

Plucking a Liberal Sound: Japanese Women's Resignification of Finnish Kantele in a Hobbyist Club

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Abstract: *In this chapter, I examine the new meaning of an old instrument in a foreign context. Kantele is the national instrument of Finland, and over the past decades it has established itself, among the very few Nordic instruments, a significant presence in Japan. Most of its enthusiasts are women (approx. 150–200) living in urban areas. This paper explores the Japanese female participation in the transcultural music scene, asking how the new meanings were inscribed to kantele in the new environment. The context chosen for the ethnographic study is the Sapporo Kantele Club, one representative hobbyist group established in the 1990s and led by the musician Hiroko Ara, who adopted folk music, improvisation in particular, as the inspiration for teaching. I argue that the Japanese women's passion for the kantele is related to its qualities of liberty, inclusiveness and freedom, with which they refresh themselves from the rigidity of Western music and the Japanese social norm with imagination, individuality, and creativity they experience in the music practice.*

Keywords: *Finnish kantele, Japanese women, meanings, liberty, Sapporo Kantele Club.*

Several scholars such as Lebra (1985) and Iwao (1993) have called into question the Western feminist lens on Japanese women as victims of oppression. The position of women in Japanese society is a contested issue (Ogasawara 1998). As Hsia and Scanzoni (1996: 309–310) have noted, “Japanese women are far more active in private as well as in social spheres than we tend to believe. Therefore, the portrayal of Japanese women as helpless, submissive, is not without questions”. My intention in this chapter is, rather than taking a side to define women's role in the complexity, to recognize and keep the dynamics of these different discourses in mind when examining the meaning of Japanese adoption of Finnish kantele. Kantele is a Finnish folk instrument that has established a visible presence in Tokyo, Sapporo, and Western Japan. Approximately 150–200 enthusiasts – primarily women who come from middle-class families with heterogeneous backgrounds – form a small music community and use kantele as a new aspect to approach Finnish culture. About five seniors have progressed from hobbyist players to a professional status. They provide lessons to hobbyists and constantly perform on kantele on different occasions. Why is kantele loved in Japan, and why do some practitioners successfully build

a profession with kantele? What is the power and the meaning of kantele in the lives of Japanese women? To what extent does the kantele impact women's life?

While exploring possible answers to Japanese women's adoption of this less-known instrument from a Nordic country, in this chapter, I focus on the role and work of Hiroko Ara, as both professional kantele performer and teacher, to assess the enthusiasm of the women members in her group. By applying Small's (1998) concept of "musicking", I examine women's reflection and their acts reconstructing a new aesthetic, as an alternative to supplement the weakness perceived in music teaching in Japan. The kantele, with its foreignness, provides a novel experience to Japanese practitioners. Overall, I argue that it has been interpreted as an instrument of freedom, because of a different quality that practitioners find positive for their society. This quality of foreignness pertains to why and how the kantele established its niche in Japan, where many foreign music traditions have already found their audiences (Atkins 2001; Condry 2001, 2006; Cornyetz 1994; Fares 2015; Furmanovsky 2008; Hosokawa 1999a, 1999b; Kurokawa 2004; Manabe 2006; Mitsui 1993; Reyes-Ruiz 2005; Savigliano 1992). Data used in this chapter were collected between 2016 and 2018 in the Sapporo Kantele Club, where I conducted participant observation and interviews with the leader (Hiroko Ara) and club members, and identified myself as a kantele performer-researcher. Furthermore, I consulted Internet information and had email correspondence with research participants in 2022 to confirm some details.

The Kantele in Japan

Before investigating women's passion for Finnish kantele, I provide an overview of lifestyle changes in the lives of women, resulting from social transformation after World War II. After the end of World War II, Japan gained economic success that led to changes of Japanese notions on recreation, due to increased household wealth (Brannen 1992: 217; Linhart 1998: 16). It also influenced the lifestyles of women, transitioning from extended family to nuclear family (Mori 1996: 119; Ueno 1987: 79–80). Women's pursuit of leisure freedom expanded in 1960s consumerism and the feminist movement in the 1970s (Macnaughtan 2006: 32). The "ethnic boom" in the 1980s saw the increasing availability of commodities from foreign culture, especially items from Southeast Asians, Koreans, and urban African Americans (Cornyetz 1994: 131). Affluent people in Japan invested their free time in hobbies related to their cultural life; for example, the piano gained many practitioners in the 1950s and early 1960s with its middle-class image (Yoshihara 2008: 34, 141).

Kantele is a chordophone regarded as the most representative folk instrument in Finland, resulting from the nineteenth century Finnish nationalists' efforts to make kantele the Finland "national instrument", in order to distinguish Finland from their Swedish and Russian counterparts, that have controlled this country until 1917. Kantele can be classified by the number of strings (small kantele, middle-size, and big-size) and methods (carved or box) (Rahkonen 1989: 79–159). In 1983, it was included as one of the main instruments in the Department of Folk Music at Sibelius Academy (Hill 2009a), Finland's prestigious music university, and since then the music became more eclectic and diverse due to musicians' new approach to modernization, in accordance with contemporary

tastes (Austerlitz 2000: 205; Hill 2009a: 86; Ramnarine 2003: xi). These new attitudes facilitated, as observed, not only the kantele's ongoing popularity in Finland, but also its transnational move beyond Finnish borders. Nowadays, the kantele enjoys increasing attention from international audiences (Träskelin 2015; Virta 2020).

Following the intensified relationships between Finland and Japan in the post-war era and the "Finland boom" in the 2000s (Ipatti 2019), Japan became the country in East Asia, where visible enthusiasm for kantele resulted from the publics' "exceptionally positive" image of Finland (Ipatti 2019: 103). In 2008, the Japan Kantele Friendship Association (Nihon kantele tomo no kai) was established, which was the first (and so far the only) overseas branch of the Finnish Kantele Association (Kanteleliitto). An analogy with other imported genres that Japanese enthusiasts have adopted, such as gospel music, helps understand kantele's success in Japan, for foreign cultures seem to "...release [Japanese practitioners] from... a feeling of restrictedness" (Waseda 2013: 193). I shall examine this issue in this chapter. Over the past years when this study was launched, I was constantly asked (by Finns in most cases) to what extent koto, the traditional Japanese zither with synthetic strings, plays a role in kantele's success in Japan. Based on a general observation, only a few practitioners whom I have met in the course of fieldwork have related their attention to kantele to koto, even though the two instruments share an ontological similarity. Louder voices heard in the field revealed that the two stringed instruments differ from each other in terms of images. They noted that the koto has a connotation of formality, which ultimately makes it fall out of their definitions of a hobby – they assumed it would take years for one to master the advanced skills.

Hiroko Ara, the leader of Sapporo Kantele Club, is one of the several senior players who built a professional career on the kantele in Japan.¹ She works closely with enthusiasts who are attracted to her "style", inspired by Finnish folk music. These women usually self-identify as kantele players of "folk-style" when they meet other peers from different groups, to differentiate themselves from others. Ara's musical sensibility was, rather than trained in formal conservatories, nurtured at Hokkaido University, where she studied Economy between 1982 and 1986. She was exposed to various music genres such as jazz, folk, and world music and developed her musical talent as a drummer and keyboardist in a popular music band. Her encounter with Finnish culture took place in early 1990 when she worked as a secretary in the Hokkaido-Finland Association (HFS) office. In 1991, she assisted the HFS's first kantele promotional plan in which Finnish kantele player Minna Raskinen was invited to host concerts and workshops in Japan. Ara was impressed by the diversity of musical genres and styles Raskinen played on kanteles.

It is my impression, that by way of having a strong interest in Irish songs, Indian music, and Japanese melodies and grafting the essence of such songs into her compositions, and composing fantasy-laden suites inspired by poetry, she [Minna Raskinen] had a strong focus on creating a very unique world as a kantele player. Taking as venue the stony chapel of Sapporo's Luther Church [the venue where Raskinen performed],

1 According to most members of the community, professional kantele players are Masako Hazata and Miho Kuwajima in Tokyo, Hiroko Ara and Mitsuko Sato in Sapporo, and Tomoko Onishi in Kobe. These professionals' approach to kantele music is stylistically different from each other.

songs performed that night in the concert, *Tonakai no komoriuta* (Reindeer's lullaby), *Kareria kyōkai no kane* (The Bells of Karelia church), *Haha ni sumire wo* (Violet's for my mother), as well as *Wakare no uta* (Farewell Song) and *Osaka • kokusai* (Osaka – international) composed by Miss Minna, were imprinted in my ear for the longest time. (Hiroko Ara. Blog. 18 October 2005. Accessed 8 December 2020).

Ara continued playing kantele in meetings spontaneously organized by Hokkaido Finland Society members after 1991. In these gatherings, she sometimes helped prepare the music for group practice due to the absence of materials and kantele instructors. For example, “the classic” *A Guide to Five-String Kantele Playing* was used for inspiration. She acknowledged that it was challenging to understand the spirit of old kantele tunes only from the notes without listening. In this situation, she sometimes composed or arranged pieces (not only Finnish) for a five-string kantele ensemble enthusiasts formed at that time. In 1994, Ara became one of the trainees when the Hokkaido-Finland Society sent prospective players to Finland for developing skills to teach kantele when back in Hokkaido, where the number of enthusiasts increased. Funded by HFS and the Hokkaido government, the trip took place in Helsinki and Kaustinen, the two places known for kantele's regional tradition and contemporary development (Ramnarine 2003: xv). The one-month project widened Ara's views on the scope of Finnish folk music and kantele music. Besides playing styles, she was inspired by the importance of improvisation and the methods of learning music by ear. Both are at the core of Finnish folk music pedagogy.

When she returned to Japan, Hiroko Ara introduced these aspects to Japanese audiences through camps² and a broadcast³. In the following section, I examine her live concert in a local café and her teaching at Sapporo Kantele Club in Sapporo to understand how she built leadership as a kantele performer and instructor in the niche of Finnish/Nordic music within the world music community.

The Female Musician Enriching Japanese Imagination with “Borderless” Kantele Music

Like elsewhere in the world, playing live concerts is one of the few ways an independent musician can diversify her/his income.⁴ On the afternoon of the 27th of May 2018, I had a chance to observe how Hiroko Ara introduced kantele for Japanese audiences. Café Hiragi is a small shop in Sapporo, with a wooden structure and nostalgic furnishings. The

2 Hiroko Ara invited several kantele musicians from Finland and Norway between 2006 and 2012 to teach kantele in Hokkaido. The three events are called “camps” (Hiroko Ara. Blog. Accessed 24 March 2022).

3 She has been promoting kantele music and other genres of Nordic music on a local radio program, “Kantele no Mori” (literally “Kantele Forest”) on a Sapporo broadcast station since 2012. (Hiroko Ara. Blog. 16 July 2012. Accessed 5 January 2022).

4 As the Japanese kantele community is small, it is common for professional kantele players to collaborate with different individuals outside of the Japanese cultural niche of Finnish culture to broaden their activities. The kantele are found to be used in, for example, story reading, Nordic culture fairs, and cultural/commercial exhibitions.

owner is a bluegrass singer, who has been organizing special events like live music concerts to diversify her customers. The clientele I encountered was entirely composed of wealthy Japanese.⁵ White's (2012: 13) research on Japanese cafés that play "the locus of community, of continuity in relationships and the creation of new ones" supported my observation on Hiiragi. From my perspective, Hiiragi manages to carve out a space for foreignness in the center of a society where the musical hall remains the main place for listening to music. The small café's hospitality is manifested on the wall bulletin board, which was full of flyers announcing various upcoming music performances. As heard in the event, these events win the hearts of music lovers, especially those who are tired of the "formal" music events taking place in a music hall and attempt to search for less-mainstream music in a relaxing space such as a café with people they regard as having the "same taste".

Unlike relatively straightforward representing kantele as a national instrument by performing pieces such as *Finlandia*, as addressed by other professional kantele players in Japan, Hiroko Ara's kantele music was more sophisticated and boundless. Besides music pieces, improvisation is the practice that differentiates Hiroko Ara's "style" from others, which was performed on different sizes of kanteles in the live concert. The concert program of Hiroko Ara shows careful navigation of a middle ground, for the program featured a mix of the explicit references to Finnish folk tunes to her own compositions that include foreign and Japanese music (Figure 1). I loosely categorized them into four groups for discussion: 1) music from Nordic countries, 2) Japanese music of different genres, including adaptations of pop, children's songs, and animation songs, 3) world music such as jazz and Irish music, and 4) original compositions. The live concert demonstrated Hiroko Ara's attempts to draw inspirations from all directions from different cultures, and the four typologies of music manifested that her perception of the kantele as a cultural crossroad, rather than a representation of a defined tradition of only Finnish culture. She performed a Finnish piece, a traditional tune from Sweden as the next, and followed by the improvisation on a five-string kantele and a Japanese animation song. All music is instrumental, with a softness in dynamic level and rich in texture without obvious tension or dissonance, which excellently fit the setting where clients pay for relaxation.

The inclusion of a considerable non-Nordic repertoire suggests Ara's navigation to make kantele relevant for local audiences coming from different backgrounds, including both men and women. Ara was particularly aware of the presence of two guests from afar: they took flight from Tokyo to Sapporo for the live concert. As told by a kantele peer who was also in the event, the two men became Hiroko Ara's kantele music fans after watching the animation *Girls und Panzer* (literally "Girls and Tanks" or GuP).⁶ "Senshaō Kkōshinkyoku" (*Panzer Vor*), the theme song of GuP, was played on the kantele concert,

5 A seat for Ara's live concert costs 2500 yen (appr. 17.5 euros), with a drink included.

6 *Girls und Panzer* (literally "Girls and Tanks" or GuP) is a Japanese animation that tells a story about tank competitions between girls' high schools. It was initially aired as a TV series in Japan between 2012 and 2013 and based on which an animated film was released in cinemas in 2015. The kantele was adopted in GuP to represent Finland in a high school, and it added another dimension to kantele fans in Japan that no one could have ever anticipated. In the anime, Hiroko Ara uses two eleven-string kantele to play the Finnish folk song *Säkkijärven Polkka* (*Säkkijärvi's Polkka*), which became a well-known kantele "piece" in Japan.

with some adjustments in terms of pace and style. The original music in the animation was orchestra music, dominated by solid and steady percussive beats of drums, cymbals, and brass instruments. Hiroko Ara's adaptation was different from the rhythmic style and characterized by more rubato and softer tone, which added flavor to a cafe's air and created an aura of meditation. The new adaptation resonates with Colson's (2014: 2) words, "artists follow a creative process that takes exogenous sounds and localizes them by making alternations and adjustments that 'personalize' pieces and make them sound more familiar".

In the small cafe with limited space, a microphone was not used because it was acoustically satisfying. Ara's free plucking on the kantele filled the air with an intriguing atmosphere and enriched Japanese experiences of listening to music combining elements from different geographical locations. Audiences were left with a good deal of autonomy for imagination, feeling, and relaxation, which differs from precisely constructed music pieces by great composers or from that of some music that tells listeners what to think with strong "concepts". This program that features a coexistence of "old" and "new", the "foreign" and "Japanese", the "pieces" and "original works", is, of course, not a new invention. However, it shows her attempt to craft a new aesthetic and expressivity discernible from previous experiences. All music was carefully tailored to local audiences' expectations, and they eventually were taken on a musical journey to Finnish, Nordic, Japanese, and other cultures of the past and present. After the live concert ended, a few members of the audience approached Ara, asking for her signature on albums they bought on site and wished to know more about her activities. What they experienced was more than just exotic sounds; it was the result mediated by the interaction between performers and people in the specific space and time, as noted by Small (1998: 184), who attributes overall effects in performance to the wholeness of participants, sound, and the physical space. Told by a regular client who enjoyed the mind's flow with Hiroko Ara's music, the live concert in small Hiragi creates an intimacy, open to interpretation, feelings, and human relationships.

My observation in this section has shown how Hiroko Ara grounds herself as a foreign practitioner who crafts a new aesthetic and expressive (sub)culture for Japanese audiences. The kantele offers an opportunity to celebrate individuality and creativity through music, without the pressure of an explicitly musical "tradition". In the next section, I continue to examine why and how kantele is perceived and adopted as a "liberal" instrument in Sapporo Kantele Club by women practitioners.

Figure 1: Hiroko Ara's live concert program in Hiiragi.

Hiroko Ara's Solo Concert café Hiiragi 2018.05.27 13:00-15:00 Program	⑩ Improvisation and A runo-song tune	Finnish folk music
	⑪ Maaherran Polska (Governor's Polska)	Finnish folk music
*Concert kantele		
Martti Pokela (Finnish composed kantele music) Roger Tallroth (Swedish band: Väsen)	⑫ ノスタルジックなワルツ (Valse Nostaligique)	Hiroko Ara (original piece)
	⑬ ナイト・フラワー (Night Flower)	Hiroko Ara (original piece)
Hiroko Taniyama (animation song)	⑭ Wedding March from Sweden (スウェーデンの結婚行進曲)	Swedish folk music
Hiroko Ara (original piece)	⑮ ポホヤンマー地方に伝わる古い結婚行進曲 (Vanha Häämarssi Pohjanmaalta; Old Wedding March from Ostrobothnia)	Finnish folk music
*Eleven-string kantele		
Timo Väinänen (Finnish folk music)	⑯ Improvisation	-
*Concert kantele		
Shiro Hamaguchi (animation song)	⑰ 日蔭の庭 (Hikage no Niwa; Shade Garden)	Hiroko Ara (original piece)
Hiroko Ara (original piece)	⑱ Sara's Touch	Mike Maineri (jazz)
	⑲ この道 (Kono Michi; This Road)	Kosaku Yamada (Japanese Children's song)
*Concert kantele		
Zabadak (Japanese popular music)	⑳ イエブアの行進曲 (Jepuan Marssi; March from Jepua)	Finnish folk music
*Five-string kantele		
	㉑ Blind Mary and Elenor Plunkett	T. O'Carolan (Irish folk music)

Improvisation as a Teaching Alternative Enabling Different Voices to be Heard in Japanese Re-contextualization

Hiroko Ara has been promoting kantele and the Finnish folk music in the Sapporo Kantele Club (SKC), a musical gathering that was established in May 1991, supported by the Hokkaido-Finland Society.⁷ The major members in SKC, primarily the residents of Sapporo or from adjacent cities, come from multiple backgrounds such as office ladies, housewives, students, and others. Small and middle-size kantele are the two types used, for their simplicity is rather easy to manage and thus allows a player to create a pleasant sound in a shorter time.

In the sessions I participated in spring 2018, the repertoire varied slightly in every class. The four pieces, 'Eevan ja Aatamin Valssi' ('The Waltz of Adam and Eve'), 'Toukokuu' ('May'), 'Tilannevalssi' ('Situation Waltz') and 'Pehmeä Jig', have been practiced. They were either Hiroko Ara's arrangements or those taught by visiting Finnish musicians. While notations were given at the end of a class as supplements, learning music by ear was prioritized. Told by a member, Hiroko Ara constantly emphasizes "make your version/voice" in the club, which made her and other members feel positive because, their voices were acknowledged. For example, one SKC member introduced the kantele at a video game fan gathering in Tokyo in 2016 by playing the well-known video game *Final Fantasy VII*, arranged by herself. Another member, Kazumi Yokotani, drew on an old Japanese poem *Iroha ni Hoheto* from her childhood as the lyrics for a rhythmic Finnish polka, *Maaherran*. The poem *Iroha ni Hoheto* has Buddhist connotations, which Yokotani learned from her grandmother, who read it to her when she was small. Yokotani performed this combination on the fifteen-string kantele in *Virtual Kaustinen 2021*, the famous summer festival in Finland, streamed during the pandemic period (Email, 5 January 2022). These aforementioned cases reveal the ambivalence of kantele performances in Japan, where the kantele was initially adopted because of its foreignness, but then quickly made familiar by women who re-signify it through their life experiences and their imagination.

I have mentioned in the previous section that improvisation is Hiroko Ara's signature style. Improvisation is adopted, besides performances, in her teaching as pedagogy which ultimately became a group identity. Improvisation is an old musical practice, handed down from ancient times and particularly associated with Karelia, the borderland of Finland and Russia, that characterized rhythmic repetition without muting (silencing) as the aesthetics (Kastinen n.d. "Karelian Kantele Tradition – About kantele Karelian players" par 5). While it has its distinction in the Karelian area, Hiroko Ara adopted it as group practice because of the quality opposite to notation. In a session I observed in 2018, she taught the basic plucking techniques after tuning was ready and told the players who held five-string kantele to pluck the strings of re, sol, and la with specific fingers, and the fifteen-string players the chords. "Please imagine that winter has just passed and play what you feel most comfortable with", said Ara and encouraged students to "make your voices". She shuttled back and forth in the practice room to demonstrate a number of short rhythmic patterns that consisted of the basic three

7 Hokkaido-Finland Society is a friendship organization founded in the 1970s that promotes Finnish culture in Hokkaido.

notes. Plucking strings without any visual reference (notation) seemed neither easy nor comfortable for every member, especially those newcomers who appeared to be nervous when they took their turns. The reason was presumably because of the fear of making “mistakes” – unexpected sounds that stood out in the group. For them, improvisation was completely novel, since they did not experience it much in school, where notations dominate the primary way of making music. The music teaching in Japanese schools has been historically influenced by Western notation, harmony, and theory that were introduced to Japan in the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), when those in power pursued Western models for modernization and industrialization (Herd 2016: 363). Therefore, improvisation that blurred boundaries of “melody” and “accompaniment” (Rahkonen 1989: 170–1) created a refreshing experience in which practitioners retrieve musical joy in the participatory activity (Small 1998: 8). Gradually, the melody became richer, after the development by several senior members, who joined in later. The session ended with a peaceful silence when the last vibration faded.

Improvisation seems to enliven a club atmosphere, because it provides a different approach to create music that differs from demanding students' mechanical representation of musical sheets. Most importantly, the practice raises individuals' awareness of their emotions, which seem to be lost at the expense of reading sheets. Naemi Ukumura, an office lady in her twenties, who had just joined the Club for some months playing the five-string kantele, upheld that improvisation is conducive to perceiving one's emotion.

I want to improve the techniques of improvisation. The techniques include the fingering skill and the ability to feel my emotions. (Naemi Ukumura, interview, Sapporo, 29 May 2018).

For club members, Hiroko Ara's approach shaped the mood of the club and what being a practitioner of kantele signifies to them. In fact, Hiroko Ara has never asserted that her adoption of improvisation was meant to deny the classical music system. However, as a methodology, improvisation seems to “improve” the quality of musical learning experiences. In autumn 2016, I conducted a group interview among several hobbyist players who had a long history in the SKC. Their narrative showed that the membership was not necessarily related to the immediate information about Finland, nor the act of creating something new, and even less that of achieving musical perfection, but the atmosphere in SKC they elaborated with “emotional warmth”, “friendship”, and “peer support”. They attributed their long membership to the musical joy and senses of togetherness - the meaning of music is inscribed by social relationships and experiences (Small 1998: 13; Turino 2008).

I am now immensely enjoying improvisation in Hiroko's club because I enjoyed this style. Hiroko-san says [that] there are no “wrong notes” when we improvise... I enjoyed the feeling in the group. It would be lonely if I left this group. When playing the kantele, I need friends. (Anonymous, group interview, Sapporo, 24 October 2016).

Clearly, the reason why improvisation is appealing is the absence of correctness as the notion in musical practice. The free plucking in improvisation is a process of imagination and creativity (Väljaots 2021). The joy in SKC was aptly crystallized in a comment by a member, who related her feeling of improvisation to the acceptance and tolerance. While

the interviewee did not mention classical music, her reply has inferred the different ideas that improvisation holds, which differs from “accuracy” demanded on a practitioner’s one-way representation of written notes.

It is a very friendly group with good friendship. I always made mistakes while playing, but Hiroko never scolded us. She instead encouraged us to enjoy playing. Hiroko told us that every note harmonizes with each other, making us comfortable to play “our voice”. That’s one of the reasons we kept playing the kantele. (Anonymous. Group interview. Sapporo, Japan. 24 October 2016).

In Japanese experiences, improvisation inspires a new musical journey that, to some extent, breaks the “hierarchy” – the primary-secondary relationship – that exists in notation. In other words, the practice dissolves boundaries between peers, and the teacher and students, because all voices, regardless of a player’s background and musical competence, are recognized. This way of musicking differs from the feelings in structured music, in which some voices are subordinated to others, considered more “experienced/talented”. A woman pointed out the inclusiveness and openness she experienced in SKC, attributing the pleasant atmosphere to the idea that musical joy outstrips musical perfection.

Because of friendship and Hiroko, I have played the kantele for a long time. I thought Hiroko has a personality of “including everything”; she is very open-minded. Because I don’t practice much and therefore I [my kantele playing] improves very slowly. Nobody [in the club] ever judges, Hiroko never says a strict word, the kantele sound is very comfortable. (Anonymous, group interview, Sapporo, 24 October 2016).

Chie Kōno, a hobbyist player from SKC, believed that improvisation enabled mental recovery. Kōno was a housewife who joined the club in 2008. She felt particularly attached to Finnish folk music because of her exhaustion and the hardship in long-term care of the elderly mother in 2007. The kantele, according to her, became a great companion when she was isolated at home, and improvisation particularly brought about positive effects on her loss.

I had a job before I got married. I had been taking care of my parents for six years. When I started to play the kantele, my mom was very sick. After a few months, she passed away. My father had already passed away three years before my mom. So I suddenly had too much time because I was not working... After taking care of my parents, I was “empty”. I was so empty that I didn’t want to meet friends or go to a concert... The kantele helped me... I was very sick in 2004 and 2007. At that time, I couldn’t manage my life well. My husband reluctantly accepted the situation. Although now I have become healthier... Without the kantele in 2008 and 2009, I couldn’t manage to spend my days. The kantele sound and kantele friends helped me out. (Chie Kōno. Interview. Sapporo, Japan. 18 October 2016).

As Asplund (1983, 83) put it, “[by] using only five strings, players were able to conjure up a constantly changing world of sound. The result was not closed-form pieces of a specific length but music that flowed freely along with ‘infinite variation’”. Improvisation helped Kōno become aware that everybody has innate musical competence after she realized

that she herself was capable of improvising as a kantele novice. The result was surprising and thus she believed that improvisation frees a practitioner because of a different idea of making music.

I have two [contrasting] feelings when I play the kantele. When I play tunes, I have to concentrate and somewhat feel strained; but I feel relaxed when I improvise. It [improvising] is comfortable. Before having the lesson [improvisation] in Finland, I had already started improvising, it came naturally... In the past three or four years, I have always improvised at concerts, and some friends became interested in my improvisation... I don't have to think about anything but [just to] be empty when I play improvisation. My fingers move as they want to. I had thought that only great players could feel relaxed when playing; however, a kantele beginner can feel relaxed when improvising on the kantele, at least in my case. That's why I like it. Having been playing for many years, playing and listening to kantele is most comfortable now. (Chie Kōno, interview, Spporo, 18 October 2016).

Lamenting that she had been constantly excluded from the groups when playing music in Japan, improvisation prompted Kōno's review of Japanese society and particularly the Japanese ways of making music. She found some aspects problematic, due to Japanese over-preparation and their lack of flexibility and ability to listen to others when playing music. For her, improvisation is a journey of re-discovery, and through the practice she feels herself more open to relationships with people from different backgrounds.

The idea of "not deciding in advance, but making music by listening and feeling each other in the group" from Hiroko Ara and the Finnish musicians is my favorite idea. Japanese people tend to make precise plans to clarify everyone's part even when playing music. I had thought that there were no other choices. I did not consider if it was fun or not. After knowing the style of folk music, I can do "improvisation" in my life, not only on kantele. My life changed for the better; I am thankful for the folk [music] style. Before this, I often felt I was an exception in our society. I might be wrong, not good, and different from ordinary people in this society. But now, I can live here and feel comfortable with people of diverse backgrounds. (Chie Kōno, interview, Sapporo, 18 October 2016).

While Kōno's narrative might show a certain degree of idealization of Finland when she mentioned the kantele, she was not meant to deny every aspect of Japanese society. Instead, she recognized responsibilities tied to womanhood and sought to fulfill the best of the expectations held for her role as a wife. She acknowledged her husband's hard work, which allowed her to cultivate playing kantele in her free time. As van Ede argued, the Japanese pursuit of a cosmopolitan hobby is not necessarily meant to oppose Japanese society.

Internationalism is, I believe, not "inevitably set against", but even so set within "traditionalism", exactly because of its dependence on locality – a sense of place that not simply equates the local with the national in opposition to the international/cosmopolitan/global. . . (italic original, van Ede 2014: 161).

I have investigated Japanese women's enthusiasm for Finnish kantele in this chapter. While the enthusiasm seems to be, on the surface, a mere microcosm of the social phenomenon of "Finland boom", a close examination of practitioners' experiences shows wider dimensions the kantele brings to its foreign female enthusiasts. Firstly, I examined how Hiroko Ara has, among a few professional players, crafted a new aesthetics and expressive (sub)culture with the spirit of Finnish folk music for Japanese audiences. She represents kantele in her live concert as an eclectic instrument with which she could tap into different inspirations to create music, with no specific standard "tradition" features insisted upon. Secondly, I examined the new meaning attached to kantele in the Sapporo Kantele Club, where women practitioners find great satisfaction because they are allowed, from their position of relative knowledge, to connect kantele to something different than the local styles and mores. As found, liberty is the new meaning inscribed to kantele, since it legitimizes, after all, the very existence of freedom, egalitarianism, and autonomy previously less available in Japan. This chapter shows how Japanese women, by adopting a less-known instrument from Finland, reach out to the (partly imagined) "foreign" tropes of freedom. They improve their life and facilitate a better relationship with others by being practitioners of kantele that acknowledges all voices.

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