



MUSICAL COURTSHIP

Gagaku, the ancient music of the Japanese court, is coming to the Edinburgh International Festival for a one-off performance, writes David Kettle

If you think Western classical music is ancient – and let's face it, even Bach dates back over 300 years – it's a mere youngster compared with gagaku. The music of the Japanese imperial court, which gets a very rare British outing as part of the International Festival, is the world's oldest orchestral tradition (by a long way). It can trace its origins back a millennium and a half, to the sixth or seventh centuries.

'It arrived in Japan between the fifth and the tenth centuries, mainly with Buddhist ceremonies,' explains Hisashi Itoh, tour manager for the Edinburgh performance. 'The music actually comes from quite a wide area, mainly central Asia, along the old Silk Route.'

Nagao Okubo, chief musician in the ensemble making the trip to Scotland, makes a telling comparison: 'It's as if you still had ancient Roman music being played in Britain and Ireland – as if, although the empire has disappeared, the music remains.' But gagaku must have changed over time: how close is what's played today to how it would have been all that time ago? 'The gagaku musicians have always been there to serve the emperor, so they didn't have to change,' Itoh explains. In today's culture where pop and classical stars alike can rise and fall in a matter of months, that's a hard thought even to contemplate.

And it's ironic that something that's come to embody the pinnacle of Japanese traditional culture actually started off life in China, Korea and farther west. For this is Japanese music at its most refined, serious yet thrilling, and the embodiment of imperial values. The group making the trip from Tokyo to Edinburgh are the emperor's own musicians, and they define the style. And although they accompany

court banquets (and even grab violins and cellos to take up their second role as a classical ensemble) their function in court isn't simply one of entertainment.

'We play a vital role in court in supporting the emperor's rituals,' explains Okubo. 'About 70% of his life is concerned with carrying out ceremonies.' For gagaku isn't a Buddhist music, but one far more closely aligned with Shinto, the Japanese belief system based around spirits. When the emperor honours his ancestors, or carries out rituals for the victims of last year's earthquake and tsunami, the gagaku musicians are there too.

For anyone in an Edinburgh audience, though, it's probably some of the weirdest-sounding music you'll ever encounter, with strident oboes and softer flutes accompanied by brittle twangs from kotos and biwa lutes, all interspersed with thudding drums and chiming cymbals. But if that sounds off-putting, it isn't meant to be: there's a hypnotic quality to the slow-moving, gradually evolving music that undeniably gripping. And in a live performance, the sounds are just the starting point: equally important (and symbolic) are the sumptuous costumes, the elaborate stage scenery and the measured movements of the dancers who take part in several of the pieces.

The International Festival's one-off event is a rare chance to experience this ancient and spiritual music, in a performance that's as authentic as it's possible to be.

Usher Hall, 0131 473 2000, Wed 22 Aug, 7.30pm, £12-£30.