

# *international festival*



# Imperial pleasures



The world's oldest form of orchestral music is as beguiling

Gagaku music - and the colour and spectacle that go

closed for centuries, but the possibility of being a performer, too.

"so he plays Schubert or Brahms as well as gagaku. If there's a traditional Japa-





The world's oldest form of orchestral music is as beguiling to western ears as it was to the Japanese emperors for whom it was created, writes **David Kettle**

IT'S some of the strangest music you're ever likely to hear. But wonderfully, fascinatingly strange, in its glacial tempos, its jarringly beautiful sounds and the sense of awe it effortlessly conjures. It's no surprise that gagaku, the hyper-refined Japanese imperial music making a rare trip to the Edinburgh International Festival this year, translates literally as "elegant music".

But it's an elegance not of sumptuous, reassuring beauty, but of the hard and the soft held in careful balance, and one derived from centuries-old rituals. And despite its remoteness from anything a western audience would be familiar with, it's beguiling even to virgin ears. "When we play gagaku in Europe, people understand it almost immediately, even though it's quite unfamiliar," says Nagao Okubo, chief musician from the Imperial Household Agency in Tokyo, the ensemble making the trip to Scotland.

It's easily the oldest orchestral music in the world, dating back to the sixth and seventh centuries when it came out of China and Korea with Buddhist teachings. But despite its slow, meditative atmosphere, it's not Buddhist music. "It's played at the imperial court for Shinto rituals," explains Hisashi Itoh, tour manager for the Edinburgh performance. "Shinto is more like animism, which is a belief based around spirits. When you say Shinto, no Japanese person can really explain it properly - they'd just say it's what's around us."

Nevertheless, Shinto's huge emphasis on the importance of history and the spirits of the natural world are areas where the impe-

rial gagaku ensemble plays a vital role. "The Japanese emperor has far more ritual power than political power," explains Itoh. "Sometimes gagaku is played in rituals for winning battles, or for getting a good harvest. The emperor still has a small rice field in the imperial palace - he does some ritual growing of rice, so that he's connected to the spirits of agriculture."

The gagaku musicians have a busy time with these rituals. "Our calendar is based around ceremonies," explains Okubo. "We have about 17 different seasonal rituals each year. The current emperor is from the 125th generation, so there are 124 previous emperors, and for the centenary of each of them we also perform a ceremony - so in some years there are more than 20 of those." The ensemble also plays for royal events such as births, deaths and marriages, and for state banquets - two or three a month. These performances are behind closed doors, though: the orchestra is kept intentionally close to the court as a symbol of the unchanging, unceasing power of the Japanese imperial house.

The music has fascinated western composers for decades. Messiaen included a gagaku evocation in his Japanese-inspired *Sept haikai*, and Stockhausen wrote *Der Jahreslauf* for an ensemble including a gagaku orchestra. But how well known is the music in its home country? "I think everyone knows the word gagaku," says Itoh, "and they've probably heard the music in shrines or at ceremonies. But you wouldn't really sit in an audience to listen to it."

And it wasn't just performances that were

Gagaku music - and the colour and spectacle that go with it - is more at home in the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, above, than Edinburgh. But it travels well

closed for centuries, but the possibility of being a performer, too. "Originally all the players were from families of musicians that went back for generations," explains Okubo. "It was only after the Second World War that the imperial court allowed people from outside to audition."

Okubo's father worked in the court, but as an officer rather than a musician. He encouraged his son to audition at the age of 12 to become part of the gagaku ensemble. "I studied for nine years, the first five without an instrument. We had to memorise the melodies by singing. Then, as well as learning the instrument that I now play, I had to study dance, singing and the other instruments in the orchestra. You need to know how the whole thing will sound, you need to know what everybody else is playing as well."

That's quite a departure from the western orchestral idea of simply learning your own part. Ask orchestral musicians to learn the music being played by everyone else and you'd get some shocked reactions. But it's essential for the tight-knit sense of ensemble and the sometimes freely floating rhythms that are key to gagaku's remarkable sound.

Okubo's instrument, the *hichiriki*, is a kind of oboe, and he's kind of in charge - "a sort of concertmaster, but not in western terms," as Itoh explains. In the ensemble, he's joined by a *ryuteki* flute and the spectacular-looking *sho* mouthorgan, with its spiky pipes pointing heavenwards. There are also plucked stringed instruments - the lute-like *biwa* and *koto* zither - and an array of drums and cymbals that provide percussive punctuation to the music's melodies.

Yet the court musicians are sometimes required to perform western music. "Mr Okubo is also a cello player," explains Itoh,

"so he plays Schubert or Brahms as well as gagaku. If there's a traditional Japanese event in the palace, the orchestra plays gagaku, but if the emperor has a western ceremony, he might ask them to play western music. For them, it's just two different types of ceremonies."

Gagaku also plays a vital role in accompanying a form of ritualised, stylised dance, and half of the Edinburgh programme is devoted to dance. Any gagaku performance is about far more than just the music, as Okubo explains. "All the details of gagaku are vital - the costumes, the instruments, the staging, everything. The carpet we use is made of silk. I even put my *hichiriki*'s reed in a special green tea when I'm not using it, to strengthen and moisten it. All these details are very important. There are a huge number of artisans involved in the performance."

Coming from the emperor's palace in Tokyo, the musicians of the Imperial Household Agency form the gagaku ensemble against which all others are measured. And there are others - "we have a lot of different ensembles, in Shinto shrines, for example," explains Okubo. "There are gagaku musicians all over Japan."

Such is the imperial musicians' expertise, though, that they were given the title of Important Intangible Cultural Properties in the 1950s - commonly known as national living treasures. "There's always pressure because you feel like you have to represent the highest point of your country's culture," says Okubo. "We have to be confident about it, but we also have to be modest. For us, it's a great honour to participate in this great festival." And it's a rare opportunity for Edinburgh listeners to begin to understand this spellbinding and ancient music.

● **Gagaku: Imperial Court Music and Dance of Japan**, Festival Theatre, tomorrow, 7:30pm. [www.eif.co.uk](http://www.eif.co.uk)



Shinto is more like animism, which is a belief based around spirits. When you say Shinto, no Japanese person can really explain it properly - they'd just say it's what's around us