

Music of the Asian Royal Courts:

A Smithsonian Folkways Learning Pathway
for students in grades 3–5.

Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2:

Gagaku - Imperial Court Music of Japan



Lesson Overview

Japan, an island country located along the Pacific rim in Asia, has a population of over 125 million people. *Gagaku* 雅楽 [Ga-gaku] (meaning “elegant music”) is the classical music and dance of the Imperial Court of Japan. It was first imported from China in the 8th century. The original Chinese court music, called *yayue*, blended with Korean influences and native Japanese musical traditions to form gagaku, which has been performed in Japan for over 1300 years. Gagaku is recognized as one of the oldest living court traditions in the world, and was used in Buddhist temples in Japan around the eighteenth century.

This lesson will open student’s ears to the music, instruments, and sounds of Japanese gagaku. Students will learn about the history of gagaku through the different instruments and sounds of the gagaku ensemble. They will also have a chance to sing along with a well-known gagaku song and play body percussion alongside the drums.

For more information about gagaku [see "Further Information for Teachers" below](#).

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Lesson Components and Student Objectives*



1. What Is Gagaku? (20–25 minutes)

- Students will describe the history and origins of gagaku music.
- Students will aurally identify the difference between European and Japanese classical music and learn about gagaku’s influence in contemporary culture.



2. Gagaku Instruments (15–20 minutes)







- Students will identify and describe the sounds of three instruments from the gagaku ensemble (*shō*, *ryūteki*, and *hichiriki*).



3. Sounds of Gagaku (15–20 minutes)

- Students will perform a section from a famous gagaku song.
- Students will perform rhythms played on the drum used for gagaku.

*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Component. Keep in mind that these Components are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Components they’d like to use from each Lesson.

While all learning types ( History and Culture,  Music Listening,  Music Making and Creation, and  Creative Connections) fulfill 2014 National Music Standards, non-music teachers will be able to use  History and Culture and  Creative Connections Components without specific musical knowledge.

Teaching Plan

Introduction (slides 2–5): Start with the following introduction before you choose the Component you will focus on

Slide 1 – We’re on our birthday trip to Asia!

This slideshow is one of many in the Music of Asian Courts Pathway. If you are presenting this to students after presenting the Introductory Lesson (Lesson 2), you can extend its birthday theme to this slideshow. Tell the students that they have just landed in Japan for their birthdays and are being greeted there with gagaku music!

Slide 3 – Next stop, Japan!

Slide 4 – Lesson Introduction: Questions for focus

Slide 5 – Component Menu Slide: Choose the component you’d like to teach.

1. Component One: What Is Gagaku?



To Prepare:

- Read through the Component.
- Preview Component 1 of the **Lesson 2 Slideshow** (slides 6–17).
Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 2 landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.*)

Component One starts on slide 6

Slide 7: Share Information: Introduce students to the “magical bird Karyobinga.”

Ask students why they think the bird might be magical.

- Explain to students that **many cultures tell stories of magical birds.**
- **The Karoybinga is a creature from the Buddhist religion. It has a human head and the body of a bird. It is said to begin singing even before it hatches from the egg.**
- Say, “Our Karyobinga is going to come along with us to teach us about gagaku music.”

Slide 8: Attentive Listening: Introduce students to the sounds of gagaku

- Play the video clip in the slide.
- Ask students
 - *What sounds do you hear?*
 - *How would you describe this sound to a friend or to your parents?*
 - *Do you like it?*
 - *Does the music sound like any other music you may have heard?*
 - *Does the music make you feel like dancing? Why or why not?*

Slides 9–10: Pronounce and define gagaku

- Gagaku is pronounced “GA ga ku,” “Ga GA koo,” or “Ga-JAH-koo.”
- Elegant Music: Gagaku is the imperial court music of Japan. The word **gagaku** means “**elegant music.**”
 - Ask students: *What do you think the word “elegant” means?*
 - Continue: “Look at the picture in the slide of this **elegant tern**, a bird found on the west coast of North America.”
 - *Why do you think bird experts gave the bird this name?*
 - *What does the bird have in common with the music?*
 - **They are both graceful, beautiful, and they move in a smooth, simple motion.**

Slide 11: The Origins of Gagaku

- Display or project a large world map that clearly shows China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan and their proximity to each other (or click the down arrow for a map showing East Asia [slide 11.2]).
- Explain the origins of gagaku: Point to each region as you explain,
 - **“Gagaku music is a type of music that joins together music from China, Korea, and Vietnam.”**
 - Ask students: *How do you think music travels? Does the music ride on a camel, fly like a bird, or take a boat?*
 - **People from these parts of the world probably took long journeys to settle in new lands, such as Japan.**
 - **When they traveled, they took their music with them. The musical traditions from their homelands combined or fused with Japanese music to create a new type of music. Many musical traditions followed this path.**
 - **For** additional information on the reasons for migration, [click here](#).

Slide 12: Gagaku is a very old kind of music.

- Explain to students: Gagaku music has been played in Japan for more than 1300 years. That is a very long time. Right now, we live in the 21st century. **Let’s think about how our lives might have been different thirteen centuries ago!**
 - *How would people travel from one place to another?*
 - *What would they wear?*
 - *What do you think they would eat?*
 - *How else might their lives have been different?*
- **“How about 1300 years in the future?”**
 - *Think about the people and things that are popular now. Think about movie stars, rock stars, and sports stars.*
 - *Do you think people will still know their names in 1300 years?*
 - *What music will be popular in the year 3400?*

Slide 13: Where is Gagaku traditionally played?

- Long ago, Gagaku accompanied the rituals and events of the Emperor and the royal family. It was entertainment that only people in the courts could watch.
- Today, it is still used at the Imperial Palace of Japan and for religious purposes at temples.

Slide 14: Gagaku today

- Despite being centuries old, Gagaku is a tradition that is still present in Japanese culture.
- Gagaku instruments are still used today by musicians of different genres.

- The images shown on this slide are from *The Gagaku Sentai White Stones*, a TV series featuring three minor superheroes who play the three Gagaku wind instruments. (Learn more about those in Component 2)

Slide 15: Listening – Gagaku Music in Video Games

- Listen to this song from the video game *Okami*. It uses traditional Gagaku instruments.
- Raise your hand when you hear an instrument you think is from Japan.
 - Students aren't expected to identify the instruments by name. Have them describe things they know, like flutes, drums, etc.
 - **For the teacher's knowledge, we are hearing:**
 - **Gagaku instruments:** three wind instruments: **shō, hichiriki, ryuteki** (Learn more about those in Component 2)
- After video, ask: *Have you heard any of these instruments before? Did you hear any other instruments?*
 - **Other instruments: synthesizers, strings, percussion**

Slide 16: Compare and Contrast

- Play gagaku example – "[Imperial Sho Koto Chant: Gagaku](#)" (Various artists)
 - Ask students: *What kinds of instruments do they hear? What do they like? Dislike?*
 - **Students aren't expected to identify the instruments by name, but for the teacher's knowledge, we are hearing: male singers accompanied by *koto* (plucked string instrument) and shō.**
- Play European renaissance theatrical example – "[Handel's Water Piece](#)" (The Wayland Consort Orchestra)
 - Ask students: *What kinds of instruments do they hear? What do they like? Dislike?*
 - **Students aren't expected to identify the instruments by name, but for the teacher's knowledge, we are hearing an 18th-century American colonial orchestra: Violins, violas, bass, oboes, French horns, bassoon.**
- Discuss what students heard
 - *What are the differences and similarities that they identified?*

Slide 17: Learning Checkpoint

- What does "gagaku" mean in Japanese? **Gagaku means "Elegant music" in Japanese.**
- Where can you hear gagaku in Japan? **People can hear gagaku on television, in anime, and in video games.**

Slide 18: Navigation Slide



2. Component Two: Sounds of Gagaku

To Prepare:

- Read through the Component.
- Preview Component 2 of the **Lesson 2 Slideshow** (slides 19–33).
Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 2 landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.”*)

Component Two starts on slide 19

Slide 20: What does Gagaku mean?

- (NOTE: If students have completed Component 1, then they can skip this slide.)
 - Gagaku is pronounced “GA ga ku,” “Ga GA koo,” or “Ga-JAH-koo.”
- Elegant Music: Gagaku is the imperial court music of Japan. The word gagaku means “elegant music.”
 - Ask students: *What do you think the word “elegant” means?*
 - Continue: Look at the picture in the slide of this **elegant tern**, a bird found on the west coast of North America.
 - *Why do you think bird experts gave the bird this name?*
 - *What does the bird have in common with the music?*
 - **They are both graceful, beautiful, and they move in a smooth, simple motion.**

Slide 21

- Gagaku is a style of music that combines singing and other instruments.
- Ask students:
 - *Can you think of other types of music that also combine singing and instruments?*
 - *What about music that is only singing, or only instruments?*

Slides 22–24: Listening - shō

- (slide 22) **“First, we’re going to learn about the shō.”**
 - Pronunciation: **“show”** (play pronunciation video at top right corner and repeat with students).
 - Listen to “Imperial Sho Koto Chant: Gagaku.” It includes chanting, accompanied by a shō and a *koto* (plucked instrument). Ask students to listen for the shō. (you may have to differentiate it from the koto by saying it sounds like a whistle).
 - More info: The shō is a complicated mouth organ that is played similarly to a harmonica; it is likely that the harmonica is based on the shō.
 - Ask students: *What does it sound like? What does it remind them of?*

Guide them towards thinking about **bright colors**.

- (slide 23) People in Japan say that shō sounds like “light piercing through the sky.”
 - Play the video, which focuses on the shō.
 - Ask students:
 - *Does the shō sound like “light piercing through the sky?”*
 - *What are some other ways you might describe the sound?*
- (slide 24) People also say the shō is shaped like a phoenix (define phoenix if necessary).
 - Ask students:
 - *Does the shō look like a phoenix?*
 - *Does it sound like a phoenix?*

Slides 25–28: Listening - ryūteki

- (slide 25) Play embedded video of someone playing a *ryūteki*
 - Ask students: *What animal does this instrument sound like?*
- (slide 26) **The *ryūteki* is known as the “dragon flute.”**
 - Pronunciation: **“re-yoo-teh-key”** (play the pronunciation file and repeat with students).
- (slide 27) In Japan they say it sounds like a dancing dragon.
- (slide 28) Listen again, then ask:
 - *Why do you think this instrument is named after a dragon? Is this what you thought a dragon would sound like?*
 - If the classroom has instruments: have children explore instruments and decide if any match with an animal, OR, think of animals and decide if any of the instruments available describe the sound/size of the animal.

Slide 29–30: Listening - hichiriki

- (slide 29) “Now we’ll learn about the hichiriki, the instrument Karyobinga plays!”
 - Pronunciation: **“he-chee-ree-key”** (play the pronunciation file and repeat with students).
- (slide 30) Ask students: *Does this sound like Karyobinga? How would you describe the sound? Can you think of other instruments that have similar sounds?*

Slide 31: Listening – identifying instruments

- Play embedded video.
- Ask students:
 - *What instruments can you hear? Can you name any of the instruments? Can you see the musicians playing them?*

- **Starts with all three, but the hichiriki is the loudest. The shō plays a drone underneath, and the ryūteki is the high-pitched flute. The hichiriki stops for a moment and you can hear the shō continue. Then the ryūteki becomes prominent, flying above the other instruments.**
- *Are there any instruments playing that we haven't talked about? (Drum)*
- **Optional:** discuss details of the dancer's dress ([more info below](#))

Slide 32: Listening/Activity

- Play embedded video again.
- Divide the class into three groups. Each group will raise their hands once the *ryūteki*, *shō*, or *hichikiri* is played.
- *Optional:* Add a fourth group for the drum.

Slide 33: Learning Checkpoint

- Which instrument sounded like a Dragon? (**Ryuteki**)
- Which instrument sounds like a Phoenix? (**Shō**)
- Which instrument sounds like Karyobinga? (**Hichiriki**)

Slide 34: Navigation Slide



3. Component Three: Performing Gagaku

To Prepare:

- Read through the Component.
- Preview Component 3 of the **Lesson 2 Slideshow** (slides 35–39).
Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson 2 landing page. (*If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow link, which will not show the notes.*)

Component Three starts on slide 35

Slide 36: What does Gagaku mean?

- (NOTE: If students have completed Components 1 or 2, then they can skip this slide.)
 - Gagaku is pronounced “GA ga ku,” “Ga GA koo,” or “Ga-JAH-koo.”
- Elegant Music: Gagaku is the imperial court music of Japan. The word gagaku means “elegant music.”
 - Ask students: *What do you think the word “elegant” means?*
 - Like this bird, the “elegant tern,” **the music is graceful, beautiful, and moves in a smooth, simple motion.**

Slide 37: Performance Activity #1: Singing “Etenraku”

Play the embedded video of “Etenraku,” which explains how to clap the beats for the song and contains subtitles for the lyrics.

- Have students just listen the first time through.
- Play the video again and have students clap along.
- Play the video again; this time, have students sing along and read the subtitles.
- Play the video a fourth time and have students clap along while singing.

Slide 38: Performance Activity #2: Drumming with the Gagaku Beat

Play the embedded video and have students listen to the drum patterns.

- Ask students: *What does the drumbeat remind you of?*
- Play the video again and have students drum along with the video using their knees as the drum.

Slide 39: Learning Checkpoint

- How does Japanese classical music differ from other forms of classical music?
 - Encourage students to think critically about Japanese classical music.
- Does today’s music have rhythms like Japanese classical music?
 - Encourage students to compare the musical rhythms of Japan with today's music.

Slide 40: Navigation Slide

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Cr1.1.3b Generate musical ideas (such as rhythms and melodies) within a given tonality and/or meter.

- Can I play a steady beat or rhythm along with a gagaku piece?
- Can I sing along with an etenraku piece?

MU:Pr4.2.2a Demonstrate knowledge of music concepts (such as tonality and meter) in music from a variety of cultures selected for performance.

- Can I play a steady beat along with a gagaku piece?
- Can I identify familiar instruments based on timbres?

MU:Pr4.3.2a Demonstrate understanding of expressive qualities (such as dynamics and tempo) and how creators use them to convey expressive intent.

- Can I explain, using expressive qualities, how the *shō* is thought to be like a phoenix?
- Can I explain, using expressive qualities, why the *ryūteki* is named after a dragon?

MU:Re7.1.2a Explain and demonstrate how personal interests and experiences influence musical selection for specific purposes.

- Can I explain why I prefer some uses of gagaku instruments over others?
- Can I explain why specific gagaku instruments are used for particular reasons?

MU:Re7.1.3a Demonstrate and describe how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, or purposes.

- Can I explain some of the purposes of gagaku music?

MU:Re7.2.3a Demonstrate and describe how a response to music can be informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music, and context (such as personal and social)

- Can I give examples of differences and similarities between gagaku and music from the western classical era?

MU:Re8.1.3a Demonstrate and describe how the expressive qualities (such as dynamics and tempo) are used in performers' interpretations to reflect expressive intent.

- Can I identify how gagaku performers are using dynamics and tempo to create a mood or emotion?

MU:Re9.1.2a Apply personal and expressive preferences in the evaluation of music for specific purposes.

- Can I explain my opinions of *shō*, *ryūteki*, and *hichiriki* based on what I have learned about these instruments in Gagaku tradition?

MU:Cn10.0.3a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music

- Can I explain why I prefer some uses of gagaku instruments over others?
- Can I describe what fusion in music is?

MU:Cn11.0.3a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life

- Can I identify connections between gagaku music and court dances that are performed?
- Can I explain why dance and music were part of court entertainment?

Further Information for Teachers

History:

Gagaku 雅楽 [Ga-gaku] (literally “elegant music”) is the classical music and dance of the Imperial Court of Japan. It is an ancient type of classical music, which was first imported from China in the 8th century (during the Tang dynasty). The original Chinese music, called *yayue*, was then adapted to Japanese tastes by blending with native Japanese musical traditions. This adapted style, now called gagaku, has been performed in Japan for over 1300 years. Though its original form has long disappeared, it remains an important component of court ceremonies and some Buddhist and Shinto rituals and functions. In fact, the gagaku orchestra at the imperial palace of Japan is the oldest continuously performing orchestra in the world. Gagaku consists of three repertoires: native Shinto religious music, vocal music based on Japanese folk poetry, and songs and dance based on ancient international music (mostly from China and Korea, but also from Central Asia, India, and Vietnam). Historically, these repertoires were primarily transmitted by families of professional, hereditary musicians who passed their secret musical knowledge on to their (male) descendants.

Gagaku popularity peaked at court during the Heian period (794–1185), then declined in the medieval Kamakura period (1185–1333). During this period there were three musical guilds based in Osaka, Nara, and Kyoto, but when governmental power structure changed, gagaku came to be performed mostly in the homes of aristocratic families rather than at court.

In the Edo period (1600–1868), however, the government worked alongside the imperial court and musical families to revive and reorganize the traditional ensembles. At this time, a newly formed guild at the castle of the Shogun in Edo (present-day Tokyo) joined the three existing guilds (based in Osaka, Nara, and Kyoto). These became the progenitors of the present-day gagaku ensembles and their repertoires.

Today, 1300 years after its establishment, gagaku is considered the oldest living orchestral music in the world and has been recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Its cultural importance goes well beyond music and performing traditions to include the visual arts, educational methods, traditional artisanal crafts and sensibilities, rituals and ceremonies, and an elaborate and complex philosophy of music.

Modern Gagaku:

While Gagaku performances are most often seen in ritual and ceremonial settings, various sights and sounds of the genre appear in Japanese popular culture.

In literature, Gagaku has famously featured in a historical detective series set in Edo-period Osaka called *Naniwa Case Files*. The author studied the *shō* and incorporated his musical knowledge into his writing. A television series based on these novels was adapted by Japanese public TV.

Gagaku elements also appear in *anime*. Bugaku dancers wearing paper masks are among the many spirits in animator Miyazaki Hayao's popular film, *Spirited Away*. *Anime* with Shinto themes often feature young women performing a sacred dance for the gods, accompanied by gagaku. Similar gagaku elements appear in video games as well.

Western musicians and composers began incorporating gagaku influences into their music in the 1920s. Since gagaku instruments can be hard to find, musicians have adapted a variety of instruments to the genre. Japanese composers today still write gagaku music, helping to make gagaku popular all around the world.

Description:

Gagaku is a rich genre, including instrumental music, dance, and vocal music. This music is exceptional as it combines archaic allure with unexpected contemporary musical features (free rhythms, complex sound clusters, controlled dissonance).

The gagaku orchestra employs instruments (woodwinds, string, and percussion) that are unique to the genre. These include the *hichiriki*, a type of Japanese oboe, the *shō*, a complicated mouth organ played similarly to a harmonica, and the *ryūteki* or dragon flute.

Why does it sound like this?

The first character used to write “gagaku 雅楽” means “refined” or “correct.” In terms of Confucian philosophy, it was meant to improve the morality of the listener rather than cause pleasure. These philosophies were also imported to Japan, and influenced the development of both the philosophy and sound of the gagaku genre.

Gagaku Musicians' and Dancers' Dress:

Gagaku became a part of liturgical music in some Buddhist temples in Japan around the eighteenth century. Some Japanese Buddhist temples in the United States began incorporating the gagaku musical traditions in the first decade of the twentieth century. Originally, the robes worn by gagaku performers in Japan were mostly white. Today performers wear a variety of costumes, each with a long history.

A layered silk robe called *kasane shōzoku* is worn by the dancers only for quieter pieces. This robe is based on the court outfit of the Heian period (794–1192); at that time, it was not even considered a costume. The dancers' clothes are usually more complex and refined, and they differ according to the genre of dances. Costumes generally include an inner robe (*shita-gasane*) and an outer garment (*hō*). The outer garment is decorated with two layers of motifs: the background decoration (*jimon*) and the main motifs on the surface. Such motifs can be animals, such as cranes, carps, fierce beasts, flowers, waves, and geometrical shapes. They usually follow a symmetrical order in horizontal and vertical columns.

[\[Back to Lesson Overview\]](#)

Additional Reading and Resources

Within this section, please list any readings and/or resources that you think might be helpful for teachers if they would like to dig deeper into this music culture. Please use Chicago reference format.

Let's ask the author for recommended sources

Chapin, P. (2015, July 27). A Look at the Music of Okami. *Parker Chapin*.
<https://parkerchapin.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/a-look-at-the-music-of-okami/>

Tan, N. (2006, December 12). Gagaku and Japanese indigenous instruments in game design. *Honest Gamers*. http://www.honestgamers.com/draqq_zyxx/blog/posts/8780-gagaku-and-japanese-indigenous-instruments-in-game-design.html.

Examples of fusion music featuring gagaku instruments:

Worksheets

Mottainai

(Don't Waste What Nature Gives You)

Great Leap/Nobuko Miyamoto

Voice

We take, we use, we throw a way. We

Voice

Oh mot tai nai

Percussion

4

Voice

take, we use, we throw a way. We

V.

Oh mot tai nai

Perc.