Tonari no Piano: On Music, Cross-Cultural Understanding, and All That Jazz

Jillian Marshall, Ph.D
Hyogo, 2009–2011

Abstract

My article reflects on the friendship I shared with my neighbor in a rural fishing village during my time with the JET Program and on music’s power to create lasting cross-cultural understanding. In those two years, I learned that life abroad begets an inevitable negotiation once the pink clouds of exhilarating novelty fade away: we must acknowledge cultural differences, lest we fail to truly overcome them. Had it not been for my neighbor—a 66-year-old piano teacher who invited me to play at her house every week—this challenge might have proved too overwhelming. When she later offered unsolicited support in a time of personal distress, my eyes were forever opened to the subtleties of Japanese culture and how music facilitated this bond. Ultimately, this article’s testimony of our unlikely liaison supports my broader mission to illustrate music’s ability to create cross-cultural understanding through its transcendent language of emotion, corporeality, and imagination. After all, if music can bridge gaps between two societies as diametrically opposed as Japan and the U.S., its soft power and diplomatic possibilities are endless.
Whenever I move, one of the first things I take care of is finding a place where I can play piano. I grew up playing an upright with chipped ivory keys as old as my great-grandparents; later, my college dorm had a colorfully tinny upright. And wherever I’ve lived since, pianos seem to naturally appear—which I appreciate, because a piano is as necessary as walls for me to feel at home.

Indeed, a piano materialized on my first night in the fishing village called Fukura in Awaji Island, Japan, where I moved after college graduation to embark on a two-year journey as an ALT with the JET Program. After getting dropped off at my new apartment—complete with shoji screens and tatami floors—I set down my suitcases, opened the windows, and wondered: OK... where will I play piano here?

Just then, I heard the pastel melodies of Debussy’s *Claire de Lune*, played on piano, floating on the wind. I ran outside to listen more clearly; it seemed to be coming from next door. I knocked, and moments later, a beautiful, dignified older woman appeared. She looked at me with twinkling eyes and a small smile; I smiled back, but with toothy American flair.

“Um, konnichiwa!” I stammered in broken Japanese. “Watashi wa Jiru desu. Amerika-jin desu.”¹ The woman’s smile turned into a giggle, which she hid with a delicately placed hand. Peeking inside, I saw a beautiful black baby grand in the middle of the room, which was Western-style and lined with bookshelves filled with sheet music of European composers. Naturally, the piano was a Yamaha.

“Konbanwa, Jiru-san,” replied the woman. Her voice was fluttery and sweet.

“Um, I like piano. It is play! It is music. Here, I play? Um... it is thank you!”

The woman bowed, introduced herself as Noguchi, and explained that she teaches piano—and laughed at last.

We made an arrangement: On Thursdays at 7:00 p.m., I’d enter the door left unlocked for me and play on that beautiful Yamaha in her study. After a few weeks, Noguchi Sensei began coming into the study with *mochi* and tea around 8:00 p.m., at which point we’d chat. She’d ask what I was working on, and if I wasn’t too embarrassed, I’d play for her. In those days, I was working on piece by Fats Waller called *Viper’s Drag*, which was composed in the stride style: a development after ragtime where the left hand literally strides across the lower octaves. The overall effect of stride piano is exciting and upbeat, and it rhythmically set the stage for the later jazz style of bebop. When she me

---

¹ “I am Jill. I am an American.”
heard play it for the first time, she cocked her head and smiled wryly, offering only the following input.

“Genki na ongaku desu ne . . . ”²

In the field of ethnomusicology, it’s understood that music functions as a cultural soundtrack and expresses social values as much as aesthetic sensibility. For example, Robert Fink theorizes that the prevalence of repetitive music in postwar America, from Philip Glass’s arpeggiated *Koyaanisqatsi* score to the extended mix of Donna Summer’s *Love to Love You Baby*, reflects American advertising culture: a machine-like force of inundated, repeated messages that more is more.³ Stark though Fink’s case study may be, the idea that aesthetics reflect and even embody social norms allows us to consider music in Japan more thoughtfully. Unlike the United States, Japan boasts a vibrant traditional music lifeworld alongside a hyperkinetic pop culture, while underground DJs in the major cities experiment with new sounds (and ideas). Meanwhile, jazz kissaten listening cafes feature vinyl collections that would make the most blue-blooded Brooklyn hipster weep tears of envy, conductor Seiji Ozawa led the Boston Symphony Orchestra for nearly thirty years—and Noguchi Sensei teaches children Mozart sonatas in rural Awaji Island.

What exactly constitutes “Japanese” music, then, is less a question of aesthetic and rather one of society—and history. The scores of Western music in Noguchi Sensei’s study revealed not just her cosmopolitan taste but Japan’s ongoing Westernization project as well, beginning with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. In the nascent days of the Japanese Empire, Western music was eagerly adopted into Japanese society through education, public performance, and radio, in many ways supplanting indigenous musical sensibilities.⁴ Japan’s relationship with jazz began in earnest, though, with the American Occupation. As E. Taylor Atkins writes in *Blue Nippon*, Japanese musicians learned and played jazz standards on American military bases for GI audiences to make ends meet in those shaky years after 1945. Interestingly, these musicians both replicated the counter-cultural roots of jazz in America and the broader idea of the American Dream: the romantic notion that opportunities arise for those who recognize them.⁵ And while this music remains a beloved staple in Japan’s

---

² “Wow, such spirited music…”


⁴ For a detailed history on Japan’s relationship to Western music, from the Meiji Period to present times, Bonnie Wade’s *Composing Japanese Musical Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) is a fantastic resource.

contemporary music scape, Western music, for better or worse, represents the soundtrack of victory—and loss.

Noguchi Sensei was born in Shanghai, due to wartime circumstances, before the unconditional surrender of 1945. She didn’t tell me much about her early years in our conversations, which could have been for any number of reasons that I never pried into out of respect for her privacy. Looking back, I wonder what it was like for her—raised in rural Japan after the war ended—to have an American neighbor play jazz piano in her home. While jazz may have had personal meaning on-base and in major cities where it has long been performed live, Noguchi Sensei perhaps heard jazz through a complicated post-war ambivalence. As John Dower explains in *Embracing Defeat*, the socio-cultural environment in immediate postwar Japan “reflected a multitude of sentiments apart from emperor-centered grief: anguish, regret, bereavement, anger at having been deceived, sudden emptiness and loss of purpose—or the simple joy at the unexpected surcease of misery and death. . . [as though] a great burden had been lifted.” While there is no way of knowing for sure, the subdued artistry of European classical music—long inculcated in Japan’s socio-cultural consciousness by 1945—was likely less politically complicated for Noguchi Sensei than jazz, particularly the vaudeville jubilance of *Viper’s Drag*—a piece steeped in an aesthetic of “Americanness,” which is itself stereotyped in Japan as interesting enough but lacking in depth.

Indeed, by the winter of my first year in Fukura, I felt that this was how I was seen in my community. On the surface, I was a surrounded by people curious about me, but I felt miserably lonely. Experiences like finding myself left alone in the staff room during meetings at school, or when a coworker told a student to not call me sensei because I “wasn’t really a teacher,” rendered me feeling like a hopeless outsider. A child once followed me around the supermarket screaming “GAIJIN! GAIJIN!!!!” at the top of his lungs, and his mother laughed when I hid in the aisle, humiliated by the scene he was causing. When I relayed the story to a Japanese friend, her response only underscored the frustrations I felt at that point in my Japanese life:

“Well, you are a gaijin.”

Yet, while leaving my apartment some mornings was a Herculean effort, I still went next door to play piano on Thursdays.

One evening in February, I sat down at the keys, but instead of feeling energized or excited about playing, I was utterly listless and began to cry. With my attempts to weep unnoticed having

---


7 Slang for “foreigner”; literally, “outside person”
failed, Noguchi Sensei appeared in the study after a few minutes. She asked me what was wrong with warm, nearly grandmotherly concern.

Though my Japanese had improved by then, I couldn’t articulate the complexities of my emotions. It wasn’t that I hated Japan and wanted to go home; in fact, it was quite the opposite. I was sure of my inexplicable affection for Japan since the first time I set foot there on a one-night layover while on my way back to the States following a summer of study in Beijing. Living in Fukura only deepened that love. I adored concrete aspects of everyday life, like my apartment, the vistas along the remote southeastern coast of the island, my students, the cuisine, and the language; I also loved the ephemera, like the sound of waves against tsunami breakers, the way the old shopkeeper at the vegetable market shouted *Irasshai!*,⁸ the hiss of late summer cicadas, and how Japanese clouds look like watercolor wisps in the sky. Instead, my sadness that winter—exacerbated by humiliating episodes of exclusion—was due to what felt like unrequited love: I loved Japan, but there, I was just another anonymous *gaijin*, unseen for who I am *inside*.

The irony is that I couldn’t explain this to Noguchi Sensei, even if I had the words. How could I tell this person, who was actively showing genuine care in that very moment, that I felt invisible—outcast? By this time, Noguchi Sensei was also regularly stopping by my apartment to drop off home-cooked meals and say hello. So I accepted her kindness into my heart, stopped crying, and put my hands on the keys at last.

The next evening, I drove home in my clownishly petite Daihatsu Mira and checked my mailbox. There, I found a note written on a piece of beautiful washi paper with pressed flowers in the fibers. It was from Noguchi Sensei. It said:

*Kyou mo ganbarimashitaka?*

“Did you try your best again today?”

Simple though it was, this gesture marked a turning point in my understanding of Japan. Noguchi Sensei had never lived abroad in her adult life and couldn’t have related to the specificities of my experience. Nevertheless, her note acknowledged what I was feeling in a way that made me feel understood, without excessive emotional display. It also halted the narrative of exclusion playing on loop in my head. After all, if Noguchi Sensei saw me as a fellow human being, perhaps others in my community did as well.

Afterward, I found the strength to go about my days with a more open mind. There were painful moments of feeling Othered yet to come, but I learned to not take these instances so personally. Most importantly, Noguchi Sensei’s unassuming support allowed me to embrace the more

---

⁸ “Welcome!” Or, more accurately, “Come on in!”
subtle ways of communicating and relating in Japanese society that have ultimately made me a more empathetic person.

Why is it that Noguchi Sensei and I were able to forge such a meaningful connection—particularly in the days when my Japanese was all but existent? The answer is as simple and profound as her note: music. Regardless of our radically different lives, we were equalized by our love of the eighty-eight Black and Whites and the portals they can open.

Playing *Viper’s Drag* on Noguchi Sensei’s Yamaha was, in many ways, a metaphor for our relationship and for my relationship with Japan as a whole. On the surface, the piece is simple, cheerful, and direct: all typical American stereotypes in Japan, as I learned first-hand. But behind every melody is a player with a wide range of emotions—and the best players know that, to communicate joy, they must also know the depths of sadness. And while the times that sadness comes up vary from culture to culture, emotions are the great human universals.

There was an evening toward the end of my time with the JET Program, before I returned to the States to undertake a PhD (naturally, in the music of Japan), when, for a change, I played Debussy for Noguchi Sensei: *Claire de Lune*, in fact. And as she listened with pensiveness I hadn’t sensed when I played *Viper’s Drag*, that’s when I knew she understood the depth lurking behind even the most cheerful Americana: music, culture, people—and all that jazz.
About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.

About the JETs on Japan Forum

Jillian Marshall, PhD, is a writer, educator, and musician. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 2009 with a degree in East Asian Studies, she spent two years with the JET Program as an ALT in Awaji Island. The experience changed her life, opening her mind (and ears) to the music of Japan. Jillian went on to earn a doctorate in the musicology of Japan at Cornell University in 2018; her research on Japanese traditional, popular, and underground music has been supported by the Fulbright Foundation, MTV, and the U.S. Department of State. Jillian currently lives in New York City, where she writes and teaches the language and history of both Japan and China as well as music. Her first book, tentatively titled Listening In/To Japan: Musical Lessons Across the Pacific, explores music, community, and society in contemporary Japan. It is set to come out in 2022 with Three Rooms Press.