we are not in the music business”). Ultimately, members of Nanto gakuso do not seem to subscribe to any simple definition of what it means to be a *gagaku* practitioner: in this sense, ‘amateur’ is not a marker of identity, it is merely one of several available forms of self-description. Indeed, if anything can be said about the complex topic of the practitioners’ identity, it is that this would be better described as multiple rather than as stable or monolithic<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps, then, being a practitioner in Japanese court music would be better described as a process through which one ‘becomes many’, rather than a path leading to the crystallization of a fixed identity.

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<sup>17</sup> On moving “beyond identity”, see (Brubareck and Cooper 2000). For a brief overview of the most recent debates concerning the relationship between music and identity, see (Roy and Dowd 2010, 189–91).

## 4.2 TRAJECTORIES OF BECOMING: TYPOLOGIES OF PRACTITIONERS WITHIN NANTO GAKUSO

As of today, both men and women can become members of Nanto gakuso<sup>18</sup>, and even though the charter of Nanto gakuso officially sets an age limit of 45 years for new practitioners, exceptions are possible. Indeed, an interest in *gagaku* is in principle all it takes to qualify. However, a shared endeavor is no guarantee of a group's uniformity and cohesion. In fact, different personalities and backgrounds normally contribute to a group's internal diversity, sometimes giving rise to contrasts and complex power dynamics. Despite such differences, however, sketching out a typology of *gagaku* practitioners illuminates some of the ways in which men and women approach 'court music' in contemporary Japan. Membership in a *gagaku* group is not simply about 'being oneself' –it is also a socially mediated process of becoming.

As soon as they join Nanto gakuso, group members have to choose one of the three wind instruments of the ensemble. *Ryūteki*, *hichiriki* and *shō* practitioners are subsequently grouped together, and weekly rehearsals are conducted on the basis of these smaller subgroups<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, in the course of these rehearsals there is very little interaction among members practicing different instruments: the primary socialization of Nanto gakuso's members takes place within one's instrument's subgroup. On a superficial level, therefore, the easiest typology of *gagaku* amateurs coincides with the initial choice of one of the three wind instruments. Even though I sporadically observed *hichiriki* and *shō* rehearsals in the course of my first year of fieldwork, what follows is largely based on the *ryūteki* lessons. I chose to focus on one instrument mostly because this would give me the possibility to achieve a higher proficiency, which indeed proved fundamental in order to be able to fully appreciate the subtleties of more advanced stages of court music's training. The *ryūteki* subgroup is also the most numerous, with as many as 40 official practitioners.

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<sup>18</sup> Gendered aspects of *gagaku* practice are a neglected topic. This is regrettable, since there are clear differences in what men and women can or should, do both in the practice room and on stage. Unfortunately, space limitations prevent a fuller exploration.

<sup>19</sup> As for the dances, a number of years and an official decision on the part of the administrative board are necessary before the practitioner can choose between *tōgaku* and *komagaku* repertoire. Once the choice is made, he or she will always and only be able to dance the pieces belonging to that particular repertoire (Kasagi 2008, 69).

From the examination of a complete list of members referring to the year 2012, I was able to ascertain that the total number of practitioners (including new ones enrolled that year) amounted to 123 individuals. In reality, however, I soon realized that that number had to be reduced to approximately 70 individuals, 40 of whom may be rightfully considered 'regulars'. In fact, the remaining 30-odd members attended the weekly rehearsals quite loosely, on average about once or twice a month. By contrast, regulars came in at least twice a month, and a few were almost always present. This distinction also matches the semi-official, internal subdivision of the group among 'beginners' (*shoshinsha*) and 'regulars' (*ippansha*) (although there were cases of especially assiduous beginners) (Kasagi 2008, 68).

The weekly practice also follows this bipartite model, with a 'beginners' class' from 7 to 8 pm, and a more 'advanced class' from 8 to 10 pm every Saturday night. Nevertheless, most of the 'regulars' also attend the first class, regardless of their 'higher' status. The age range is rather wide, and is not necessarily aligned with the aforementioned distinction between *shoshinsha* and *ippansha*: though children from 3 years of age only attend the first class, regular members aged 20 to 80 can attend both. In other words, age in itself is not a determining factor to decide whether a practitioner is a beginner or a regular. It is also common for different members of the same family to be part of the group: at times, representatives from three generations may sit next to one another. This may be the single most important element contributing to the overall atmosphere of 'familiarity' invariably pointed out as an important feature of the group.

These simple characteristics indicate that the structure of the group initially presents itself as remarkably horizontal: for instance, beginners' classes seamlessly flow into regulars' with little changes in the setting (if any) and no major distinction in format. On such a horizontal plain, members can be divided into beginners (*shoshinsha*), regulars (*ippansha*) and teachers/instructors (*sensei*) (see **TAB. 4.1**). This is also the most accurate representation of the overall, phenomenological impression encountered at the outset of my fieldwork, reinforced by frequent allusions to the metaphor of the group as a family. In their demeanor as well as in their practical organization of time and space, practitioners initially suggest that *proximity* is both a physical and abstract trait of Nanto gakuso's practice. However, such an imagery must not be taken at face value: a sense of mutual support or diffuse affection is not at odds with an equally diffuse awareness of there being a subtler distribution of power at work.

### ‘Outward’ Horizontal Structure

Shoshinsha

Ippansha

Sensei

**TABLE 4.1.** The apparent or ‘outward’ horizontal structure of Nanto gakuso.

Interestingly, upon closer inspection it became clear that identifiable subsets within Nanto gakuso corresponded to a specific age distribution, and that each of these subsets was characterized by the particular circumstances that prompted its members to join the group. In other words, age itself is less a marker of the achievement of mastery, and more an indicator of how a certain individual might have come to be involved in *gagaku*. In this sense, younger members, between 5 and 20 years of age, constitute a subset that is best described by the expression ‘family-obligation’. These are elementary, middle school or high school students who are often strongly encouraged by their families to join Nanto gakuso as a sort of ‘educational hobby’. This subgroup of practitioners is also characterized by the perceivable tension between a necessity to make sure that the new generation will take on the performance of *gagaku* in Nara, and an objective high dropout rate, which endangers the transmission of tradition. During an interview with a regular member in his fifties, this conundrum emerged with great clarity:

INTERVIEWER: I noticed that there are many children coming to the weekly rehearsal...

RESPONDER: Yes, it’s very sweet to see them playing with their flutes for the first time, their little fingers can’t even cover the holes! [laughs] But you know, many of them are sent by their mothers...it’s normal actually, to have the mother who says: “Go to study *gagaku*!” and there’s nothing the kids can do...they just have to come. I guess the mothers think it’s good for the children, that they’re going to learn something. But unfortunately most of these kids drop out of the group quite soon. It’s difficult, when you think about the future. It all depends on how many of them will stay in the group<sup>20</sup>.

As this practitioner points out, the youngest subset of the group is in a certain sense also the weakest: the fact that at a beginners’ lesson an average of 5 to 10 practitioners are

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, October 2013.

below 20 years of age may stand out at first, but it does not automatically guarantee the generational turnover necessary for a steady transmission of the tradition.

A second identifiable subgroup comprises members between 20 and 50 years of age. These constitute the majority of the ‘regulars’, and have generally spent at least a decade practicing *gagaku*. In general, these practitioners are mostly hailing from the middle-class, they are educated and generally enthusiastic about performing<sup>21</sup>. Their geographical provenance is uniform: the overwhelming majority of them was born and raised in Nara prefecture, where they also work and reside. However, a small number of practitioners commutes by train from Kyoto or nearby smaller cities<sup>22</sup>. The fact that they choose to enroll in Nanto gakuso and not one of the other groups active in Kyoto is noteworthy. Some say that the main reason is monetary: in fact, the annual fee of Nara’s *gagaku* group is a mere 60 dollars. Others quote the relaxed atmosphere of the rehearsals and the possibility to relax and get to know people with similar interests. The overwhelming majority of these members either witnessed a performance of Nanto gakuso which induced an interest in court music, or came into direct contact with the group’s leader, Kasagi Kan’ichi. Accounts of both situations abounded during my fieldwork. This is how a female practitioner in her late thirties, mother of two children also enrolled in the group, recalls her initial decision to try practicing *gagaku*:

I went to see the Wakamiya Onmatsuri festival one winter, about two years ago, and I remember I was so impressed by the *bugaku* pieces! Maybe it was the atmosphere in general, but I really remember it vividly. Then for a while I kept thinking about *gagaku* from time to time but didn’t do anything about it. And then I went to see Nanto gakuso again on a fixed performance, on Children’s Day [a national holiday celebrated on May 5], and again I was impressed –I thought the costumes were so elegant, and I loved the sound of the mouth organ. It’s so relaxing! So I finally went to *okeiko* one night and I met Kasagi *sensei*. He was very nice, and I was instantly convinced. Since then I kept coming, also with my children, and they also like it very much!<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> One informant once told me in passing that there are many teachers in Nanto gakuso, referring to the fact that several adult members are employed as teachers in primary or secondary schools in or around Nara.

<sup>22</sup> This minority of about 6 members was especially important in the course of my fieldwork, since we often engaged in relaxed, carefree conversations on the way back to Kyoto, which provided a good opportunity for authentic “ethnographic hanging out” and, occasionally, for fully-fledged, 45-minute long unstructured interviews (see Bernard 2006, 368–69).

<sup>23</sup> Interview, February 2014.

A younger member, a girl in her twenties, heard a talk by Professor Kasagi at Nara University<sup>24</sup>, got interested in *gagaku* as a part of the historical heritage of the province, and decided to try to play<sup>25</sup>. Those who joined the group later in life have similar stories to tell, and some of these members are highly motivated precisely because their passion has developed at an advanced age. Confirming the educational or moral value often attributed to *gagaku*, one lady likens her practice of “court music” to another dignified “pastime” (*hobi*): tea ceremony. She told me: “I have been involved in tea ceremony for many years, and lately I decided to start studying *ryūteki*. I find many similarities between court music and tea ceremony, especially the element of elegance. I think both are very refined. The gestures are also very beautiful”<sup>26</sup>. All in all, the ways in which these adult practitioners entered the group are rather similar. In general, an initial interest in *gagaku* served as the basis for a personal contact with the leader of the group. Moreover, the fact that ‘adult members’ toward the younger side of the spectrum often entered the group not because of family obligations but spontaneously seems to indicate that younger practitioners were born in a period characterized by a certain degree of familiarity with *gagaku*, approximately coinciding with the beginning of Tōgi Hideki’s discographic debut in 1996 (see Lancashire 2003, 26). Academic research on the connection between his artistic career and the recent rise in the number of *gagaku* practitioners is needed.

Finally, a small subgroup comprises members who have been enrolled for more than 20 years. Seven of these practitioners have spent over 40 years within Nanto gakuso and are *always* referred to as *sensei* or “masters”. In a way, they could perhaps be called the ‘founders’ of contemporary Nanto gakuso. Having joined the group as early as 1945, these “grand amateurs”, to employ Hennion’s term in a slightly altered sense (2005, 131), would certainly deserve a more in-depth, dedicated treatment<sup>27</sup>. Below I will only summarize these findings. First and foremost, all *sensei* agree on the fact that the status of *gagaku* has steadily improved from their childhood to the present. Immediately after the war, the group consisted of less than 10 members. Rehearsals were themselves very

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<sup>24</sup> Kasagi is Professor Emeritus at that institution.

<sup>25</sup> interview, November 2015. As a matter of fact, the connection between Nanto gakuso and Nara University’s students’ association Nara gagakukai is an important resource for the group: several of its members first experience *gagaku* in the context of their student life.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, February 2014.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, individual interviews conducted with all seven of them between February 15 and February 18 2014 revealed a wealth of information concerning the most significant changes in the practice of *gagaku* in Nara throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

different from today: classes were individual rather than collective, and greater importance was placed on learning how to sing the melodies in the so-called *shōga* solfege technique<sup>28</sup>. In fact, the same melody was sometimes sung a hundred times before finally taking up the instruments. In general, the training seems to have been stricter and more physically demanding (though this particular aspect may be overemphasized). Moreover, because the father of Kasagi *sensei* was already a member of Kasuga kogaku hozonkai before the war, his family became a veritable catalyst in the training of new generations of performers –something that still holds true today. Entrance into the world of *gagaku* was often less a consequence of a clear-cut choice and more a matter of serendipitous circumstances. Being classmates or simply acquaintances was more than enough to trigger the initial curiosity that lead to decades of engagement. Despite the fact that for several years the group only counted a few individuals, the *sensei* invariably recall those early decades as a happy time, marked by the novelty of performing at prestigious institutions like the Tōdaiji temple and other religious centers in or around Nara.

The bond tying these performers together appears to be especially strong: having toured abroad and performed hundreds, perhaps thousands of times all over Japan has forged permanent, indelible personal relationships. As is to be expected, many of these grand amateurs have passed down the art to their children. In this sense, it is no exaggeration to say that the group is for them as an extended family, and that their status of harbingers and patriarchs is undisputed. In fact, one important aspect of this subgroup that requires further study is the fact that they have de facto initiated ‘new *gakke*’: new hereditary genealogical lines of transmission. Indeed, their families have reached the third or even fourth successive generation of practitioners enrolled in Nanto gakuso, thus forming a direct connection between the present group and its Meiji-period forerunners. While the methods of transmission may be relatively stable, what is truly striking is the consolidation of a sort of ‘monopoly’ on the higher ranks or key roles of Nanto gakuso’s hierarchy. For example, the son of one of these masters is employed at Kasuga Taisha, and is in charge of the more practical, organizational relations between the group and the shrine. Similarly, there are rumors that the son of Kasagi *sensei*, now in his late forties, will one day inherit his father’s position as ‘Head’ of the group (*gakutō*). How the transmission will be handled by the next generations will determine whether or not the

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<sup>28</sup> On this particular aspect of the practice of Japanese traditional music, and on its value, see (Gamō 2000, 208–45; Hughes 2000; 2002).

tradition of Nara's *gagaku* will come to be identified with specific families that prior to 1870 had no direct relations with 'Japanese court music'.

This tentative typology of Nanto gakuso's members is certainly arbitrary. Others would be equally significant: in particular, the performers' gender is just as defining a trait in one's experience of court music, and so is the balance between the practice and the primary activity of each member (be it an office job, a part time employment, the role of housewife or mother, or simply attending school). A short note on the issue of gender: while *gagaku* specialists have noticed that female participation in amateur groups is on the rise<sup>29</sup>, quantitative research that could provide statistics and detailed figures has yet to be undertaken. Still, even the most cursory observation of Nanto gakuso practice reveals that gender roles are rather strictly imposed on the practitioners, especially during rehearsals<sup>30</sup>. In general, women tend to conform to the subservient role assigned to them in similar contexts within the world of Japanese traditional performing arts: the most evident example of this is the preparation and distribution of tea at the beginning of both beginners' and regulars' rehearsals. Within Nanto gakuso, it is also worth noticing that only one 'teacher' is a woman: whether this is due to the fact that this person is a professionally trained musician (in European classical music) and is in this sense 'exceptional', or whether there are simply not enough highly skilled male *hichiriki* practitioners is not clear. It is important to stress that these considerations are based entirely on direct observation, and not on in-depth interviews conducted with the practitioners. As such, they should not be taken as conclusions as to the role of women within Nanto gakuso, but rather as potential elements in a broader, more complex dynamic that remains to be explored. Certainly, the renegotiation of gender roles within a performing art that for centuries has been limited to male performers is a crucial indicator of the feasibility of alternative typologies of *gagaku* amateurs.

Nonetheless, the distinction between a younger group driven by 'family obligations', a group of 'adult practitioners' internally diverse, and a stable, core group of 'founders' highlights the various paths that led and still lead individuals to join Nanto gakuso more

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<sup>29</sup> I thank Terauchi Naoko for pointing this out.

<sup>30</sup> Outside the practice room, the conventional attribution of tasks to males or females tends to loosen up. For instance, I have observed men and women loading boxes with costumes and stage paraphernalia in preparation for an upcoming concert performance. At the same time, I have also witnessed a general 'cleanup' (*katazuke*) day in which only the female participants cleaned, and mended the costumes, while both men and women folded them.

effectively than most categorizations. Furthermore, even though a certain horizontal, ‘democratic’ structure seems to stand out as the main internal categorization of Nanto gakuso practitioners, other mechanisms exist that reveal partially divergent configurations of the lifelong processes through which members *become* amateurs.

### 4.3 IN THE PRACTICE-ROOM

The activities of Nara’s *gagaku* amateurs can be roughly divided into three main categories: regular, occasional, and educational. The first are sometimes referred to as *nenjū gyōji* or “calendrical events”: they take place on the same day every year, and coincide with ritual celebrations at Kasuga Taisha and/or with national holidays. These yearly celebrations constitute the bulk of Nanto gakuso’s public commitments, and can be thought of as the primary vehicle for the promotion of the group’s fabricated narrative of continuity with the past. The official website of the group lists 26 of these occasions, the most important being by far the *Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri* in December<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 4.3). Together they epitomize the long tradition of performing *gagaku* at Kasuga Taisha<sup>32</sup>. As such, they are also the best known activities of Nanto gakuso, its ‘public face’, the most obvious referents of famous expressions such as “the *gagaku* of Nara” or “the *gagaku* of the southern capital”, often used by the group as markers of a strong local-territorial identity (e.g. Kasagi 2008; Kasagi 2014). Strictly speaking, however, none of these ‘calendrical events’ should be considered ‘concerts’, since they are offered to the *kami* deities rather than to the general population.

The symbiotic relationship between Kasuga Taisha and Nanto gakuso conveys a set of powerful assumptions regarding ‘court music’ as a whole: the fact that performances take place during or on the day of a shrine celebration suggests that for its performers and audiences *gagaku* is indeed the ‘soundscape of *shintō*’, ‘the right music’ for that specific environment. Moreover, connecting this music with the ritual or religious atmosphere

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<sup>31</sup> “Main Annual Celebrations in Nara (In Relation to Performing Arts)” <http://www.nantogakuso.jp/index-i.htm> (accessed August 19, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> As we saw in Chapter 3, such a tradition can be interpreted as both ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’. Indeed, it is precisely upon the continuity of that tradition that the present-day group Nanto gakuso founded its public representation.

also suggests that *gagaku* has cosmological or spiritual connotations. Finally, both Nanto gakuso and Kasuga Taisha capitalize on the implied link between *gagaku* and nature, mobilizing complex cultural associations regarding a supposed “Japanese sensitivity” to the environment (see Berque 1997; Asquith and Kalland 1997). The prominence of this association between “*the shrine*” (as practitioners routinely call it) and Nanto gakuso is evidenced by the practice of visiting Kasuga Taisha before and after important performances, to receive the purification from a priest and to “report” on the successful conclusion of the performance itself (see Kasagi 2008, 52–68).



**FIGURE 4.3.** The *bugaku* dance *Kitoku* performed during the *Otabishosai* on December 17, 2013.  
(Picture by the author).

A different class of events includes stage performances in theaters, culture centers and similar venues, both in Japan and overseas. Two recent examples of particular significance are the participation of the group at the Hue festival in Vietnam in 2014, in which Japanese and Vietnamese court music were performed on the same occasion<sup>33</sup> and

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<sup>33</sup> On Vietnamese court music as an example of Japanese cultural nationalism in the context of the critical discourse on intangible cultural heritage, see (Akagawa 2015, 150–81).

the recent ‘stage adaptation’ of the whole *Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri* at the National Theater in Tokyo, on July 30, 2016. Apart from the obvious excitement connected to going on a tour, these particular performances are considered somewhat less solemn and perhaps even less important. For instance, a *sensei* dismissively told me once that “Performing in a theater is not like playing at the shrine. Our *gagaku* is not for the stage *per se*, it is as an offering to the gods [*hōnō*]. The public in a theater is composed by normal people, but our most important public is the gods”<sup>34</sup>. Of course, such statements must always be handled with the utmost care, bearing in mind that it is all too easy to assume that they signal specific religious motives or straightforward affiliations. ‘Belief’ is not a universal category that one can easily take for granted.

Analogously ‘minor’, but with different connotations, are workshops, conferences and public lectures aimed at popularizing *gagaku*. Practical workshops organized with a ‘hands-on’ approach are considered especially precious occasions to reach out to younger generations, who often have but a superficial understanding of what *gagaku* sounds or looks like. At the same time, however, there is also a sense in which these activities serve the purpose of fulfilling the unwritten duty to popularize ‘traditional Japanese culture’ as a whole.

All these events require a great deal of preparation: hardly a month goes by without an important performance taking place, either in Nara or in other regions of Japan. Like any other orchestra, Nanto gakuso selects the pieces to rehearse on the basis of what will be onstage on the next performance. Therefore, rehearsing in and of itself can and should be considered the main activity of Nanto gakuso. ‘Lessons’, ‘classes’ or, more broadly, ‘the practice’, are called *okeiko* (see Keister 2004; 2008). They take place: every Saturday evening from early September to late June; once a month on Sunday at Kasuga Taisha to rehearse orchestral pieces with or without dance (*gassō*); less than once a month on weekdays, during the evening, to practice the *bugaku* and Kuniburi no utamai repertoires or string instruments. Additionally, every year at the beginning of August an intensive summer course is held at Kasuga Taisha (participation is advised but not mandatory). Of these, the most ‘basic’ type of lesson is the Saturday weekly rehearsal. These *okeiko* classes offer endless opportunities to study interactions among various members of the

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, February 2014.

group, and represent the primary context for a kind of participant observation that is best described as “apprenticeship-based” (see Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015).

Saturday *okeiko* takes place in a building called Ōshukusho, located at the end of a busy covered shopping street (*shōtengai*) that leads from Nara Kintetsu train station to the older merchant district known as Naramachi. Slightly removed from view, the location is signaled by a tall, unadorned wooden gate (*torii*). Past the gate, a wide courtyard is revealed. On the left side of the main building, a small wooden shrine sits quietly in the shadow, invisible from the shopping street. Members of the group bow in front of it before and after *okeiko*, but almost all of them curiously ignore which deity the shrine is dedicated to: “The god of *gagaku*?!” answered laughing a female practitioner in her late twenties when posed the question<sup>35</sup>. The Ōshukusho is owned and managed by Kasuga Taisha, and hosts a dedicated ritual (*Ōshukushosai*) on December 15, as part of the preparations leading to the *Kasuwa Wakamiya Onmatsuri*<sup>36</sup>. It is a one-story, rectangular building much longer than it is wide, with only a few rooms inside: entering from the extreme right, one encounters a restroom, a small kitchen, and, to the left, a narrow wooden corridor that runs parallel to the façade (see **FIG.4.4**). The main rooms are all situated at the right of the corridor. The first is immediately after the entrance, and it is used by *hichiriki* practitioners from September to May, when they briefly hand it over to the mouth organ practitioners so that they can profit from the centralized air-conditioning system. At the center of the building, a large open space is used by the dancers. Towards the end, one finds two additional rooms of approximately the same size as the first one: they host *ryūteki* and *shō* players, respectively.

Entering the practice room, called *okeikoba* or simply *keikoba* (*o-* is an honorific prefix), the first impression is of dignified simplicity. The space is set to Japanese style: tatami floors, *fusuma* sliding doors, thick *zabuton* cushions to sit on. The cushions are arranged to form six or seven rows of five or six people each. The room ends with a window, below which a low table is prepared for the teacher who leads the class. A kettle and a few teacups sit on the right side of the entrance. Before and after the class, when the cushions

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<sup>35</sup> Personal communication, February 2014.

<sup>36</sup> The ritual is noteworthy because it includes a ceremony known as *yudate*, in which a *miko* priestess of Kasuga Taisha sprinkles boiling water from a large cauldron on the onlookers, with the purpose of purifying them (see Lancashire 2013, 40).

are piled up next to the teacher's desk and nothing else punctuates the space, the appearance of the practice room is minimal, almost frugal (see **FIG.4.5**).



**FIGURE 4.4.** The Ōshukusho building. (Picture by the author).



**FIGURE 4.5.** The *keikoba* or practice room. (Picture by the author).

But in fact, the simple setup of the Ōshukusho is highly functional: when the entire group needs to practice a danced piece, the flute and mouth organ rooms are ‘fused together’ by moving the sliding doors. *Hichiriki* practitioners then join the *ryūteki* room, and dancers can use the central space as a miniature stage, facing the orchestra (see **FIG.4.6**). During normal lessons, practitioners can see the teacher with little to no physical impediment, and the absence of furniture reduces potential sources of distraction.

From this point of view, the space of *gagaku* practice is very different from the typical European solfege classroom studied ethnographically by Hennion (2015: 221-244). In that case, rows of desks are prearranged in front of a vertical piano, to make up a ‘classroom’, a term that “names the underlying function of this space” (Hennion 2015: 222). The grid of seats and desks in the solfege classroom “gives material reality to the hypothesis that there is a homogeneous plane, which allows us to use the same units to evaluate different elements which have been defined a priori according to the same parameters” (Hennion 2015: 223). By contrast, the educational topology of *gagaku* maintains different, more ambiguous relations and mediations. The lack of furniture does not necessarily imply a greater freedom of movement, nor does it simply enable practitioners to change seating positions at will. On the contrary, in the *keikoba* patterns and regularities are detectable that are no less pervasive than in a Euro-American school environment. For instance, beginners who need to learn the most invariably sit in the front rows, on the cushions that are closer to the teacher (as can be seen in **FIG.4.6**). This may or may not coincide with an age distribution: normally, during the beginners’ lesson from 7 to 8 pm, the younger subset of Nanto gakuso (the ‘family obligation’ subgroup) does sit in the front, and the age increases progressively towards the back of the room.

For ‘regular members’ lessons, however, the situation is more complex: in general, ‘adult practitioners’ tend to sit in the center, but there are members who occupy the same seating position consistently, possibly to mark specific power dynamics or even personal attitudes toward other practitioners (revealed in part by the very fact that according to one’s position in the room certain persons are ‘pushed out of view’). ‘Founders’ invariably occupy the row(s) to the back of the room. Their demeanor is telling: one of them never uses a cushion; another answers his phone and sometimes smokes cigarettes (something that would be unthinkable for a ‘normal’ member). In general, *sensei* move around more often and more nonchalantly than other practitioners, and spark conversations among one another rather freely. In this way, the typologies of practitioners introduced above

are mapped onto the practice room: a certain structure of the group is projected on the ground, so to say, complicating the apparent conflation of horizontality and democracy. This aspect also demonstrates how crucial it is to consider *gagaku* practice as a fundamentally “emplaced” activity –that is, as an endeavor that cannot be separated from the specific site in which it occurs (Pink 2009, 63–81; see also Ingold 2000).



**FIGURE 4.6.** Getting ready for an ‘ensemble rehearsal’. (Picture by the author).

When it comes to the researcher, ‘outsider’ par excellence, yet other dynamics come into play. No doubt under the influence of Euro-American commonplace uses of the classroom environment, I initially tended to occupy the back of the room, sitting in front of the older masters, as close as possible to the wall. In other words, I actively tried to find a place that would provide me with the highest degree of ‘invisibility’ in order to regulate as needed the observation end of the ‘participant observation’ ladder<sup>37</sup>. One day during my second year of fieldwork, I felt a brusque tapping on the back, and the firm voice of one of the masters saying: “Go sit in the front!”. Moving to the rows closer to the low table, I started thinking that assigning me a different seating spot was not so much a reprimand (my conscious decision to sit at the back was not necessarily considered ‘wrong’ per se),

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<sup>37</sup> For a typical example of such a ‘graded’ interpretation of participant observation, see (Bernard 2006, 347–49).

but rather a renegotiation of what Jeanne Lave and Etienne Wenger have called “legitimate peripheral participation” (1991, 34–42). The fact that I was being asked to physically join the other practitioners signaled that my role within the group was being acknowledged; perhaps, my presence was becoming less unfamiliar. The episode was also an important reminder that the body is always an important research tool, and that a reflexive understanding of how the space of research is inhabited can help understanding the interrelation of space, bodies, and social interactions in learning environments.

For beginners and regulars alike, the structure of the practice is very much the same: first, the melody of a certain piece is sung once or twice in its entirety, as notated in the scores; later, the same piece is performed on the flute. The practice of singing together, called *kuchi shōga* and sometimes translated as “oral mnemonics” or “solmization”<sup>38</sup> likely became fully developed only in the Edo period<sup>39</sup>, just like the method currently used to notate the melodies (Hughes 1989; 2000; 2002). In this system, the melodies of the flute (and of the *hichiriki*) are arranged on parallel vertical columns on the score. At the center of each column, specific syllables (such as *ta, chi, ra, ro, fo*, and so on) are sung. These convey systematic indications as to the fingers’ movements throughout the melody. Practitioners are generally unaware of the ‘meaningfulness’ of the syllables: to them, they are mostly arbitrary if not even nonsensical sounds. In reality, however, “each choice of consonant and vowel is likely to reflect some feature(s) of the musical sound in a relatively direct and intrinsic way” (Hughes 2000, 96). The right side of the main column indicates the main drum beats with bigger or smaller black dots. The left side is for all effects and purposes a tablature, indicating the name of a certain position of the fingers which in turn corresponds to a certain pitch. By singing the syllables in a way that is close to the actual performance of the melody, practitioners supposedly interiorize not only the melodic contour of a piece, but also a number of subtler characteristics pertaining to rhythm, phrase length, musical ornamentation and so on.

However, the real value of the *shōga* is a staple of practitioners’ casual conversations on *gagaku*. A short repertoire of comments includes but is not limited to: “The *shōga* is

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<sup>38</sup> Conceived by David Hughes as an “acoustic-iconic mnemonic system” (2000, 96). For sound examples of this practice spanning across many genres of Japanese traditional music, see (*Kuchi Shōga Taikei* 1978).

<sup>39</sup> However, early examples of notated solmization for *biwa* and *ryūteki* do survive. (Takuwa Satoshi, personal communication).

useless and boring –why can’t we just do without it?”; “When X-sensei sings the *shōga*, I can imagine the melody in my head, and then it’s useful to sing it along. But with Y-sensei it’s impossible to understand...and it changes slightly every time!”; “Well, there’s nothing anyone can do about it, it’s part of the practice and we just have to accept it”. Older members of the group, and especially the most experienced *sensei*, tend to stress the importance of these oral mnemonics, often claiming that “If you can’t sing the *shōga*, you can’t play the melody properly”<sup>40</sup>.

One thing on which all members seem to agree is that the sitting position in which melodies are sung, known as *seiza* or “correct sitting”, is painful. Onstage, court music is performed in a crossed-legs position called *gakuza*, with the left leg in front of the right one and the body facing the front. During *okeiko*, however, practitioners alternate between singing the oral mnemonics in *seiza* and performing the piece with the instruments in *gakuza*. Both sitting styles have correct and incorrect postures, thought to have a significant impact on, respectively, vocal emission and tone production. The *seiza* position requires the back to be straight, the weight of the body distributed on both legs equally. It is maintained for the time necessary to sing the melody once or twice, that is for 10 to 25 minutes on average. Though probably this sitting style can strike as more demanding, the *gakuza* is perhaps the most important of the two: most practitioners find it easy and natural, but for some it is challenging to maintain the back straight and the torso facing the front. In particular, members trained in the transverse flute (such as myself) are naturally inclined to tilt the upper body slightly, imitating the standing position of a flute soloist. This mistake is often corrected by more experienced practitioners, who insist that the air column has to flow freely, sustained by the abdominal region.

Thorough explanations of the fingers’ positions are sporadic and surprisingly scant. The most effective means to demonstrate how certain notes should be produced is a visual demonstration by the teacher leading the lesson, who takes up the flute with both hands and holds it above his head, showing the right fingering(s) to the onlookers. Certain passages, known to be more technically demanding, are emphasized and underlined with special care. Occasionally, these short phrases are also performed as isolated fragments,

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<sup>40</sup> Interview, February 2014.

in unison, up to two or three times. But the overall outcome is given greater importance than each individual's precision.

Surprisingly, older members often hold a negative stance toward individual practice at home: in fact, they believe that playing without fellow practitioners can lead to incorrect habits in one's posture or fingering, that later on will prove hard to correct. Indeed, for most practitioners performing at home is not an option anyway: living in apartment buildings and working office jobs do not match a daily musical practice. Still, some of them would like to practice, if only circumstances permitted it. A male practitioner in his thirties once told me: "The thing I envy most about the fact that you're doing research on *gagaku* is that you have a room at the University and you can play whenever you want"<sup>41</sup>. These objective limitations have the fundamental consequence of making the *keikoba* the most crucial site of *gagaku* practice. Indeed, the practice room must be considered not merely in terms of its physical space, but also as a node of material and immaterial negotiations: in this sense, as noted by Keister, "a lesson place is socially constructed by the individuals inhabiting the space and their interrelationships" (2008, 241). This "social construction of the space" (Keister 2008: 256) is inseparable from the bodily presence of the practitioners (see Vergunst and Ingold 2006, 77), as made clear by the connection between the architectural features of the *keikoba* and the educational features of the lesson itself.

Before and after each class, members bow and respectfully thank the teachers. During the lesson itself, their gestures and verbal utterances are restrained. The practice as a whole takes place largely 'on the ground level': practitioners rarely abandon the sitting position. When they do stand, they tend to keep their bodies low, with their backs bent down, and take fast, small steps. They also move close to the walls of the room rather than in the center. All these characteristics are common to the demeanor of practitioners of other Japanese traditional performing arts, from *Nihon buyō* to *nagauta* (e.g. Keister 2004, 41–44; Hahn 2007, 71–77). Factors that are often underlined in analyses of the spaces of transmission of such arts are the "centrality of discrete, detailed units of predetermined patterns of action" known as *kata* (Keister 2004, 39; see also Fujita 2013) and the "ritualized" nature of the space, that can even be perceived in terms of "sanctity" (Hahn

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<sup>41</sup> Personal communication, November 2015.

2007, 77). These elements seem to be especially relevant to a highly formalized system of familial, hereditary transmission known as *iemoto* (see Ortolani 1969).

In the case of *gagaku*, however, what counts most is perhaps the peculiar “sense of place” (Feld and Basso 1996) instilled through inhabiting the practice room together. For this reason, the most fitting anthropological model to make sense of the dynamics unfolding in the *keikoba* from the point of view of an apprenticeship-based research is that of an “*emplaced ethnography* (...) that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment” (Pink 2009, 25 emphasis added). The entwinement of values, structures, experiences and materialities is especially evident in the ways “making (court) music together” in the practice room means weaving passion, skill acquisition and a mutual negotiation of the roles fulfilled by members of the same group.

#### **4.4 COMMUNITIES OF *KEIKO***

It is perhaps appropriate to resist the impulse to equate belonging to a group to being part of a community. Certainly most, if not all, members of Nanto gakuso are voluntarily engaged in a common pursuit (the practice of *gagaku*), and the overwhelming majority of them resides in Nara prefecture. But is this really enough to make us think of them as a “community”? The definition is itself controversial: “‘Community’ is concerned with people having something in common, although there is much debate about precisely what that thing is”; indeed, some scholars have highlighted “the importance of people being brought together by common interests or by common identities, neither of which requires co-presence” (Crow 2011, 74). So even if members of Nanto gakuso are indeed characterized by both geographical proximity and a common interest, neither seems to be a necessary and sufficient condition for the sociological definition of community. Of course, the constructed nature of the concept applies both to local realities and large-scale ones: “in fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson 2006, 6). Nations, as Benedict Anderson famously showed, are a case in point.

One theoretical framework that capitalized on the openness and ambiguity of the term community is the study of so-called “communities of practice” (see especially Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002; Fox 2000). Far-reaching in scope and compelling in its general assumptions, the notion of community of practice was first introduced by Etienne Wenger and Jeanne Lave in the context of a broader “social theory of learning” (1991, 4) that redefined it “as a situated activity” (1991, 29). A more complete theory of communities of practice was later developed by Wenger, who argued that its essential components are “competence” and “participation”, tightly woven together in the practices of social communities (Wenger 1998, 4–5).

These concepts are certainly crucial to any ethnographic analysis of shared human enterprise, especially when, as in the case of apprenticeship, the methodological weight of participation is emphasized. However, the characteristic circularity with which Wenger defines the building blocks of his theory appears problematic<sup>42</sup>. Things get especially complicated when Wenger manages to provide the exact same definition of the concepts of “practice” and of “negotiation of meaning”: both are “the process by which we experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (1998, 51, 53). So, meaning is defined tautologically, practice is conflated (or confused) with meaning, participation amounts to being a participant in a social community, the description of which refers back to participation and to competence, left entirely undefined. With such theoretical inconsistencies at its core, what can be the value of taking the concept of community of practice seriously?

First of all, since both of its components can accommodate a multitude of interpretations, the notion befits John Law’s suggestion to “keep the metaphors of reality-making open” (2004, 129). In other words, “community of practice” is a ‘stretchable’ concept, whose adaptability pays off in the face of its sheer imprecision. Secondly, as suggested by Wenger himself (1998, 73–76), there is much value in considering some of

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<sup>42</sup> Knowledge, arguably the center of any theory of learning, is believed to consist in competence and participation (“knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises”; “knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world” (Wenger 1998, 4)); participation refers to “being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to those communities” (Wenger 1998, 4 emphasis in the original). Communities are “the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognized as competence”, while practices are “the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (Wenger 1998, 5). Finally, participation is elsewhere defined as “the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises” (Wenger 1998, 55).

the “dimensions” of associating community and practice: for instance, the idea that even though “mutual engagement” defines a community engagement is inherently partial and not necessarily related to the homogeneity of a group, can aptly be applied to the case of Nanto gakuso. Indeed, different members of the group exhibit a varying and ever-changing degree of commitment: their mutual engagement pulls the practitioners together, but it is not a unified field or force. It has also been remarked that “a community of practice may dissolve in the intervals between training sessions or performances” (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015, 189). This too is true of Nanto gakuso: although some members do occasionally meet for spontaneous social gatherings, there is no real sense in which they constitute a “community” beyond the activities of the group.

Even more important than the ‘stretchability’ of the expression coined by Lave and Wenger is the ‘ontological spin’ produced by reinterpreting the concept of practice on the basis of the work of Dutch philosopher Annemarie Mol (see especially Mol 2002). In her book *The Body Multiple*, Mol claims that “if an object is real this is because it is part of a practice. It is a reality *enacted*” (2002, 44 emphasis in the original). Studying a specific medical object (the atherosclerosis of the lower limbs) through a detailed ethnographic investigation of a Dutch hospital, Mol found that the disease is not a stable entity that presents itself evenly across different sites, such as the radiology department, the surgeons’ operating table or the consultation room. Rather, there are several “versions” of atherosclerosis: as pointed out by Tom Rice, “these distinct versions of the disease (and of the patient body) are able to coexist simultaneously. In a hospital, [Mol] argues, there is not just a single patient body, but rather many versions of the same body: the body is multiple and disease is composite – an entity produced through different versions of the disease and of the body” (Rice 2013, 181). In fact, “objects come into being—and disappear—with the practices in which they are manipulated. And since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies. The body, the patient, the disease, the doctor, the technician, the technology: all of these are more than one. More than singular” –hence the title of the book (Mol 2002, 5).

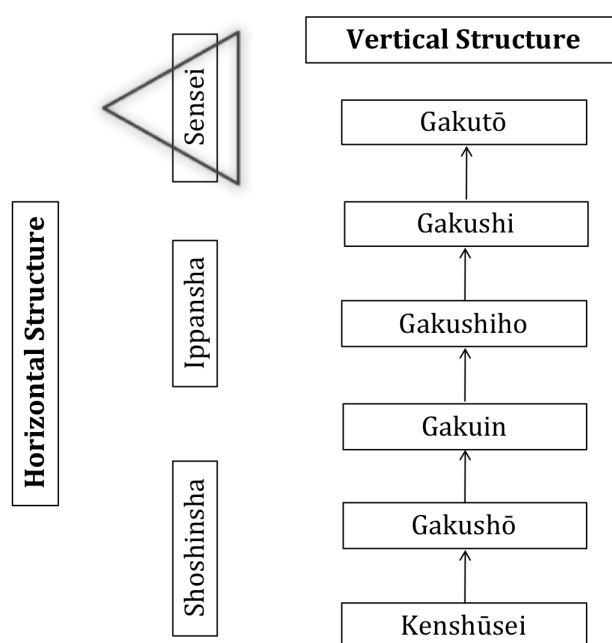
If realities are “enacted in practice” (Mol 2002, 152), the anthropological endeavor should itself be reconfigured in terms of a “praxiography”, an ethnographic study of practice (Mol 2002, 31–33; see also Law 2004, 59). Thus conceived, the concept of community of practice is fundamentally transformed, reinvigorated by a healthy infusion of new speculative blood. And, given the significance of training as the main dimension of

the *enactment of gagaku in practice*, it becomes possible to speak of Nanto gakuso as a 'community of *keiko*': a praxiography of 'Japanese court music' in Nara should therefore follow the particular ways in which amateur practitioners embody corporeal and conceptual dispositions that turn them into sensitized music-makers. In fact, as pointed out by Ingold, 'understanding in practice' "is a process of *enskilment*, in which learning is inseparable from doing, and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement in the world", which he refers to as "dwelling" (2000, 416 emphasis in the original). If there is any sense in calling Nanto gakuso a community of practice, it is precisely the recognition that members of the group are above all engaged in the continuous process of *becoming* practitioners.

Within this radically reinterpreted framework, the ways in which the group organizes itself can also be revisited. The issue is not what rigid structure is chosen by Nanto gakuso in order to regulate itself as a community, but rather what is the preferred way to coordinate various parallel "trajectories of becoming" (Ingold 2011, 14, 84). Recall the phenomenologically 'outward' horizontal structure of the group. Upon further inspection, a second, more hidden structure of relationships emerges. In fact, the administrative board or Rijikai has the authority to bestow a series of 'titles' or appellations on the basis of each member's competence. These official 'titles' are: *kenshūsei*, *gakushō*, *gakuin*, *gakushiho*, *gakushi*, and *gakutō*. In general, beginners are *kenshūsei* or *gakushō*, while more experienced practitioners called *gakuin* and *gakushiho* are mostly but not exclusively regular members. Old-timers are called *gakushi*. This appellation is reserved to a small subgroup that in 2013 amounted to 17 individuals. Finally, the head of Nanto gakuso is called *gakutō* (presently, Professor Kasagi Kan'ichi), and acts as a spokesperson for the whole group. Interestingly, the distinction among these appellations is materially represented in the official garments worn by the group when performing in public: a small, simple knot on the back of the costume, at the base of the neck, can be yellow, for beginners; orange, for experienced practitioner; or purple, for the highest ranks.

The bestowal of each 'title' is neither automatic nor dependent on any special examination: it rests solely on the judgment of the administrative board, which is composed of the *gakushi* members, the *gakutō*, and honorary members such as the head priest of Kasuga Taisha. A juxtaposition of the two structures of the group, the superficial 'horizontal' one and the undisclosed 'vertical' one (summarized in **TAB. 4.2**) reveals that

they are both based on what could be called an ‘identity of competence’<sup>44</sup>: even though the final decision is taken by the administrative board of the group, *in practice* competence is assessed as the practice itself unfolds, and is continuously renegotiated. Thus, just like in other Japanese performing arts the “very concrete and particular way of *doing* tradition” (Keister 2008, 240 emphasis added) is valued over any abstract conception of the past, so too the *making* of a *gagaku* amateur is much more crucial than the appointment of the title in and of itself. Indeed, practitioners very rarely talk about the vertical structure of the group, which is sometimes referred to as “just a tool older members like to have so they can exercise some power” or “a necessary structure that no one really cares about too much”<sup>45</sup>.



**TABLE 4.2.** A comparison of the horizontal and vertical structures of the group.

The best example to demonstrate how this double structure is articulated through the mutual negotiation of the amateurs’ identity of competence is represented by the peculiar

<sup>44</sup> Wenger notes that “because a community of practice is not necessarily reified as such, our membership may not carry a label or other reified marker. (...) In this context, our membership constitutes our identity, not just through reified markers of membership but more fundamentally through the forms of competence that it entails” (1998, 152).

<sup>45</sup> Interviews: male practitioner in his thirties and female practitioner in her forties, respectively. Both January 2014.

ambiguities of the term *sensei*. This word *sensei* has entered common usage in English as an honorific epithet referring especially to a teacher or instructor in Japanese martial arts. The OED defines it as “a teacher or instructor; a professor; a respectful title, occasionally with ironic connotations, for one skilled in an art”<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, in Japanese too this term implies the recognition of a particular degree of proficiency or specialization. Every week, Nanto gakuso’s flute players receive instructions from a *sensei* who leads the class sitting behind a desk and giving indications on how to play certain passages. His version of the *shōga* melodies is the one to follow, and whenever a doubt emerges over a certain aspect of the practice, questions are directed to him. He is a regular member, invariably a middle age male *not* part of the administrative board. This distinction is critical: in fact, even though old-timers *gakushi* are *always* referred to as *sensei*, they *never* lead the class. In other words, the figure of the weekly ‘teacher’ does not correspond uniformly to the vertical structure of the group: he is kept separate from the ‘masters’, even though the same word identifies both types of amateurs. This ‘temporary *sensei*’ is appointed on the basis of a pre-established rotation, so that every week a different regular member leads the class, effectively learning how to teach.

On a superficial level, this situation seems to be nothing more than an illustration of the polysemy of the Japanese word *sensei*. But upon closer inspection, a similar explanation does not exhaust the significance of the phenomenon. Two examples from the practice room illustrate the point more clearly. In a light conversation with a beginner in her forties, I started noticing that she referred to one of the younger ‘regulars’ using the term *sensei*, even though he never led the weekly classes<sup>47</sup>. As is customary in Japan, different members of the group commonly resort to a range of suffixes to be added to other persons’ surnames, in so doing signaling varying degrees of respect, proximity or intimacy. For example, older members call younger ones *-kun* (as in Yamamoto-*kun*), while for people of roughly the same age it is customary to use *-san*. When it comes to the term *sensei*, however, the same members do not conform uniformly to a shared, if unwritten, rule: rather, by resorting to it practitioners actively make an assessment of other amateurs’ perceived mastery. In other words, members of Nanto gakuso employ

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<sup>46</sup> "Sensei, n.". OED Online. June 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/175959?redirectedFrom=sensei> (accessed August 30, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Personal communication, March 2016.

the term *sensei* as a means to express a mutually assigned and constantly renegotiated identity of competence.

Similarly, the fact that members belonging to different 'steps' of the vertical ladder of titles/appellations can be equally addressed as *sensei* can sometimes give rise to interesting examples of mildly conflictual 'micro-interactions' among practitioners<sup>48</sup>. From the back of the *keikoba*, the voice of a senior member of the group may arise, offering remarks on certain aspects of the piece being performed or on *shōga*: the comments are usually offered to all practitioners, but sometimes they point directly at the weekly teacher ("Before, while you were singing the *shōga*, you made a mistake at the beginning of the fourth column. I think the melody should go like this..."). There might be a short exchange, or even a mild confrontation, between the two *sensei*, but in the end the older one invariably wins the argument. Seniority prevails, but this does not prevent the propagation of alternative interpretations, circulating in the form of muffled, critical comments.

On these occasions, when there is a micro-conflict between *sensei* and *sensei*, amateurs learn that the status of all participants is negotiable, and that having a certain role is no direct guarantee of authority. Fleeting and similarly insignificant as these moments may appear (after all, at most these exchanges last but a handful of minutes), they nevertheless open up spaces of negotiation in which the practitioners' identity of competence is renegotiated. Such incidents also prove that communities of practice can be less harmonious than the expression itself may suggest. As noticed by Fox, "[p]ractices evolve partly through the agency of the members of a community as ways of working are changed. (...) Different masters may compete with each other in leading the way to the future. Alliances between masters and young masters can be crucial to the outcome of such struggles" (2000, 856).

Commenting on the master-disciple relation, Keister notes that in the case of Japanese traditional performing arts the learning process "concretizes the tradition and ensures that the tradition resides in the house (*ie*) and physically resides in the *iemoto* –the head of the house who is *the living embodiment of the tradition*" (2008, 242 emphasis added). According to this view, "the art" is essentially "a practical knowledge that is carried in the

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<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to Fujita Takanori for suggesting the use of this term in the context of my research, and for highlighting the points of contact between my approach and that of Ethnomethodology (on the basic tenets of which, see Chang 2011). Personal communication, May 2016.

mind and body of the *sensei* as a performer and teacher” (Keister 2008, 243). This centrality of the master has led several researchers to emphasize the vertical, hierarchical structure of learning, thus placing much of the agency and capacity to modify tradition predominantly in the hands of its official bearers. Countering similar tendencies, Lave and Wenger chose to “take a decentered view of master-apprentice relations”, showing that “mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part” (1991, 94). My experience with Nanto gakuso reinforces this diffused view of the learning process, further indicating that the role of master is itself not as static as many analyses of Japanese performing arts seem to suggest.

#### 4.5 DOING FIELDWORK IN SOUND: *GAGAKU*’S MATERIALITY

Waiting for the regular members’ class to begin. The usual chatting. The pace is slow; people don’t seem too eager to start again. Just hope we’ll do a *gassō* rehearsal tonight. I just want to listen.

Field notes. March 2016, 8.05 pm

There is an image of myself that keeps coming back every time I think about my fieldwork with Nanto gakuso. It is an image I conceive in terms of the “ethnographic moment” so masterfully described by Marilyn Strathern:

“We could say that the ethnographic moment works as an example of a relation which joins the understood (what is analysed at the moment of observation) to the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis). The relationship between what is already apprehended and what seems to demand apprehension is of course infinitely regressive, that is, slips across any manner of scale (minimally, observation and analysis each contains within itself the relation between them both). Any ethnographic moment, which is a moment of knowledge or insight, denotes a relation between immersement and movement” (1999, 6). And she adds: “Either observation or analysis, either immersement or movement, may seem to occupy the entire field of attention. What makes the ethnographic moment is the way in which these activities are apprehended as occupying the same (conceptual) space” (Strathern 1999, 262).

In my own experience, this moment was recurrent, as it coincided with Saturday evenings’ *gassō*, occasional regular members’ orchestral rehearsals that gravitated

around the performance of danced pieces. I could never know when these special rehearsals would take place, though naturally they were more likely at times when an important public performance was drawing near. So every week there was a speck of trepidation in attending *okeiko*. The swiftness with which the entire atmosphere in the practice room would change was also part of that distinctive feeling-to-come: in a sense, the trepidation with which it began never left the overall sensation. It went something like this: seemingly out of the blue, the sliding screens that delicately separated the flute's room from the mouth organ's (on the left) and from the open space where the dancers practiced (on the right) were slid and moved to the side, opening up what until a few seconds before had been a wall. This new space brought a new relationality with it: the practice room became rapidly noisier, with *hichiriki* practitioners flocking in and sitting down among the flutists. The percussions were arranged on the narrow corridor in front of the dancers' area. In a matter of minutes, the orchestra was ready, facing the dancers coming onto the mockup stage in their everyday clothes. Tilting their heads and moving the cushions slightly, practitioners searched for the right spot to check on the dancers during the performance. It was a positively bustling scene, to be sure, but it also always felt like ordinary business. After all, this was an experienced group: ensemble practice was their daily bread. Sitting somewhere among the *ryūteki* practitioners, doing my best not to get in anyone's way, I kept both the score and the notebook open, a pencil to record at once the musical features of the flute's melody and a few impressions (FIG.4.7). Certainly this was practice at its utmost manifestation: this was *gagaku* in the making.

After a short instrumental prelude performed by soloists from each of the wind instruments, the piece begins. When *hichiriki* and *shō* jump in on the *ryūteki* melody, it feels like an explosion, a sonic attack to the ears. What strikes one first (quite literally) is the sheer volume of the music: *gagaku* is loud and powerful. The rhythmic section is categorical: the smaller, double-headed drum *kakko* accelerates in sparse strokes, while the suspended drum *taiko* provides simple beats that work like semicolons in the musical syntax. The hands of its player, holding two thick mallets, alternatively come to a rest on the hips with a beautiful but determined movement. The suspended gong *shōko* comes in a fraction of a second after the *taiko* beats, and the long sticks falling on the metal linger on the surface of the instrument. When you hear its sound, you can almost feel the density of the bronze. Meanwhile, the mouth organ envelops the space seamlessly with alternating crescendos and diminuendos. One moment the melodies of the *hichiriki* and

*ryūteki* are conjoined, the next they are slightly apart. Often when they depart there is an interval of a major second between them –something considered sharply dissonant in Euro-American classical music up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**FIGURE 4.7.** The practice from within. (Picture by the author).

I can follow the melodies; appreciate the characteristically progressive change in the overall tempo. Or I can watch the movements of the dancers and the faces of the other participants. I can even join in and play: I’ve been told it’s ok. In fact, sometimes I do. But more often than not I sit still, overcome by information, sensations, thoughts. There is a surfeit –a surfeit of everything that counts in fieldwork research. Sometimes I choose to close my eyes and plunge into sound. Is it a reaction to the hopelessness of trying to register it all, to take it all in on so many different levels? In part, certainly, it must be. Is it the passion *I* personally feel towards this music? Or is it the embodied disposition I carry with me wherever I go, my “habitus of listening”? After all, according to Judith Becker,

“we listen in a particular way without thinking about it, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening. Most of our styles of listening have been learned through unconscious imitation of those who surround us and with whom we continually interact. A habitus of listening suggests not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and one’s emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways” (2011, 130).

But is it really so? Do I listen to Japanese court music the way I listen to a piano concerto? Do I *make myself feel*, like Hennion’s music amateurs and drug addicts, who skillfully move between activity and passivity (see Hennion and Gomart 1999)? Do I give myself away to a culturally predetermined (or to a culturally ubiquitous, for that matters) “sonic rapture through listening” (Kapchan 2015, 37)?

There must be more to this. This act of listening, which is also a specific moment in the history of my fieldwork with Nanto gakuso, is also, perhaps primarily, a search for “sound knowledge –a nondiscursive form of affective transmission”, “both a method and a state of being” (Kapchan 2015, 34, 42). In this sense, it is inscribed within a precise theoretical paradigm, informed by phenomenology and pioneered by Steven Feld (see especially Feld 1990; 1996; 2015). The program of his “acoustemology”, the conjoining of acoustics and epistemology, is “to investigate sounding and listening as knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible” (Feld 2015, 12). Mobilizing a “relational ontology”, a form of “knowing through relations” (Feld 2015, 12–13), this approach fosters “consciousness of modes of acoustic *attending*, of ways of listening for and resounding to presence” (Feld 2015, 15 emphasis added). Note the progressive intensification of mutual resonances among theoretical concepts already encountered: according to Kapchan, for instance, certain ways of listening are “listening acts”: “Like J. L. Austin’s [(2009)] ‘locutionary acts’, listening acts *enact* –that is, they are ‘performative’, they do not simply represent sound, as waves reach the ears and are relayed to the brain, but they *transduce* these sound waves, changing the waves, the body and the environment in the process” (Kapchan 2015, 36 emphasis in the original). Tom Rice further points out that “listening to” a sound “implies that a person, having moved beyond the detection and/or location of the auditory stimulus, is *attending to it* with a degree of focus” (2015, 99 emphasis added).

Enactment and attendance are but two of the conceptual nodes that feed back into the ethnography of *gagaku* practice. Equally important in the particular listening act

sketched out above is its distinctive *immersive* quality. Far from being simply a moment of emotional rapture in the field, immersement (to use Marilyn Strathern's version of the more common word 'immersion') or "the experience of the flow" (*botsunyū* in Japanese) is also a fundamental aspect in the acquisition of practical skills by craftsmen, artists and sport practitioners (see Kitamura 2011). It is precisely by *thinking through* immersion (see Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007) that it becomes possible to bind together the materiality of court music and the metaphoric or rather the analogical conceptualization suggested by the ethnographic moment of the listening act<sup>49</sup>. As recently noted by Novak and Sakakeeny, "to engage sound as the interrelation of materiality and metaphor is to show how deeply the apparently separate fields of perception and discourse are entwined in everyday experiences and understandings of sound, and how far they extend across physical, philosophical, and cultural contexts" (2015, 1).

Thus the materiality of *gagaku* is first and foremost present in the form of "vibrational force", to use Steve Goodman's expression (2010, 81–84): it manifests itself in terms of the "physicality of sound (...) so instantly and forcefully present to experience and experiencers, to interpreters and interpretations" (Feld 2015, 12). The vibrations of this music's sonorous enactment reach my body as I sit in the practice room with my eyes closed –as it reaches the other music-makers, intent in performance. Enskilment, enactment, and emplacement are co-constitutive: I am caught up in this loop<sup>50</sup>.

This vibrational and experiential account of doing participant observation *within gagaku* practice is an "acoustemology of embodied place resounding", to quote Steven Feld again (see Feld 1996). However, if it is to be more than "a literary activity mainly concerned with explorations of selves", "self-indulgent and narcissistic" (Davies 1999, 178, 179) (a danger of so-called autoethnography at large), such a stance needs to be turned into something akin to what Law refers to as "resonance as method" (2004, 144). How can the immersive quality of doing fieldwork in the sound of *gagaku* be conducive of not only the researcher's, but also the amateur's experience of enacting *gagaku* in practice?

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the imagery suggested by the verb 'to bind' is misleading, in that it suggests a tying together of discreet entities –whereas the relational ontology underlying both a phenomenological approach to sound and a praxiography of *gagaku* denies precisely this kind of splitting of the real into material and immaterial components. The paradigm is that of the material-semiotic network introduced by Donna Haraway (1988, 595) and developed by ANT-inspired research (Law 1992; Strathern 1996).

<sup>50</sup> On the concept of feedback and for a skillful ethnographic application of it, see (Novak 2013).

One way may be to *not* disentangle the act of listening from the materiality of *gagaku* –to try to revert *gagaku*'s aura of intangibility back to its tangible, even tactile, sensory production. In a way, this amounts to “gesturing to listening as a mode of consciousness that reaches beyond the merely auditory” (Rice 2015, 101). On the one hand, in fact, it has been suggested that “listening is at least as significant as observation to ethnographers” and that “ethnography is arguably more aural than ocular, the ethnographer more participant listener than observer” (Forsey 2010, 561). On the other, and taking one step further, a relational ontology of sound knowledge rests on the premise that “all human beings, whether hearing or not, are immersed in a vibrating world” (Cusick 2013, 278). Thus, “we are never quite as separate from other vibrating entities” and “we exist in something like a continuous loop of vibrations, an environment dense with what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls the ‘re-soundings’ by all the vibrating entities in a space of all the vibrating entities in that space” (Cusick 2013, 278 emphasis in the original). Suzanne Cusick phrased the anthropological dilemma of how to deal with this conception of reality wonderfully: “How might we imagine that this notion of our immersion in an always already mutually vibrating world could interact with an anthropocentric notion of subjectivity to produce a second, vibration-centred framework?” (2013, 278).

An interesting answer comes, again, from the anthropology of medicine. In Tom Rice's ethnographic research on the various listening practices in two British hospitals, auscultation on the part of doctors plays a crucial role, and so does the acquisition of the skills necessary to use the stethoscope on the part of medical students (see Rice 2010; 2012; 2013). Apart from being a competence indispensable for the formation of medical practitioners, in fact, stethoscopic listening was found to have a powerful symbolic significance: indeed, the instrument became an important symbol of medical identity among young doctors (Rice 2015, 106). The attitude of *gagaku* practitioners toward *their* instruments similarly suggests that those tangible musical mediators are given a central place in the practice, and that they carry a formidable amount of agency in the making of *gagaku*. *Ryūteki*'s and *hichiriki*'s cases are often lavishly decorated with tailor-made, mother-of-pearl inlays, depicting scenes from famous Buddhist paintings or ancient Japanese illustrated scrolls. Most amateurs own more than one of the instruments of the ensemble, and sometimes have a spare instrument in addition to their primary one. Though they seldom brag about such topics as prices and particularly expensive

materials, it is well known that their costs can be astronomical, and the quality and even the antiquity of some of the teachers' instruments are fabled. In a sense, then, listening and performing practices are shaped by the relationship amateurs hold to the tangible embodiments of *gagaku*, in a way that resembles young doctors' attachment to their stethoscopes. Curiously, while the latter are listening devices, the former produce sound. But could there be a deeper connection between the two?

Auscultation in medical settings opens up a window into relational dynamics that are ethnographically rich. For instance, "the fact that auscultation required close tactile and visual contact between doctor and patient (listener and listened-to) also meant that it created what some doctors saw as a valuable point of human contact between themselves and their patients. There was some consensus that auscultation produced an intimate, personal, and humane type of medical interaction" (Rice 2015, 106). On this basis, Rice draws an analogy between stethoscopic listening and ethnographic fieldwork: in particular, "the balance of subjectivity (in the experience of sounds) and objectivity (in constituting those sounds as perceptual objects about which rational judgments may be made) that occurs in stethoscopic listening resonates with the balance of subjectivity and objectivity that defines the conduct of successful ethnography" (2015, 107–8). As farfetched as the parallel may seem at first, what I want to suggest here is that a 'sonic praxiography' of *gagaku* oscillates between the two poles of immersion and auscultation. Far from indicating a simple distinction between hearing and listening (since doing fieldwork in sound requires attending to the significance of both), this oscillation is a challenging exercise in turning the researcher's body into a stethoscopic device, able to detect resonances among embodied auditory and experiential modalities.

Practicing *gagaku* can be overwhelming, both in terms of the sheer unfamiliarity with its context and contents and of the vibrational force of its sonic manifestations. Sound should not be idealized. Indeed, sound has recently been investigated as a powerful means to disrupt the social tissue of a community (Cox 2013), to dismantle the stability of ordinary self and personhood (Cusick 2013), and to contribute to "an immersive atmosphere or ambience of fear and dread" (Goodman 2010, xiv). But these unsettling characteristics are only partially resonant in my fieldwork with Nanto gakuso. Other detectable, recurring threads include the continuous mutual renegotiation of the

practitioners' identity of competence, itself a sort of productive resonance among and across members of the group, and the complex structuring of a community of *keiko* based on attendance and on the embodiment of specific bodily techniques, a process that in turn resonates with the spatial qualities of the practice room. In all these cases, the materiality of the practitioners' body, of their surroundings, and of their instruments is inseparable from the production of impalpable attitudes and long-lasting associations between *gagaku's* sonic manifestations and a host of moral and even spiritual values. For this reason, a closer exploration of the fate of *gagaku's* primary materials, the ones used to produce its instruments, provides not only a window on the manifold manifestations of the multiple reality called court music in contemporary Japan, but also a better understanding of its place within wider discourses embracing history, the environment, and the very survival of these ancient, unruly sounds.

