The trading route eventually known as the silk road was likely traveled prior to 1000 BC. Various actual routes exist, but the uses of interest here connected central Asia to eastern Asia via one of two corridors: the borders of the Taklamakan desert or just north of the Tianshan mountain range. In either case, the routes combine into a single route that paralleled the Yellow river after passing through the Hexi Corridor. Trading routes then branched off in other directions depending on the political stability of the current regimes. The longest reach of regular trade likely ended in Japan during the Nara period around the eighth century.

The Silk Road, an important trading route connecting east Asia with India and the middle east, served as a conduit for commerce and culture. Although not named “Silk Road” until the mid 1800s, the trade route is referenced in both Eastern and Western literature. Cultural flow was bidirectional, but it is likely that string and wind musical instruments primarily moved from West to East. Consideration of instrument construction, acoustics, accessible music scales, and playing styles provides a wealth of research opportunities that bridge Asian Studies and the sciences.

The Evolution of Musical Instruments in Time and Space from Kashgar to Kyoto

Abstract

String Instruments

There are three main classes of instruments to consider: the plucked/struck strings with fingerboard, the plucked/struck strings without finger board, and the bowed strings. All except the dulcimer-type instruments are generally agreed to have originated in the west. There is some discussions as to the origin of the dulcimer instruments, as evidence exists that others might have come into existence independently in Western and Eastern spheres of influence. The Chinese Gu qin, as well as the Vietnamese Đàn Biểu are interesting in that they are one of the few plucked/struck strings that take advantage of forced harmonics to play different notes. In any case,

A comparison of stringed instruments, even among one class, is useful; two candidates of study are the Japanese Shamisen and the Japanese Bujö, both having arrived from China (probably via Korea) and a common distant ancestor, one evolving independently in Western and Eastern spheres of influence. The Chinese Gu qin, as well as the Vietnamese Đàn Biểu are interesting in that they are one of the few plucked/struck strings that take advantage of forced harmonics to play different notes. In any case,

A very short history of music along the silk road

It is unlikely that very many individuals traveled the length of the route, though there are celebrated individuals in both eastern and western culture that probably did. Most trade was probably local, with caravans that would connect major points some one to two month ride in each direction. As such, dissemination of novel goods was likely slow. Trade would necessarily increase or decrease along the route depending on the state of local governments. That, combined with cultural pressures, would result in an uneven flow of music styles and instruments along the road. In some countries all previous music would be tossed out during a regime change, while in others the music could find safe haven in folk songs or private court functions. It is not surprising, then, that current musical instruments in the region reflect a Darwinian evolutionary distribution, with some occupying odd cultural niches, while others have risen to widespread prominence.

Access to the musical instruments is often via museum pieces, though there are old stores available in various parts of Asia with long traditions of apprenticed craftsmen.

Wind Instruments

With the exception of the Tibetan horn, vibrating lip brass instruments are not an important part of silk road music. There are three major wind instrument families: the double reeds; the single reeds, and the flutes. All three are present in the traditional Japanese Shakuhachi. Forming an interesting example of the instrument types, as well as a quasi-frozen thousand year old representation.

The Ryūtēki, Hichiriki, and Sho probably arrived during the Nara Period, and apparently have evolved little in the past 1300 years, though it is likely the playing styles have become harsher and less melodic. Gagaku performers who visit central China have indicated that there is but a vague cultural memory of the Ryūtēki.

A close relative of the Hichiriki is the Chinese Dizì, though the Dizì has an extra tone hole that is covered with a thin membrane to provide an extra “buzz” to the sound. A number of other horizontal flutes have spread throughout the region, including the Chinese Suona, which is a cross between a flute like instrument and a single reed clarinet like instrument.

A close relative of the Hichiriki is the Chinese Gōngzi, except that the hichiriki maintained status as a court instrument, while the gōngzi evolved into a folk instrument after the Tang dynasty. The Chinese Shǔo, often made with a brass or copper bell, is a relative, and not really a brass instrument.

References