

## An Interview with Dr. Barbara Ruch

Director of Institute for Japanese Cultural Heritage Initiatives,  
Columbia University

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### From Japan to the World: The growing appeal of Japanese heritage music



Music has the ability to unite us, transcending language, culture and time, and the work undertaken by Columbia University’s Institute for Japanese Cultural Heritage Initiatives in New York bears testimony to this power. Dr. Barbara Ruch is Director of the Institute, as well as Professor Emerita of Japanese Literature and Cultural History at Columbia University. Dr. Ruch shares her insights on the Institute’s Japanese heritage music initiative and how this music is finding new audiences around the world, supported by the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO).

Interview by Louise George Kittaka\*

Dr. Barbara Ruch, Director of Institute for  
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#### *A changing view of Japanese culture*

Since the end of World War II, those who love Japan have been supporting Japanese culture in other countries, and Japan Societies and local Japanese communities have organized events such as concerts, films, lectures and demonstrations. While these efforts are certainly laudable, Dr. Ruch says there has been a tendency to present this culture with the audience as passive viewers.

“Our theory at the Institute is that it’s very important that Japanese culture not be an exotic thing. We don’t want people to experience it once and say, ‘Isn’t that unusual, isn’t that nice,’ and then go away and never think about it again,” she explains.



Columbia University, home of IMJS

The Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies (IMJS) was founded by Dr. Ruch at the University of Pennsylvania in 1968, with the purpose of encouraging research on hitherto neglected aspects of pre-modern Japanese civilization. It was subsequently brought to Columbia University by Dr. Ruch in 1984. The name was changed to the Institute for Japanese Cultural Heritage Initiatives in 2013 but the IMJS acronym was retained.

## ***Bringing attention to Japan's heritage music***



Japanese heritage instruments taught in the Gagaku ensemble class  
©Susan Cook

Prior to the late 1990s, Japanese music from the periods before the arrival of Western music received scant attention outside Japan. “We became aware that, aside from some lecturers about it, traditional Japanese music was being ignored” says Dr. Ruch. “To me, this is like listening to a lecture on swimming or basketball: You cannot begin to understand what these things are until you actually do them.”

After conducting a national survey, the Institute found that Japanese heritage music was the only discipline within Japanese Studies lacking a degree program or dedicated center in the United States. With support from

the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs, in 2006 a program was launched at the Institute to teach students to play the Japanese heritage wind, string and percussion instruments that constitute sacred and court music (known as gagaku), and a gagaku instrumental ensemble was formed in the Columbia Music Performance Program. This attracted a New York audience and some students went on to become masters of these instruments. Building on the success of these efforts, training in the meditative shakuhachi and the salon music of the koto was added a few years later.

By the 10th anniversary of the music initiative in 2016, the Institute’s Japanese heritage music initiative had expanded to include course credit, instrumental training, workshops for composers, summer sessions, master classes and annual concerts presenting Japanese heritage music to the general public.

## ***The chance of a lifetime in Japan***

According to Dr. Ruch, the initial and ongoing support of TIFO has greatly contributed to the progress of the Japanese heritage music initiative. She is also delighted at the success of the Global Artist Residency in Tokyo. Established in 2014, the program enables highly-skilled professional musicians of Western wind instruments working outside Japan to learn a Japanese heritage wind instrument from masters in Japan.

The first person selected by the Institute for the Global Artist Residency was Australian professional flutist Rosamund Plummer, who studied the ryūteki (seven-holed transverse bamboo flute) in 2014 under eminent gagaku artist Takeshi Sasamoto. The opportunity to apply to this program arose by chance, as the result of an email from Columbia forwarded through a chain of interested parties, but as soon as she read it, Plummer instantly knew that it was the perfect opportunity.



Rosamund Plummer with her colleagues, Henri Liang (left) and Bronwyn Kirkpatrick (right)  
©Rosamund Plummer

“Without a prior interest in Japanese music—though I’d been to Japan and loved it—I saw a fascinating challenge which would and certainly did change my life,” Plummer recalls. “The most memorable aspect was the time spent in the back room of Musashino Gakki (a music shop specializing in gagaku instruments) in Tokyo, where I had my twice-weekly lessons with Sasamoto-sensei and practiced, often four hours per day. The lessons were challenging, and the practice was a joy.”

### ***Expanding horizons for heritage music***

Dr. Ruch and her colleagues at the Institute do not see themselves on a mission to preserve Japanese heritage music. “That is Japan’s job, and fortunately there are now many young Japanese who are re-examining this music,” she says. “Nor are we trying to preserve some kind of old antique; on the contrary, we believe that Japanese instruments offer so much exciting potential for contributing to new classical music worldwide.”

Until quite recently, if a Western orchestra wanted to present Japanese compositions calling for heritage instruments, such as the works of Toru Takemitsu or Toshi Ichiyanagi, they would have to bring an artist over from Japan at considerable expense. With an increasing number of Western musicians skilled in these instruments, however, there will now be musicians within Western orchestras who can play these instruments.

This development is not only beneficial for presenting repertoires of established composers, but also opens up avenues for bringing music from emerging composers into the spotlight. “We need future leaders not just in politics but also in cultural things, and this music belongs to all cultures,” Dr. Ruch says, adding that the Global Artist Residency is a tangible example of this concept in action.

### ***Playing it forward***



Trond leads the contemporary Norwegian music scene  
©Trond Magne Brekka

Upon returning to Australia in 2014, Plummer performed on the ryūteki at the Sydney Opera House, and also introduced her instruments at educational concerts. After 33 years as principal piccolo player with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, she retired in 2019 and subsequently formed Trio Bamboo, in which she plays ryūteki, together with players of nohkan (bamboo flute used in Noh dramas) and the shinobue (six-hole bamboo flute used for festivals and stage performances). The group commission and perform new works by American and Australian composers featuring gagaku and other traditional Japanese wind instruments.

The 2018 Global Artist Residency was awarded to Trond Magne Brekka, a solo piccolo flutist with the Oslo Philharmonic who studied the shakuhachi (five-holed vertical bamboo flute) with internationally-known artist Kaoru Kakizakai. Like Plummer, he has found opportunities to incorporate this learning into performances since returning home to Norway, and it has informed both his playing technique and his overall understanding of music.

“It has given me knowledge about how to impart new flute techniques to bachelor and master students at the music academies where I teach. The Global Artist Residency program has also given me a deep insight into playing and teaching contemporary pieces for flute. Many of these pieces are strongly influenced by traditional shakuhachi music,” explains Brekka.

