

In the *Noh*

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**Abstract**

In the *Noh*

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This dissertation explores the adaptation of *Noh* opera plots within Western classical opera, focusing on ethical challenges related to cultural exoticism and representation. After a primer focusing on the history of *Noh* opera and its most relevant performing aspects, the research examines case studies of influential adaptations like *Der Ja-Sager* and *Curlew River*. Emphasizing authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration with cultural experts, the study advocates for responsible cultural adaptations that foster genuine cross-cultural exchange and inclusivity in operatic performances.

## **Dedication**

I want to thank my family for their unwavering support in this endeavor. Thank you to my parents for putting me on the path toward music and always believing in me. Thank you to my husband, Kristopher, for your love, support, belief, and dedication! Thank you to my children, Cameron and Ella, who brought me sustenance during the long hours of writing. This endeavor would not have been possible without you!

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

This dissertation investigates the plot adaptations of *Noh* opera, a traditional Japanese art form, in classical Western opera, focusing on ethical considerations related to cultural exoticism and representation in cross-cultural adaptations. I employ a case study approach to provide a detailed analysis of specific adaptation attempts and to facilitate a deeper understanding of their artistic and cultural implications. The exploration begins with a short description of *Noh's* origins and evolution, highlighting the contributions of pivotal figures such as the Japanese playwrights Kan'ami and his son Zeami. In addition to discussing inherent differences and shared characteristics between *Noh* and Western opera performance traditions, the dissertation addresses issues of cultural appropriation and the challenges associated with *yellowface* performance practices in the selected *Noh* adaptations. I analyze the highly influential adaptations of *Der Ja-Sager* by Elizabeth Hauptmann, Bertolt Brecht, and Kurt Weill, as well as *Curlew River* by William Plomer and Benjamin Britten in depth. I chose these operas because both are pioneering works that fully integrate a *Noh* plot into Western opera. These operas were created when concerns about cultural appropriation were not yet widely critiqued, allowing for a more direct exploration of cultural intersections.

Cultural adaptations can raise critical ethical considerations regarding depicting and appropriating diverse cultures. In my research, I define appropriation as the act of a creator from one culture taking elements from the creative practices of another culture, often one that has been historically marginalized, and using those elements for personal gain, typically without making a genuine effort to recognize, understand, or respect the original culture and its

practitioners, both past and present. This is distinct from exoticism, where elements of a foreign culture are deliberately used for visual appeal or spectacle, often through exaggerated or stereotypical representations like *yellowface* or the appropriation of traditional costumes, reducing the culture to a novelty rather than engaging with its deeper meanings and significance.<sup>1</sup> While cultural exchange and adaptation can enrich artistic expression, appropriating cultural elements without proper understanding or respect can reinforce harmful generalizations, undermine cultural integrity, and contribute to cultural imperialism. Consider the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players production of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado* as just one of many productions that have provoked widespread outcry recently.<sup>2</sup> The operetta's unabashed use of hegemonic worldview and cultural appropriation, in combination with the audience and performer's awareness of the issue, led to many production cancellations.<sup>3</sup>

One ethical consideration (of many) for adaptations particularly relevant in Western dramatic art forms is non-Japanese artists' portrayal of Japanese culture and stories. *Yellowface* portrayal, in which non-Asian performers use makeup or costuming to mimic Asian facial features, reinforces racial stereotypes and can contribute to sidelining Asian performers and

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<sup>1</sup> "A romanticization, fetishization, and/or commodification of ethnic, racial, or cultural otherness, as in orientalism or primitivizing representations of the 'noble savage.' Ethnocentric stereotyping (as in Eurocentric views of non-European cultures), in which the other is marked by difference. In post-colonial theory, this is identified as a form of objectification, marginalization, domination, oppression, and exploitation.

Oxford Reference, s.v. "Exoticism," accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20111102095717481>.

<sup>2</sup> David D. Nguyen, New York City Production of "The Mikado" Cancelled Following Accusations of Racism, accessed July 16th, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/new-york-city-production-mikado-draws-criticism-accusations-racism-n429546>.

<sup>3</sup> Corinna Da Fonseca-Wollheim, "Is 'The Mikado' Too Politically Incorrect to Be Fixed? Maybe Not," *New York Times*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/arts/music/review-gilbert-and-sullivan-the-mikado.html>.

creators.<sup>4</sup> At the root of the ethical quandary is the need to acknowledge the power dynamics that exist between Western cultures and formerly colonized or otherwise marginalized nations and cultures. Historically, the dominance of one culture over another shapes narratives and interpretations. This power imbalance can lead to the dismissal of behaviors, beliefs, and norms of the appropriated cultures.

In navigating these ethical considerations, artists and creators must strive for authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and unbiased portrayals. Collaboration with members of the culture being depicted, consultation with cultural experts, and a commitment to ongoing education and dialogue are crucial steps toward responsible cultural adaptations. If these steps are taken, cultural adaptation attempts can transcend exoticism and contribute to genuine cross-cultural exchange and enrichment by fostering mutual respect, understanding, and inclusivity.<sup>5</sup>

The primer on *Noh* opera in this dissertation aims to clarify the inherent differences and similarities between *Noh* opera and Western opera. With its technical emphasis on focus and tranquility, *Noh* provides a sanctuary amidst the relentless onslaught of rapid information and change in the modern world.

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<sup>4</sup> Josephine Lee, "Yellowface Performance: Historical and Contemporary Contexts," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 25 Feb, 2019, accessed 13 Apr, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.834>

<sup>5</sup> James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation, and the Arts* (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2010), 184.

## The Ancient Beginnings of *Noh*



Image 1. Traditional *Noh* costume worn by the lead actor (Shite).<sup>6</sup>

Recognized by UNESCO as part of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" since 2008, Japanese *Noh*, with its over 800-year history, holds deep cultural significance and multiple interpretations of talent, skill, and public entertainment concepts.<sup>7</sup> The development and preservation of *Noh* can be attributed to Japan's historical isolation during the Tokugawa Shogunate (Edo period, 1603-1868 AD), which limited external influences and fostered national

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<sup>6</sup> Photo courtesy of Chris Glenn, Personal Photograph, Traditional *Noh* Costume worn by the lead actor (Shite), Fukuyama Castle, Japan, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> "The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity," UNESCO, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/nogaku-theatre-00012>.

pride in its indigenous art forms.<sup>8</sup> The playwrights and actors Kan'ami and his son Zeami shaped the *Noh* we see today during the Muromachi period (1336-1573 AD) by establishing guidelines, principles, and guilds to ratify these developments.<sup>9</sup> Full facial masks are integral to *Noh's* performances, symbolize the characters' archetypes, and aim to enhance the audience's engagement with the storytelling.<sup>10</sup> *Noh* melodies exhibit distinct musical styles characterized by limited fundamental tones and accompanying pitches,<sup>11</sup> featuring vocal ornaments derived from Buddhist chants and court songs that create a uniquely Japanese soundscape and immersive theatrical experience.<sup>12</sup>

*Noh's* ancient origins can be traced back to Chinese harvest festival traditions known as San-Yue ("March" or "Three"), which were introduced to Japan through trade routes. These traditions influenced early forms of Japanese *Sarugaku* (*Saru*=Monkey, *Gaku*=Music) music, incorporating elements from Japan's Buddhist and Shinto harvest rituals and festivals during the Kamakura feudal period (1192-1333 AD). *Sarugaku* evolved into a prominent form of entertainment in Japan's medieval era, flourishing between the 11th and 14th centuries. Initially, *Sarugaku* featured music, song, dance, pantomime, and acrobatics. However, it underwent significant transformations, eventually incorporating comic dialogue and evolving to integrate all elements into cohesive theatrical plays.<sup>13</sup> By the 14th century, guild groups

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<sup>8</sup> "A Thriving Classical Theater Form: Ceremonial Art for the Tokugawa Shogunate," UNESCO, Accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/Noh/en/history/history3.html#b>.

<sup>9</sup> "Ascend to Greatness: Four Sarugaku troupes and Kan'ami," UNESCO, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/Noh/en/history/history2.html#a>.

<sup>10</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 224-240.

<sup>11</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 168-213.

<sup>12</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 224-240.

<sup>13</sup> "Roots: Linkage with Temples and Shrines," UNESCO, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/Noh/en/history/history1.html#b>.

emerged to regulate performance standards and organize cultural activities. The patronage of influential figures like *Shogun* Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1374 provided crucial support for *Sarugaku's* further development, facilitating its transition into a respected art form. This patronage also led to the adoption of the term *Noh* to describe the refined and sophisticated nature of the performances, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of this traditional Japanese art form. Kan'ami and Zeami, renowned master performers and playwrights associated with the Kanze Guild school of *Noh*, were pivotal in elevating *Noh* beyond its humble origins. Their contributions, including incorporating comedic interludes known as *Kyogen*, enriched *Noh's* performances and contributed to its enduring legacy.<sup>14</sup>

### **Kan'ami (1333-1384 AD)**

Kan'ami, born Yusaki Kiyotsugu, was a prominent Japanese playwright, musician, and actor born in 1333 during the Kenmu imperial power restoration in the Iga province, southeast of Kyoto. Like many individuals in medieval Japan, he assumed various names throughout his life due to factors such as coming of age, changes in status, adoption, or adopting an alter ego for the stage. Kan'ami is perhaps most renowned as one of the founders of the Japanese *Noh* opera. He played multiple roles in the early *Noh* theater scene, serving as a traveling troupe's founder, general manager, playwright, and leading actor. Under his guidance, the troupe eventually settled in Yamato, a city south of Tokyo, where it established itself as the Yuzaki theater company. While the Yuzaki school has evolved and is now recognized as the prestigious

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<sup>14</sup>"Access to Greatness: Zeami and the Muromachi Shogunate," UNESCO, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www2.ntj.iac.go.jp/unesco/Noh/en/history/history2.html#b>.

Kanze school of *Noh*, it still carries the legacy of Kan'ami's contributions. As Kan'ami's reputation grew, he garnered the support of wealthy patrons who provided financial and social backing to further his artistic endeavors. Notably, during a performance in Kyoto in 1374, Kan'ami's talent caught the attention of *Shogun* Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, one of Japan's most powerful figures, who became his patron. With this support, Kan'ami refined *Noh's* artistry, writing new plays and evolving performance practices. Kan'ami introduced innovations such as incorporating the dance form *Kusemai*, which replaced *Sarugaku* dance elements and emphasized stylized pantomime. While he retained certain instrumental elements from *Sarugaku*, such as the flute and drum, Kan'ami employed stronger percussive beats in standardized intervals to maintain performance coherence. Among Kan'ami's most significant plays are *Komachi*, *Ji'nen koji*, *Shii no shōshō*, *Matsukaze*, and *Eguchi*.<sup>15</sup>

### **Zeami (c. 1363-c. 1443 AD)**

"*Noh* is a means to pacify the people's hearts, to bring about a sense of contentment, and to promote a long life." *Zeami*

Zeami Motokiyo, also known as Kiyomata and Kanze Motokyio, inherited his father Kan'ami's legacy and is revered as the greatest genius in the history of *Noh* opera. Born in 1363 in Nagoya, Zeami received comprehensive training in *Noh* from his father and eventually assumed leadership of the Kanze school of *Noh* in 1385. From an early age, he demonstrated

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<sup>15</sup> Karen Brazell, *Kan'ami*, In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001/acref-9780198601746-e-2019>.



his prowess on stage and is credited with authoring approximately 100 of the 250 *Noh* plays still performed today, though some debates persist regarding the true origins of specific works.

Zeami took over the family business after his father's passing when he was just twenty. His exceptional abilities attracted the attention and patronage of *Shogun* Yoshimitsu, who recognized Zeami's potential and provided him with an extensive education in classical literature, philosophy, and poetry. This elevated education profoundly influenced Zeami's writing style and contributed to a new intellectual depth in *Noh* opera. Under Yoshimitsu's support, *Noh* flourished, and the Kanze school became *Noh's* foremost institution, enjoying performances even at the imperial court.

In addition to his artistic achievements, Zeami was renowned for his philosophical writings on *Noh* aesthetics and theoretical insights into performance practices. His treatises, considered the oldest works on drama philosophy in Japanese literature, were previously reserved for the highest masters of the Kanze school but have since been translated, offering valuable insights into *Noh's* principles and techniques.

However, Zeami's fortunes changed after Yoshimitsu's death and the ascension of Ashikaga Yoshimochi as *Shogun* in 1429. Zeami fell out of favor with the new Shogun, who preferred another branch of the Kanze school led by Zeami's nephew, Onnami. This rivalry culminated in Zeami's banishment to Sado Island in 1434 after he refused to acknowledge Onnami as the new guild head. Despite enduring tragic losses, including the deaths of his wife and son Jūrō Motomasa (author of the *Noh* opera *Sumidagawa*; source of Britten and Plomer's

*Curlew River* adaptation), Zeami was permitted to return from exile in 1441 following Yoshimochi's death.

Unfortunately, Zeami's joy was short-lived, as he passed away abruptly in 1443 at 81. Zeami's invaluable teachings would have been lost to history were it not for the treatises he passed on to his son-in-law, Komparu Zenchiku, which ensured their preservation for future generations.<sup>16</sup> Komparu Zenchiku is also the author of the *Noh* opera *Taniko*, the source of Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill's opera *Der Ja-Sager*, discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. Some of Zeami's most famous *Noh* operas are *Atsumori*, *Hanjo*, *Takasago*, *Izutsu*, and *Tadanori*.

### **Zeami's Major Treatises**

Rooted in the Japanese guild system and the meticulous preservation of family traditions, Zeami's nine major treatises have played a pivotal role in refining *Noh* to its most detailed nuances.

Zeami's treatises focus on various topics, including principles of acting, music, physicality, and performance practices in *Noh*.<sup>17</sup> They also expound upon the philosophical underpinnings of a life devoted to *Noh*, offering guidance on matters such as the appropriate age for a stage debut and the readiness of actors for specific roles. Zeami's overarching aim was to ensure the ongoing evolution of his family's craft in pursuit of excellence in performance,

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<sup>16</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans by J. Thomas Rimer and Masakazu Yamazaki (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 342.

intellectual enrichment, and personal enlightenment. I will discuss four of the most illuminating treatises: *Fūshikaden*, *Shikadō*, *Kakyō*, and *Sandō*.

### ***Fūshikaden (1402 AD)—Style and the Flower***

Zeami's first major treatise on drama, *Fūshikaden* or *The Transmission of the Flower*, is also called *Kadensho* or *The Book of Transmission of the Flower*. The flower symbolizes the actor's inherent talent and artistic essence in this context. Considered the pioneering treatise on *Noh* opera in Japan, *Fūshikaden* examines the nuances of the *Jo-ha-kyū* rhythm, which governs the pacing and progression of *Noh* performances. This rhythmic structure provides a framework for gradually unfolding tension and emotion throughout the play, aiding a cohesive connection among the performers on stage. *Fūshikaden* also offers detailed explanations and analyses of *Jo-ha-kyū* as a concept, highlighting its importance in achieving artistic excellence and capturing the essence of *Noh* opera.<sup>18</sup> (I describe this concept in greater detail below).

### ***Shikado (1420 AD)—The True Path to the Flower***

*Shikado* is a comprehensive guide to an actor's fundamental training. This treatise delineates three essential elements of an actor's abilities and explains the methods for their cultivation.

The first element, *Skin*, focuses on the actor's appearance and stage presence. Zeami emphasizes the importance of visual aesthetics and the impact of an actor's appearance on the audience's perception.

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<sup>18</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 3-63.

The second element, *Flesh*, encompasses dance and vocal proficiency. Zeami underscores the significance of expressive acting skills and melodic vocalization, accentuating the correlation of gesture and voice in conveying emotion and narrative.<sup>19</sup>

The third element, *Bone*, explores an actor's innate talent and spiritual depth. Zeami studies the essence of authenticity and sincerity in performance, stressing the cultivation of inner resilience and emotional resonance.<sup>20</sup>

Through *Shikado*, Zeami provides invaluable insights into an actor's development from an early age, advocating for a balanced approach that harmonizes the physical, vocal, and emotional facets of performance training. Zeami does bemoan that it is almost impossible for an actor to exhibit all three elements to a high degree and that most actors " ..manage to only use certain elements of skin." <sup>21</sup>

### ***Kakyo (1424 AD)—A Mirror Held to the Flower***

*Kakyo* extensively explores pitch, breath control, and vocal technique. In this treatise, Zeami provides astute observations regarding the mechanics of voice production, including the critical role of supra-glottic pressure in phonation. He emphasizes the importance of regulating pitch in conjunction with breath control, aligning vocal performance with accompanying instrumental accompaniment.<sup>22</sup> Zeami's insights predate Western pedagogical texts on vocal technique by several centuries.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 352.

Beyond vocal technique, *Kakyo* investigates various psychological and philosophical aspects of performing. Zeami discusses the actor's need for deep understanding and contemplation, touching upon the meditative state of Zen Buddhism. Given Zeami's immersion into Zen practices, his inclusion of Zen principles in the treatises reflects his desire to blend physical mastery with spiritual awareness. *Kakyo* voices Zeami's fundamental belief that technical expertise, added to a profound appreciation for the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, is necessary to practice the art of *Noh*.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Sandō* (1423 AD)—The Three Elements in Composing a Play**

*Sandō* focuses on three essential elements for composing *Noh* opera. The first element, *The Seed*, involves selecting a suitable source material that enhances theatrical, dance, and musical components. The second element addresses structuring the play once the source is chosen. The third element emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate words, lyrics, and prose for each character.

Moreover, *Sandō* elaborates on the song elements of *Nanori* (name-saying speech) and *Michiyuki* (describing a journey, referred to as *Hito-Utai* in the treatise). In a typical *Noh* performance, a supporting character (*Waki*) begins with the *Sashigoe* (opening passage), which sets the scene and provides context. This section includes an introductory chant leading into the unpitched prose of *Nanori*, followed by the *Michiyuki* chant section, completing the character's entrance.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 74-110.

<sup>25</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 148-162.

## *Noh's Connection to the West*

Since Japan opened its doors to the West in 1853, its rich cultural heritage has captivated scholars and adventurers alike.<sup>26</sup> Central to this fascination was Japan's meticulous preservation of social and cultural traditions, achieved through adherence to stringent rules and the cultivation of families, guilds, or schools dedicated to perfecting their crafts. Art forms like *Kabuki* and *Noh* have remained remarkably faithful to their ancient origins, performing with subtle variations into the present day.<sup>27</sup>

However, *Noh's* introduction to Western culture began much earlier through European travelers' firsthand accounts, articles, and scholarly writings. The earliest scholarly reference to Japanese theater comes from the Portuguese missionary Luís Fróis (1532-1597), who spent twenty-two years in Japan and documented his observations. Meanwhile, limited Western audiences eagerly consumed reports of these unique theatrical experiences.<sup>28</sup>

A significant turning point in the West's engagement with Japanese culture occurred at the 1867 World Fair in Paris, where Japanese exhibitions garnered unprecedented attention and captivated a broader Western audience. This encounter sparked a wave of new artistic works in the West, as artists sought to incorporate the influences of Japanese art forms into their cultural expressions.<sup>29</sup> As *Noh's* reputation grew, entire *Noh* ensembles began traveling to

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<sup>26</sup> Marius B. Jansen, "The Opening of Japan," *Japan Review*, no. 2 (1991): 191–202. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790903>.

<sup>27</sup> "A Thriving Classical Theater Form: Ceremonial Art for the Tokugawa Shogunate," UNESCO, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/Noh/en/history/history3.html#b>.

<sup>28</sup> Ury Eppstein, "The Stage Observed. Western Attitudes Toward Japanese Theatre," *Monumenta Nipponica* 48, no. 2 (1993): 147–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2385526>.

<sup>29</sup> Diego Pellicchia, "Aesthetics and Ethics in the Reception of *Noh* Theater in the West" (PhD diss., University of London, 2011), 25.

Western shores. The first full *Noh* performance in the West occurred in the United Kingdom in March 1900 at the Japanese Art Festival in London, further solidifying *Noh*'s place in the global artistic landscape.<sup>30, 31</sup>

Among the Western works newly inspired by Japanese culture was the operetta *The Mikado* (1885) by the dramatist-composer duo W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. *The Mikado* achieved great success by blatantly appropriating Japanese culture, including using *yellowface* portrayals of Japanese characters.<sup>32</sup> Gilbert had hoped that by placing his new opera in an exotic place, he would be able to use satire more freely and avoid pushback from the British government; however, the setting, storyline, costumes, makeup, character names, and character behavior of *The Mikado* were seen by Japanese citizens as a parody of Japanese culture. Aspects such as the apparent confusion between Japanese and Chinese customs and names irritated the Japanese government and Japanese audiences. This irritation led Japan to ban the operetta shortly after its premiere in 1885. When Prince Fushimi of Japan visited London in 1907, the English government prohibited the performance of the operetta for the duration of the Prince's visit.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "When did overseas *Noh* performances begin?," *The-Noh.com*, Google, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.the-Noh.com/en/trivia/093.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Earle Ernst, "The Influence of Japanese Theatrical Style on Western Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal* 21, no. 2 (1969): 127–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205628>.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Green, *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2009), 516.

<sup>33</sup> E.P. Lawrence, "The Banned Mikado: A Topsy-Turvy Incident," *The Centennial Review* 18, no. 2 (1974): 151–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23738143>. Yoko Chiba, "Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 31, no. 2 (1998): 1–20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029769>.

## A Comparative Analysis of *Noh* and 19th-century European Opera

**Orchestra:** *Noh* orchestras and Western opera orchestras differ significantly in their composition and instrumentation. In *Noh*, the musical accompaniment is provided by a small ensemble known as the *Hayashi*. This ensemble typically consists of traditional Japanese instruments such as the *Fue* (bamboo flute), *Kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum), *Ōtsuzumi* (hip drum), and occasionally the *Taiko* (stick drum). The *Hayashi* ensemble sets the performance's rhythm, mood, and pace, providing musical support to the singers and dancers on stage. Despite its small size, the *Hayashi* ensemble is integral to *Noh*'s soundscape.<sup>34</sup>



Image 2. From left to right: Ōtsuzumi, Kotsuzumi, and Fue.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 168-213.

<sup>35</sup> Photo courtesy of Chris Glenn, Personal Photograph, Traditional *Noh* Instruments, Private *Noh* Recital, Fukuyama Castle, Japan, November 4th, 2022.



In contrast, modern Western opera orchestras used in the current operatic repertoire are typically much larger and more diverse in their instrumentation. They include instruments from different families, such as strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion, producing a vast array of sounds and textures.

**Conductor:** Another key difference lies in the role of the conductor. In Western opera, the conductor coordinates musical cues, tempos, and dynamics to ensure cohesion and synchronization within the orchestra, the singers, and stage action. The conductor shapes the overall musical interpretation of the opera.

In *Noh*, however, there is no conductor. Instead, the lead drummer or chant leader sets the tempo and rhythm for the ensemble. The performers rely on vocal cues (*Takegoe*), rhythmic patterns associated with *Jo-ha-kyu*, and visual signals to coordinate their movements and musical phrasing, creating a sense of unity and cohesion collectively.<sup>36</sup>

**Jo-ha-kyu:** *Jo-ha-kyu* is a holistic approach to aesthetics, emphasizing simplicity, impermanence, and spontaneity. The principles of *Jo-ha-kyu* effectively replace the role of a conductor through a combination of structured rhythmic patterns and intuitive coordination among performers. The rhythmic patterns are highly structured and standardized by the guild. All performers, including instrumentalists and singers, adhere to these rhythmic frameworks. Rather than relying on a conductor to guide them, *Noh* performers internalize these rhythmic

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<sup>36</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 168-213.

patterns and develop a deep understanding of their role within the ensemble, allowing for smooth coordination and interaction without needing external direction.

*Jo-ha-kyu* emphasizes the concept of transience and detachment, encouraging performers to maintain a sense of flexibility and adaptability within their performance. Subtle variations and improvisations may occur spontaneously, reflecting the impermanent nature of the theatrical experience. Instead of rigidly adhering to a predefined tempo or structure, *Noh* performers embrace the fluidity of time, allowing the rhythmic patterns to evolve organically in response to the unfolding drama on stage.<sup>37</sup>

As a byproduct of *Jo-ha-kyu* training, *Noh* rarely requires full ensemble rehearsal. Professional Western opera companies often contract performers for months of joint rehearsals to ensure a seamless performance, while *Noh* opera troupes often rehearse only once before a performance, with only the most essential stage performers present (drum and main singers).<sup>38</sup> Apart from this one-time meeting, all contributors rehearse separately at their respective guilds. While it takes years to hone each performer's craft to a level deemed ready by the guild for *Noh* performance, preparation for a specific group performance is allocated only a few hours.<sup>39</sup>

**Composing:** Historically, *Noh* operas were composed by a limited pool of composers, with Kan'ami and Zeami being central among them.<sup>40</sup> *Noh* composers, whose knowledge was deeply

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<sup>37</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 189-90.

<sup>38</sup> Diego Pellecchia, "Aesthetics and Ethics in the Reception of *Noh* Theater in the West," Interviewed by Christina Kowalski-Holien, July 28, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> "Pellecchia, Interview."

<sup>40</sup> UNESCO, "The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

rooted in Japanese poetic, musical, and theatrical traditions, often also served as librettists for their works.<sup>41</sup> *Noh* guilds ensured that composition adhered to the devotion to tradition, continuously seeking to honor the rich heritage of *Noh*.<sup>42</sup>

Western opera composers throughout history, in comparison, were often driven to innovate alongside cultural and sociological trends and fashions and to write in ways that reflect a wide range of regional musical styles.

**Musical texture:** Digging deeper into its musical details, the pitched content in *Noh* is monophonic, but the singer and orchestra approach the melodies in a timbrally heterogeneous way. This timbrally heterogeneity features subtle variations in pitch and timbre among the performers and contributes to the music's unique soundscape and complexity.

While Western classical music began with monophony, by the time opera emerged, it was defined by polyphony and tonal harmony, with multiple instruments and voices sometimes sharing equal roles and at other times highlighting a soloist with harmonic support from the ensemble. Most 17th through 20th-century opera is composed within a system of modal or tonal (or extended tonal) harmony or in musical languages that, in some way or another, capitalize on counterpoint between individual lines.

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<sup>41</sup> UNESCO, "The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

<sup>42</sup> Contemporary *Noh* opera composition has seen innovative approaches that depart from traditional conventions. While the traditional practice has been to utilize male performers in *Noh* ensembles exclusively, there has been a growing openness to incorporating female performers into *Noh* productions, challenging gender norms and expanding the expressive possibilities of the art form. This shift reflects broader societal changes and a desire to modernize *Noh* opera while preserving its integrity. Despite these developments, the repertoire of *Noh* opera remains deeply rooted in tradition, with the composition of most plays performed today dating back over 700 years. David Jortner, ed., *Modern Japanese Theatre and Performance* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 310.

In most Western operas throughout the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sung music could be divided into recitative and aria. The recitative is the plot-advancing passage, where the singer delivers the lyrics in a speech-like manner. In *Noh* opera, this is similar to the non-rhythmical sections known as *Kotoba* or *Serifu*. Arias, on the other hand, are typically an opportunity for a character to express emotion or some internal monologue. Sections of *Noh* that include *Fushi* ( Neumes) are similar to arias in that they focus more on the lyrical voice as the expressive focus.<sup>43</sup>

**Scales:** Western opera employs various musical scales to convey emotions and moods. Major scales often create bright, joyful sounds, while minor ones evoke somber or dramatic feelings. Other scales, such as chromatic and modal, add complexity and unique colors to the music. By using these different scales, composers can effectively express a wide range of emotions and enhance the storytelling in opera.

*Noh* opera often utilizes a vocal pitch range spanning about two octaves, roughly from E3 to E5, though this range may vary depending on the singer's vocal ability and the specific performance. This pitch range is utilized in various ways depending on the section of the performance. In sections known as *Age-uta* (high song), the melody starts on a higher pitch and gradually descends to the middle of the two-octave range. Conversely, in *Sage-uta* (low song) sections, the melody begins in the middle range and descends to the lowest pitches within the same range. While the exact starting pitch within the two octaves is not fixed and is chosen by the singer based on their natural vocal ability, the intervals between the primary pitches of the

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<sup>43</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 169.

melody are standardized, and the singer must adhere to them. The primary pitches are organized into three main categories: *Ge* (low), *Chū* (middle), and *Jō* (high), and the interval between them is a perfect fourth. Additionally, there is a higher pitch known as *Kuri*, which is a minor third above the highest main pitch (*Jō*). Beyond these main pitches, performers can use auxiliary pitches, which briefly ascend or descend before returning to a main pitch, adding subtle variations to the performance.

This specific use of pitch and range is central to *Yowa-gin*, or soft singing sections in *Noh*, which features a more melody-based singing style.<sup>44</sup> The robust chanting style in *Noh*, known as *Tsuyo-gin*, theoretically uses the same pitch range as *Yowa-gin* but with a narrower vocal range of about a major third. *Tsuyo-gin* emphasizes rhythm and dynamics over melodic variation. This style is typically used to convey solemn moments or express valor and exhilaration, whereas *Yowa-gin* is used for tender moments.<sup>45</sup> The *Noh* scale is considered pentacentric and a fundamental element of traditional Japanese music.<sup>46</sup>

**Vocal score:** Unlike Western opera, where libretti exist as separate documents from the final musical scores that set those texts, *Noh* integrates the musical notation directly into the written text. This means that the singer not only follows the poetic lines of the libretto but also interprets the musical pitches and rhythms indicated within the text itself. Neumes (*Fushi*) provide guidance to the singer, indicating subtle variations in pitch, tempo, and expression.

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<sup>44</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 171.

<sup>45</sup> David W. Hughes, "Japan," In *The Other Classical Musics: Fifteen Great Traditions*, edited by Michael Church, NED-New edition (Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 74–103, accessed September 1, 2024, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt155j3zb.9>.

<sup>46</sup> David W. Hughes, "Japan," 74-103.

These markings, meticulously placed above the written lyrics, serve as a visual aid in shaping the vocal delivery, ensuring that the singer captures the essence of the text while adhering to the musical requirements of the score.

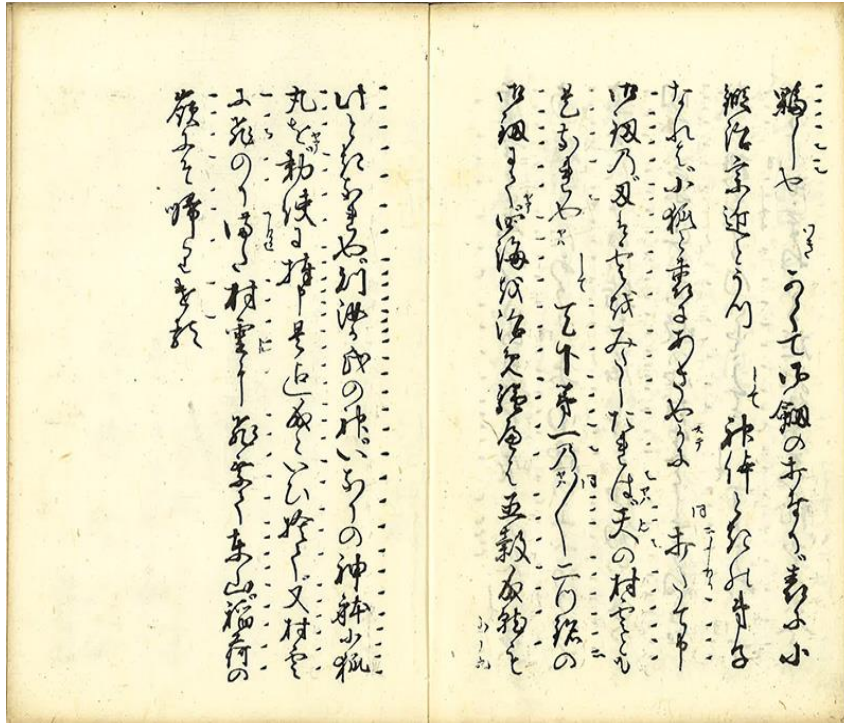


Image 3. *Kokaji*, *Noh* opera score/libretto excerpt, author unknown.<sup>47</sup>

The score's vocal or *Utai* rhythm sections are based on a 7, 5, or 12-syllable count sung over an eight-beat measure. The three rhythms in *Noh* chant are *Hiranori*, *Chūnori*, and *Onori*. *Hiranori* uses 12 syllables over eight beats, which can be considered syncopation. *Chūnori* is a double-time rhythm with two syllables for each beat, and *Onori* uses one syllable for one beat. Two main categories of *Noh Utai* singing styles are *Tsuyo-gin* and *Yowa-gin*.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Edited by Kongō Ukyō. Published by Hinoki-shoten, Tokyo in 1898.

Fujita Takanori, Jarosław Kapuściński, François Rose, *Noh as Intermedia*, 2019, accessed March 2024, <https://Noh.stanford.edu/>.

<sup>48</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 169.

Below is a depiction of the three *Noh* chant rhythms, *Hiranori*, *Chūnori*, and *Onori*, and how they are matched with the syllables of the score lyrics.

I. Three Methods of Matching Syllables of Chant								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Beat Number
<i>i</i>	...	<i>ro ha ni</i>	...	<i>ho e to</i>	...	<i>chi ri nu ru o</i>	.	<i>Hira-nori</i>
<i>i</i>	<i>ro</i>	<i>ha ni</i>	<i>ho</i>	<i>e to</i>	<i>chi</i>	<i>ri nu</i>	<i>ru o wa ka yo</i>	<i>Chū-nori</i>
<i>i</i>	—	<i>ro</i>	—	<i>ha</i>	—	<i>ni</i>	—	<i>ho</i>
								<i>e to</i>
								<i>Ō-nori</i>

Figure 1. Three Methods of Matching Syllables of Chant.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, Western opera composers set a libretto to music, and singers read from a score that includes specific pitches in an established tuning system with specific durations aligned with other singers and instruments.

**Vocal projection:** In Western opera, vocal projection is a fundamental aspect of performance, becoming increasingly central over time as orchestras and opera houses have increased in size. Singers in Western opera are trained to project their voices over the full force of an orchestra, filling large auditoriums with their sound. This emphasis on vocal projection is essential for reaching audiences seated at varying distances from the stage. Singers must, therefore, develop

<sup>49</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 196. Figure courtesy of Floating World Publishing.

a robust vocal technique and stamina to sustain powerful and resonant singing throughout lengthy operatic performances.<sup>50</sup>

*Noh* opera places less emphasis on vocal projection than full-scale Western opera due to its comparatively small orchestral accompaniment and more intimate performance venues. Instead, *Noh* vocalists focus on achieving a balanced and controlled vocal output to complement the instrumental accompaniment. The aesthetic of *Noh* opera emphasizes subtlety, restraint, and introspection, leading singers to convey profound emotions through nuanced vocal delivery rather than sheer volume.<sup>51</sup> As a result, *Noh* vocalists prioritize precision, control, and clarity in their singing, creating an atmosphere of serene beauty and contemplation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ingo R. Titze, *Principles of Voice Production* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), ISBN 978-0-13-717893-3.

<sup>51</sup> Zeami, *Fushikaden: On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 170.



**Libretto:** In *Noh*, the libretto is meticulously crafted, often adhering to traditional poetic forms and structures. These prose texts are steeped in symbolism and metaphor, conveying layers of meaning beyond narrative.

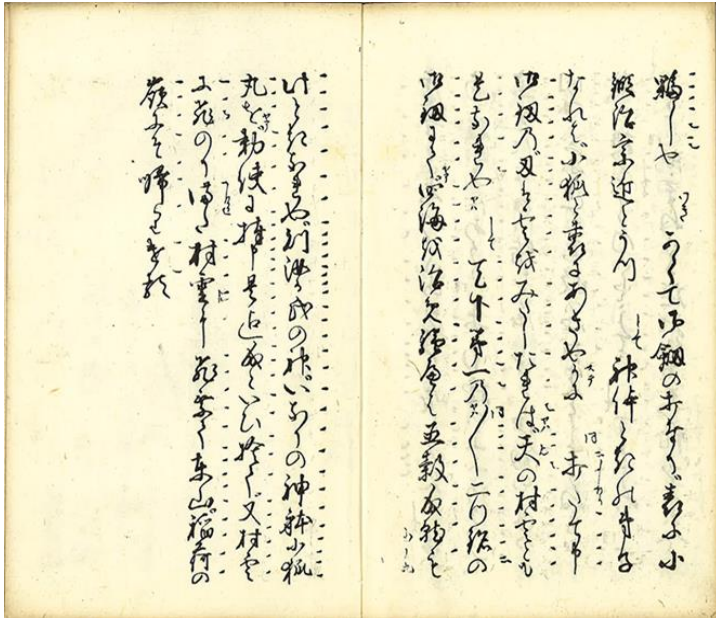


Image 4. *Kokaji. Noh opera score/libretto excerpt featuring Fushi, author unknown.*<sup>53</sup>

By comparison, Western opera librettos often follow a more linear narrative structure, focusing on dialogue and character interaction to drive the storyline forward. While they may incorporate poetic elements and lyrical expression, the primary emphasis is on storytelling rather than philosophical contemplation.

**Stage and Set:** In *Noh* opera, the set is minimalistic and symbolic, emphasizing simplicity and subtlety over elaborate decoration. The main playing area, *Hon Butai*, is a relatively small space,

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<sup>53</sup> Edited by Kongō Ukyō. Published by Hinoki-shoten, Tokyo in 1898. Fujita Takanori, Jarosław Kapuściński, François Rose, *Noh as Intermedia*, accessed March 2024, <https://Noh.stanford.edu/>.

typically measuring about 5.4 meters per side. Behind the *Hon Butai* is the seating section for the instrumentalists, called *Ato Zea*, and a bridge leading to the Mirror Room, or *Kagami no Ma*, which serves as a transformation area for actors, invisible to the audience's eye. When an actor enters the *Kagami no Ma*, the *Noh* play begins.<sup>54</sup>

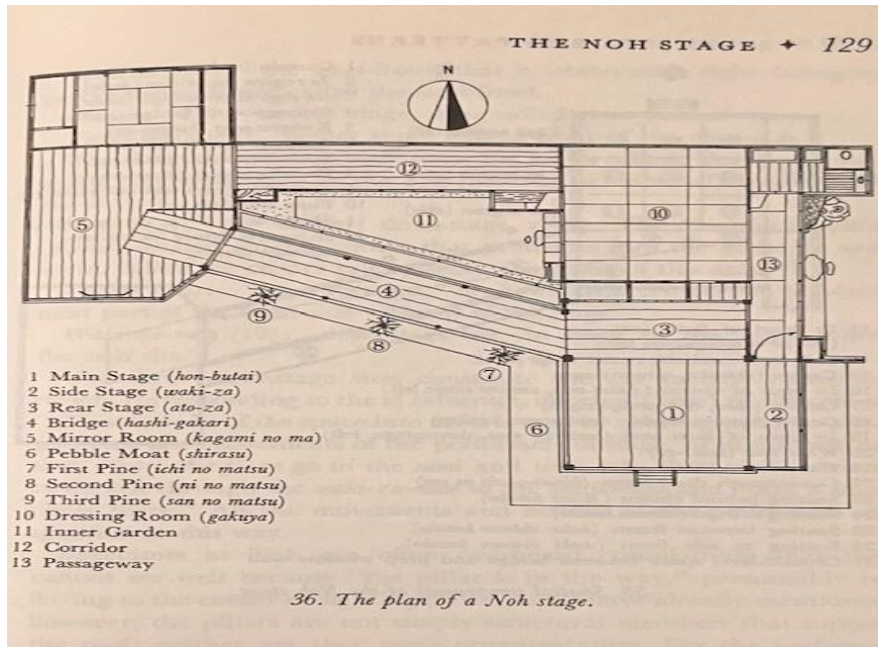


Figure 2. Diagram of a Traditional *Noh* Stage.<sup>55</sup>

Traditional *Noh* theaters often feature an open stage covered by a roof, with three sides open to the audience, and a painted pine tree on the back wall to preserve its origins as an outdoor play. This particular setup has remained unchanged since the Tokugawa period of Japan (1603-1868 AD).

<sup>54</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 109-149.

<sup>55</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 129. Figure courtesy of Floating World Publishing.



Image 5. Ancient traditional *Noh* stage.<sup>56</sup>



Image 6. Traditional *Noh* stage in modern times.<sup>57</sup>

Western opera is typically performed on proscenium stages and frequently employs elaborate and dynamic set designs that aim to recreate specific locations relevant to the plot. Productions may feature elaborate sets depicting grand palaces, lush landscapes, or intricate interiors that aim to transport audiences to different times and places. Western opera sets

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<sup>56</sup> Image courtesy of Chris Glenn, Personal Photograph, Hikone Castle, Shiga Prefecture, Japan, April 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Image courtesy of Chris Glenn, Personal Photograph, Nagoya *Noh* Gakudo stage, Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, July 2023.

often undergo extensive transformations between scenes to create a visual spectacle and enhance the storytelling experience.

**Acting Style and Movement:** Benjamin Britten said of the universalities he observed in *Noh* and Western opera after attending a *Noh* performance in Tokyo in 1956:

“The deep solemnity and selflessness of acting, the perfect shaping of the drama (like a Greek Tragedy), coupled with the strength and universality of the stories are something which every Western artist can learn from.”<sup>58</sup>

In *Noh* opera, the acting style is highly stylized, refined, and ritualistic. *Noh* actors, especially the main actors or *Shite*, undergo rigorous training to master the subtle gestures, movements, and facial expressions that characterize the art form. Their performances are marked by a deliberate and controlled stage presence, with slow, graceful movements and symbolic meaning. Main actors often wear elaborate costumes and masks, which serve to evoke a sense of spirituality. *Noh's* acting emphasizes conveying inner emotions and spiritual states rather than external expression or dramatic gestures.<sup>59</sup> The acting style in Western opera is intended to be more naturalistic and expressive.

While Classical and Romantic Western opera generally relegates dance to ornamental roles in the storytelling, in *Noh*, it occupies a central and indispensable position within the performance. Each movement, choreographed alongside the singing, conveys layers of meaning and emotion. The synchronized gestures of singing and dancing in *Noh* productions offer

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<sup>58</sup> William Plomer, *Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance set to Music by Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

<sup>59</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 256.

insights into the character's inner thoughts and sentiments. For instance, a performer might coordinate the motion of their sleeve in synch with a specific pitch to provide glimpses into the character's psyche.<sup>60</sup>

In Western opera, the extent of an actor/singer's physical engagement is primarily dictated by directors, producers, and prevailing artistic trends. While the type of dramatic action fluctuates over time, it never, on a broad scale, attained the austere minimalism characteristic of *Noh* until the emergence of works like Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill's *Der Ja-Sager*. Unlike Western opera, where acting styles evolved with changing tastes, *Noh* adheres to predetermined stylized movements specific to each actor's guild. From an early age, *Noh* actors dedicate themselves to constant skill refinement to uphold these predetermined ideals, underscoring their craft's disciplined and rigorous nature.<sup>61</sup>

While their acting techniques differ, *Noh* and Western opera feature characters that personify universal archetypes and themes. Like in Western opera, where characters often represent broader human emotions and experiences, such as love, jealousy, and redemption, *Noh* opera also uses archetypal figures that echo universal human sentiments.

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<sup>60</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 256.

<sup>61</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 74.

## Masks and Costumes:



Image 7. Traditional *Noh* opera mask. Front and back.<sup>62</sup>

In *Noh* opera, full facial masks are integral to the acting style and significantly influence the performers' expressions and movements. Masks are only worn by the main actors in *Noh*, allowing them to embody a wide range of ages, genders, and human and supernatural characters. The masks used in *Noh* are intricately carved and painted to convey specific emotions, personalities, and archetypal traits associated with the characters they represent. The actors must skillfully rely on their bodies and voices to convey the emotions and intentions of their characters while wearing the masks.<sup>63</sup>

Masks are much less common in Western opera than in *Noh* opera. Full facial masks would greatly hinder naturalism, not to mention greatly hinder sound. However, there are

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<sup>62</sup> Image courtesy of Chris Glenn, Personal Photograph, *Noh* mask, Nagoya City, Japan, October 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 224-239.

instances in Western opera where masks are used for specific artistic purposes or stylistic choices, such as operas featuring commedia dell'arte characters and avant-garde productions or experimental performances. Furthermore, masks may be used in opera productions for certain characters or scenes requiring a specific visual effect or representation, such as operas featuring a masked ball or a character in disguise.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to masks, *Noh* uses lavish costumes, again mainly used by the *Shite* or leading actor.<sup>65</sup> Traditional Western opera also values elaborate costuming but across the entire cast, including the chorus.

**Actors:** In some regions of Europe, women were not allowed, on moral grounds, to sing on stage up through part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and *Noh* opera continues to rely predominantly on an all-male cast. This convention endures due to the adaptability of *Noh* music, which can be rearranged to suit the natural vocal range of male performers, and the absence of a strict requirement for a higher treble range in the score. However, in recent years, many female performers have embraced this centuries-old art form.<sup>66</sup>

*Noh* employs very few actors on stage, usually comprised (in order of appearance) of the *Waki* (secondary character), the *Shite* (lead actor), and the *Tsure* (supporting character to either the *Shite* or the *Waki*). Sometimes, a child actor called *Kokata* is also required. The

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<sup>64</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, edited by Helen M. Greenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ISBN: 9780195335538.

<sup>65</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 240-252.

<sup>66</sup> Monica Bethe, "Noh and Gender: The Case of Female Performers." *Monumenta Nipponica* 64, no. 1 (2009): 1-35.

number of actors on stage typically ranges from 3 to 5, but including the chorus and musicians, there can be around 15 to 20 performers involved in a *Noh* play.

Western opera generally involves a much larger cast. This includes leading and supporting singers, a full chorus ranging from 20 to 100 singers, a full orchestra (which can include 30 to 100 musicians), and often many supernumeraries (non-speaking extras) and dancers.

**Objective:** Lastly, Western Opera and *Noh* may share the same basic plotlines of human life, drama, ghosts, and love, but their philosophical motivations for doing so are fundamentally different. Most Western operas seek to entertain and perhaps to provide windows into the lives of others as a form of emotional catharsis or opportunity for sympathy, whereas *Noh* operas seek to enlighten, teach, and heal. Japanese avant-garde composer Toshio Hosokawa had this to say:

“Nô ist ein Drama der Seelenheilung. Im Nô sind die Hauptfiguren in vielen Fällen Geister von Toten. Diese Totengeister sind Seelen, die im Diesseits Trauriges erfahren haben und, ohne dass die Trauer in ihren Herzen, ihr Anhaften an dieses Gefühl gelöst wurde, ins Jenseits hinübergegangen sind, erneut in diese Welt (auf die Nô-Bühne) zurückkehren: Indem sie hier vor einem buddhistischen Mönch von ihrer Tragödie erzählen, singen und tanzen, wird ihr Anhaften gelöst, so dass sie geheilt ins Jenseits eingehen können. Dieses Seelendrama ist Thema vieler Nô-Stücke. Nô ist ein Theater,



das tiefe, ursprüngliche Gefühle der Menschen schildert und dazu beiträgt, diese zu reinigen.”<sup>67</sup>

“*Noh* is a drama of soul-healing. Many of the main characters in *Noh* are ghosts whose souls have endured sorrow in life and died before finding relief within their hearts (acceptance and healing), only to return upon the *Noh* stage driven by grief. They find enlightenment and pass to the netherworld in peace by revealing this grief through recounting, singing, and dancing before a Buddhist monk. This kind of soul drama is the topic of many *Noh* operas. *Noh* is a theater that showcases humans' deep unresolved feelings and helps to cleanse them.” (translation by CKH, March 23, 2024)

Western opera is characterized by its focus on dramatic storytelling, emotional expression, and vocal virtuosity. The primary objective of Western opera is to entertain and move the audience through compelling narratives accompanied by atmosphere-enhancing musical compositions. Western opera often explores universal themes of love, betrayal, heroism, and tragedy, using music and spectacle to evoke powerful emotional responses from the audience.

On the other hand, *Noh* opera is rooted in traditional Japanese culture and aesthetics and has a more spiritual and contemplative objective. *Noh* opera seeks to transcend the boundaries of everyday reality and transport the audience to a realm of awareness and spiritual enlightenment, reflecting core Buddhist and Shinto philosophies. Entertainment is simply not

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<sup>67</sup> “Toshio Hosokawa,” Schott Musik, accessed April 9, 2024. <https://www.schott-music.com/en/person/index/index/urlkey/toshio-hosokawa>.

the primary objective. The goal is to lead the audience to a deeper understanding of the human condition and the nature of existence.<sup>68, 69</sup>

## Chapter Two

### Der Ja-Sager by Elisabeth Hauptmann, Bertolt Brecht, and Kurt Weill

#### Introduction

*Der Ja-Sager* emerged in 1930 from the collaboration between playwrights Elisabeth Hauptmann<sup>70</sup>, Bertolt Brecht<sup>71</sup>, and composer Kurt Weill<sup>72</sup> and adapts a 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Noh* opera plot, *Taniko*, into a German *Lehrtheater* work. I was fortunate to perform the role of the *Boy* in *Der Ja-Sager* myself at the age of sixteen. While I enjoyed participating in my school's production of *Der Ja-Sager*, my dissertation research has revealed a significant disparity between the creators' method of aligning technique with message and what we students experienced. Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill envisioned their opera as a form of didactic theater<sup>73</sup> within Brecht's *Episches Theater* (critical drama)<sup>74</sup> framework, intending to communicate moral and political messages to students. To support this message, *Der Ja-Sager* was to be performed using the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), a theatrical technique

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<sup>68</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, 30-44.

<sup>69</sup> Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, xxiv.

<sup>70</sup> Paula Hanssen, *Elisabeth Hauptmann: Brecht's Silent Collaborator* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1995), 15.

<sup>71</sup> John Fuegi, "Bertolt Brecht," *Colloquia Germanica* 10, no. (1976): 299–308, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23979832>.

<sup>72</sup> Biography of Kurt Weill," n.d. The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music accessed November 9, 2022, <https://www.kwf.org/kurt-weill/biography-of-kurt-weill/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Lehrstück," *Oxford Reference*, accessed 21 August 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100058804>.

<sup>74</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ed. John Willett, *The Modern Theater is the Episches Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 143-55.

designed to prevent the audience from passively identifying with characters and becoming emotionally invested in the narrative.<sup>75</sup> The concepts of *Episches Theater* and *Verfremdungseffekt*, championed by Brecht, Hauptmann, and Weill, were also central to some of their previous collaborations (*Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagony* and *Dreigroschenoper*).

Before the creation of *Der Ja-Sager*, Brecht collaborated with the renowned German composer Paul Hindemith to create a *Lehrstück* called *Der Lindberghflug* (1929 AD). Although initially conceived as a *Lehrstück*, *Der Lindberghflug* was ultimately performed by professionals at its premiere. This collaboration occurred in 1929 during the *Neue Musik Berlin* (New Music Berlin) contemporary music festival, held in Berlin, Germany, which Hindemith and his team organized.

In 1930, the *Neue Musik Berlin* festival's theme focused on young players and audiences, emphasizing educational and recreational purposes. *Der Ja-Sager* was initially commissioned for the same festival, with Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill collaborating as the creative team. But Brecht withdrew his festival participation due to a fallout with Hindemith. This unexpected turn of events led to *Der Ja-Sager* being hastily arranged for a double premiere by a student cast from the Prussian Academy for Church and School Music in Berlin.<sup>76</sup> *Der Ja-Sager* was designed from the onset for student involvement, and having students perform the premiere made it a closer realization of the *Lehrstück* concept than *Der Lindberghflug*.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ed. John Willett, *A Short Organum for the Theater*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 87-104.

<sup>76</sup> This festival was part of the annual *Donauschwingen Musik Festspiele* (Danube-Wings Music Festival), established in 1921 in Baden-Baden, Germany.

<sup>77</sup> David Drew, "Weill's School Opera," *The Musical Times* 106, no. 1474 (1965): 934-37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/954340>.

Brecht commented that *Lehrtheater* was written to develop critical thinking skills and political awareness for the participants.<sup>78</sup> On the importance of participation in a didactic play, he said,

"Das Lehrstueck lehrt dadurch dass es gespielt, nicht dadurch, dass es gesehen wird."<sup>79</sup>

("The didactic play teaches through participation, not through audience observation.").<sup>80</sup>

The 1930 premiere of *Der Ja-Sager* was devoid of exotic costumes and makeup. It featured only rudimentary sets to seemingly ensure that all participants could fully immerse themselves in critical thought without emotionally identifying with characters.<sup>81</sup>

Thirty-five years later, our school production, however, took a different approach, emphasizing collaboration and creativity across various subjects and finding didactic value in the process of working together as a group throughout the entire production. Active contributions and collaboration among many classes and subjects like choir, art, and orchestra were necessary to bring this production to fruition. Our production of *Der Ja-Sager* featured costumes in the form of Japanese Karate Gi's, many props, and meticulously painted landscape backdrops. The use of Karate Gi costumes was seen as a small homage to the original land of the opera's source, Japan, which is clearly an act of reducing Japanese culture into a single exotic token. This difference in production approach between the original and our school staging prompted me to deliberate on the strength of Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill's critical thinking message over the years. Was using a *Noh* plot helpful to their political or philosophical

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<sup>78</sup> Hanssen, *Elisabeth Hauptmann Brecht's Silent Collaborator*, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967), 1024.

<sup>80</sup> Translation:CKH, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Stege, "Neue Musik Berlin 1930," 646.

cause, or was it a gimmick? Was the source of *Der Ja-Sager*, *Taniko*, simply used as a means to an end? How did the creative team initially encounter Japanese *Noh* opera, and did the team use *Noh* performance aspects to help propagate their theatrical concepts of *Lehrtheater* and the *Verfremdungseffekt*? To understand the work better, I will explore the creative teams' lives, works, inspirations, and their treatments of *Noh*'s performance aspects in their adaptation.

### **Elisabeth Hauptmann (1897-1973)**

Elisabeth Hauptmann was born to wealthy parents in Germany on June 20, 1897. Following the era's traditions and her family's social status norms, she and her siblings received music and language lessons at home. After becoming a teacher for affluent military families in 1918, Hauptmann struggled with the hierarchy and politics forced upon her by her surroundings and moved to Berlin in 1922, where she experienced the fertile socio-political grounds of the liberal Weimar culture. Aided by her extensive French and English language training, Hauptmann became a sought-after translator.

Hauptmann met Bertolt Brecht at a party in 1924, where her impressive intellect led the author to invite her to join his collective and collaborate with him.<sup>82</sup> During her time in Brecht's collective, her responsibilities encompassed researching future material, developing dramatic ideas and forms, translating sources, contributing to authorship, and engaging in brainstorming

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<sup>82</sup> „Seine Dramen verfaßte Brecht im Kollektiv, seine Mitarbeiter übersetzten Vorlagen, sammelten material, dialogisieren Episoden oder Fabelentwürfe.....Er brauchte seine Mitarbeiter als kritische Partner für seine Vorschläge, Fragen und Zweifel.“ Klaus Völker and Hans-Jürgen Pullem, *Brecht Kommentar zum Dramatischen Werk* (München: Winkler, 1983), 101.

“Brecht created his dramas in a collective setting. His colleagues translated submissions, collected material, created dialogue for episodes or fable drafts... He needed his colleagues to act as critical partners toward his suggestions, questions, and doubts.” (translation C.K.Holien, 2023)

sessions for their projects. Among the most notable pieces she introduced to Brecht were the *Beggars Opera*, *Happy End*, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, and *Taniko*. Her significant contributions to many of Brecht's works, previously unrecognized, are now facts that scholars have established through handwritten and typed material from the *Bertolt Brecht Archive* and papers Hauptmann left behind at the *Literaturarchiv der Akademie der Künste*. This research unequivocally establishes Hauptmann's extensive authorship in many of Brecht's works.<sup>83</sup>

The rise of fascism drastically altered Hauptmann's circumstances after she was arrested and interrogated for attempting to save documents from destruction. After her release, Hauptmann fled to Paris to meet up with Brecht and other authors who had fled the growing Nazi regime. She moved to St. Louis in 1934, where she and her new husband, the German composer Paul Dessau, maintained contact with Brecht to sustain their collaborative endeavors. Hauptmann returned to Germany in 1948, and Bertolt Brecht's death in 1956 changed her life again. While she served as Brecht's literary executor for the German publishing house Suhrkamp Verlag, she began to work as a dramaturg for the Berliner Ensemble, an institution established by Brecht and his wife, Helene Weigel.<sup>84</sup> Hauptmann died in 1973 in Berlin.

### **Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)**

Bertolt Friedrich Brecht was born February 10th, 1898, in Augsburg, Germany. He is best known for his reform agenda in the theater, tilting the customary entertainment themes

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<sup>83</sup> Hanssen, *Elisabeth Hauptmann Brecht's Silent Collaborator*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> "Spotlight on Elisabeth Hauptmann," Nathan Lacy, Kurt Weill Foundation, last modified June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, accessed December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, <https://www.kwf.org/news/spotlight-on-elisabeth-hauptmann/>.

toward leftist social and ideological drama. His description of the *Episches Theater*, comprised of didactic and mostly episodic plays that avoid illusion,<sup>85</sup> is still in use today and, at the time of its emergence, caused a tremendous stir throughout Germany and the entire world. Brecht was heavily influenced by other playwrights such as Kipling, Wedekind, Villon, and Rimbaud. While he studied medicine in Munich from 1917-1921, his acquaintance with Dadaist groups helped foster his already bleak outlook on society. Germany had lost World War I, and the country's social structure was crumbling. Many levels of society blamed materialist and aristocratic hierarchy, seeking refuge in Marxist theories. Brecht's friend Karl Korsch was chief among those who brought these communist ideas closer to Brecht's heart. His collaboration with Hauptmann and Weill resulted in several pieces besides *Der Ja-Sager*, including *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagony*. Brecht was exiled for eight years under Hitler's reign, forcing him to American shores and leading him into the film-music industry. He settled in Zurich because his Marxist views eventually prevented him from staying in the US longer. He is credited with developing the *Verfremdungs-Effekt* and the *Episches Theater*.<sup>86</sup>

### **Kurt Weill (1900-1950)**

Kurt Weill was born March 2, 1900, in Dessau, Germany, showing significant musical talent from an early age. He composed and performed in the hall above his family's quarters in the *Gemeindehaus*. Weill enrolled at the Berlin *Hochschule für Musik* in 1918, where his conservative training was very restrictive. He became the conductor of the municipal theater in

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<sup>85</sup> Sarah Bryant-Bertail, "Epic Theatre," In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2003), accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001/acref-9780198601746-e-1238>.

<sup>86</sup> Fuegi, "Bertolt Brecht," 299–308.

Lüdenscheid in 1919 for one season, after which he returned to Berlin. He was accepted into Ferruccio Busoni's master-class for composition (1921-1923). Weill became a music critic for *Der Deutsche Rundfunk*, the weekly program journal of the German radio (1924-1929). Weill's compositional work significantly influenced the development of modern musical theater and opera.<sup>87</sup>

### **Why did Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill choose *Noh* as the Source Material?**

At the London International Exposition in 1862, Rutherford Alcock, a former English diplomatic representative to Japan, showcased around 1500 Japanese artifacts in one of the booths.<sup>88</sup> In the following World's Fair in Paris in 1867, where the Japanese tearoom principle especially stirred the attention of many curious fair attendees, the fad of Japonisme was born.<sup>89</sup> The artistic and intellectual scene in Paris responded enthusiastically to the new and exciting showcasing of Japanese culture and art by attempting to incorporate the newly observed inspiration into their creative output. The Japonisme movement swept through Europe, inspiring many playwrights and composers to incorporate elements of the trend, aiming to captivate audiences and fuel a fresh vision. Japonisme influenced Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill through their connections with fellow writers and composers.<sup>90</sup> Hauptmann became interested

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<sup>87</sup> The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, "Biography of Kurt Weill."

<sup>88</sup> "Vienna International Exposition and Japonism," Ndl.go.jp. National Diet Library, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.ndl.go.jp/exposition/e/s1/1873-2.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Ann Lee Morgan, "Japonisme" (Oxford University Press, 2007), 243, ISBN-13: 9780195373219.

<sup>90</sup> Sabine Kehbir, *Ich Frage Nicht nach meinem Anteil* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag GmbH, 1997), 149. Robert Marx, "MUSIC: The Operatic Brecht," *The American Scholar* 44, no. 2 (1975): 283–90.



in *Noh's* "fables," as she called them, around 1928. In a 1972 interview, she stated that she liked the simplicity and straightforwardness of the message in the play.<sup>91</sup>

"Ich war ganz betroffen von diesen kurzen Stuecken... von der schönen dramaturgischen Vielfalt, von der Poesie und vielen zugrunde liegenden technischen und ästhetischen Prinzipien"<sup>92</sup>

("I was so touched by these short plays... by their dramaturgical diversity, by their poetry and their many fundamental technical and aesthetic concepts.")<sup>93</sup>

Hauptmann, influenced by other writers such as Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, who also showed similar interest in *Noh* theater, was particularly curious about the dramaturgical aspects of *Noh* theater.<sup>94</sup> Taking the initiative, she introduced her German translation of *Taniko*, which Arthur Waley had translated from Japanese to English in his book *The Nō Plays of Japan*, to Brecht and Weill. Hauptmann's German translation had previously been published (Dec.1929) in the German theater magazine *Der Scheinwerfer* in Essen.<sup>95</sup> The team agreed that *Taniko's* straightforward plot aligned well with the principles of *Lehrtheater* and *Verfremdungseffekt*. Traditional *Noh* aims to keep the audience at a thoughtful distance and encourage them to reflect on the presented themes rather than become emotionally absorbed.

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<sup>91</sup> Kehbir, *Ich Frage Nicht nach meinem Anteil*, 149.

<sup>92</sup> Elisabeth Hauptmann, *Julia ohne Romeo, Geschichten, Stücke, Aufsätze, Erinnerungen* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1977), 175.

<sup>93</sup> Translation: CKH, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Ezra Pound, "Noh or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan," *The Classical Journal*, vol. 18, no. 7 (1923): 404-415.

<sup>95</sup> Hanssen, *Elisabeth Hauptmann Brecht's Silent Collaborator*, 60.

Thoman Di Napoli, "Bertolt Brecht and the No: A Comparison of Two Theaters." *The Comparatist* 5 (1981): 30–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44366675>.

By adapting *Taniko*, the team could use these techniques to challenge the audience to consider the play's relevance to contemporary social and ethical issues.

Already experienced collaborators Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill were no strangers to experimenting with form and content, drawing from many influences to craft politically charged and intellectually stimulating theater.<sup>96</sup> The emphasis in *Lehrtheater* is not entertainment but the teaching of moral and political messages through developing critical thinking skills and contemplating societal norms and political injustices.<sup>97</sup> Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill aimed, through *Lehrtheater*, to create a guide for young minds to realize that actions have consequences, with the unique approach of having the audience actively participate as performers by using collaborative, formalized rehearsal and stage work. *Noh*'s stark and ritualized performance, characters, and music were the perfect medium to realize the creative team's theatrical vision, as the goal was to discard the traditional elements and pretenses associated with theater up to this point. *Der Ja-Sager* features a clear example of *Gebrauchsmusik*, utility music that educates the performer rather than the audience.<sup>98</sup> In fact, Brecht comments that *Der Ja-Sager* can be performed without an audience.<sup>99</sup> Elaborate sets, naturalistic acting, and emotion-driven narratives were not needed and were seen as "illusions" blocking the development of critical thought.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Brecht, ed. Willett, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, 29-42.

<sup>97</sup> Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 248.

<sup>98</sup> "Gebrauchsmusik," *Oxford Reference*, accessed 21 August, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095845670>.

<sup>99</sup> Brecht, ed. Hauptmann, "*Gesammelte Werke*," 1024.

<sup>100</sup> Brecht, ed. Willett, *On Experimental Theatre*, 39-48.

On the (mis)use of technical illusions in theater, Brecht said this:

“Eine Wand und ein Stuhl sind schon sehr viel”<sup>101</sup>

("A wall and a chair are already a lot").<sup>102</sup>

"An illusion is created only to be shattered; it is not maintained, as in dramatic theater, where the actor must make us forget that he is acting. In our theater, there is no 'suspension of disbelief.' We believe only in what we see, in its true form." <sup>103</sup>

### **Original Plot: *Taniko* by Komparu Zenchiku (1405-1468 AD)**

#### **Synopsis of *Taniko***

In the *Noh* play *Taniko*, the boy Mastuwaka joins a religious pilgrimage led by Ajari, Head Priest of the Buddhist *Yamabushi* sect (the sect still exists). The pilgrimage will trek up a great mountain where Mastuwaka will pray for his ailing mother's healing. He is advised that the difficult journey can cost him his life, but his love for his mother is so deep that he is ready to face anything. During his journey, he falls ill and consents to the "Great Custom" of the sect, agreeing to be thrown down the mountain to cleanse himself of bad karma and prevent jeopardizing the pilgrimage. After this ritual, the *Yamabushi* monks perform a cleansing and healing ceremony, seeking aid from a mountain god. A heavenly herald arrives, picks up the dead child, and carries him to the head priest. The priest touches the child's face with his prayer beads, resurrecting him.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Brecht, ed. Hauptmann, *Gesammelte Werke vol.17*, 1024.

<sup>102</sup> Translation: CKH, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Brecht, ed. Willett, *On Experimental Theatre*, 39-48.

<sup>104</sup> "Taniko," *Noh Translations*, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://hangyo.sakura.ne.jp/utahi/text/yo225.txt>.

### **Characters (in order of appearance)**

**Waki** (Secondary actor): Ajari, Head Priest.

**Kokata** (child actor): Mastuwaka, Son.

**Shite** (Main actor): 1st part –Mother.

**Shite** (Main actor): 2<sup>nd</sup> part -Heavenly Herald.

**Wakitsure** (Companion to the secondary actor): Under-leader of *Yamabushi* and other brethren of the sect.

### **Production:**

- ❖ Use of a small orchestra.
  - *Ōtsuzumi* (hip drum)
  - *Kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum)
  - *Fue* (flute)
- ❖ Use of a small chorus-Greek style
- ❖ Traditional *Noh* stage
- ❖ Duration: c. 35 minutes

### **Synopsis of *Der Ja-Sager***

A boy begs the village teacher to let him join a dangerous mountain expedition. He wants to reach the next bigger city to acquire medicine for his sick mother. The teacher eventually allows the boy to join the expedition but is warned of the dangers. According to the

custom of the mountain, anyone is to be hurled off it if falling ill. This custom was instituted to ensure that the lives of the other travelers were not endangered. During the journey, the child falls ill and is asked if he is willing to adhere to the customs of the mountain. The child agrees so as not to jeopardize the other travelers' lives and is then thrown to his death by the rest of the travelers.

**Characters (in order of appearance)**

Teacher—Baritone

Boy—Treble

Mother—Mezzo-Soprano

Students—2 Tenors and 1 Baritone

**Production:**

❖ Use of an orchestra

- Solo flute
- Solo clarinet
- Solo alto saxophone
- Two pianos
- Harmonium
- Percussion (score states ad lib. But most likely a snare and kettle drum)

- Small string section <sup>105</sup>
- ❖ Use of small chorus(Greek style).
- ❖ Minimalistic modern set on a teaching stage, hand-drawn signs indicating places (example: Bergspitze/Mountain peak), podiums, chairs, and a door. <sup>106</sup>
- ❖ No theatrical lighting design. All lights remain steady throughout the performance.<sup>107</sup>
- ❖ No costumes, makeup, wigs, or masks
- ❖ Two acts
- ❖ Duration: circa 35 min.

### **How *Der Ja-Sagers* Musical Character Serves its Dramatic Intention**

*Der Ja-Sager* is one of Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill's most successful creations; more than 300 performances were put on in 1933 alone. Weill's music throughout *Der Ja-Sager* remains very austere and rudimentary in its sound, his instrumentation calling only for a small orchestra. The mix of classical and popular musical instruments, like violins and an alto saxophone, was carefully chosen to keep the music modern and engaging and steadily carry the plot.<sup>108</sup> The percussion section is marked *ad libitum* (most likely featuring a snare and kettle drum at the premiere); Weill always considered the wind sound of flutes, clarinets, and alto sax

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<sup>105</sup> Howard Robert Spindler, "Music in the Lehrstuecke of Bertolt Brecht,"(PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1980), 79-102.

Kurt Weill, *He who says Yes, Vocal Score* (Univerval Edition:Ltd. London, 1968), 3.

<sup>106</sup> Stege, "Neue Musik Berlin 1930," 646.

<sup>107</sup> Ernst Schliepe, "Der Jasager," *Rheinische Musik und Theater Zeitung*, No 13, 12 July, 1930, 235.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Humphreys, "Expressions of 'Einverstaendnis': Musical Structure and Affective Content in Kurt Weill's Score for 'Der Ja-Sager'" (PhD diss., University of California, 2008).

more desirable, establishing a typical "Weill" sound as exemplified in works such as *Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagony*.

The tonal center of *Der Ja-Sager* is A minor, but right from the start, Weill introduces harmonic tension by highlighting the leading tone, **Ti** (G#), along with chromaticism on C# and F#. This technique creates harmonic ambiguity and introduces an unusual tone quality compared to traditional operatic Western classical scales. Weill also uses his compositional style of changing keys in a downward progression of fifths (also present in *Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagony* and *Dreigroschenoper*) from E (dominant) to A (tonic) to D (subdominant) as well as extensive tri-tonal relationships to create a feeling of impending doom and decline.<sup>109</sup>

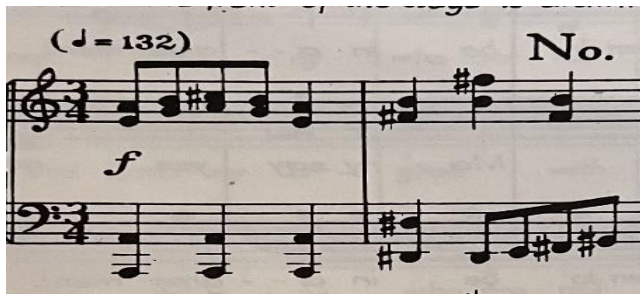


Image 8. First and second measures of *Der Ja-Sager* vocal score showing the use of A minor with augmentation and chromaticism (ABC#DEF#G#). Universal Edition UE 8206 E.<sup>110</sup>

Kurt Weill expert Ian Kemp said:

“Although Weill's music tends to favour the minor mode (presumably because of its greater versatility and lesser stability) it seems, nevertheless, to be often on the point of

<sup>109</sup> Ian Kemp, “Harmony in Weill: Some Observations,” *Tempo* No. 104 (1973): 11-15, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/943124>

<sup>110</sup> Image 8., Kurt Weill, *He Who Says Yes* (Universal Edition: London Ltd.), 3, UE8206 E. Image courtesy of European American Music Distributors Corporation, Clifton, N.J.

slipping into the major; and when it really is in the major, it often has a minor colouring.

This is one of his most personal and deeply considered ironies.”<sup>111</sup>

The *Leitmotiv* of the entire opera is a recurring ostinato march that underscores the repeating lyrics of "Wichtig zu lernen ist Einverstaendnis..." "Important to learn is consent...." <sup>112</sup> This march creates a persistent uniform cue that drives the message of resisting collective conformity in society throughout the work. *Der Ja-Sager's* deliberate musical simplicity and restraint place focus on the message, not the performance, and can be seen as a nod to the austere and extremely formalized approach in *Noh* opera.<sup>113</sup> The opera's conclusion, however, is one exception compared to the musical restraint of the rest of the opera. Here, the musical complexity and volume feature a direct and full sound swell, signaling immense human grief. <sup>114</sup>

### **Noh Practices used in *Der Ja-Sager***

Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill employed techniques of *Noh* drama across various aspects of the work, beginning with Hauptmann's libretto in which she preserves the teacher self-introduction, or *Nanori*, from the original *Noh* opera (act one, scene two) and a journey description (*Michiyuki*, act two, scene seven), initially assigned to the teacher in *Taniko* but sung by the chorus in *Der Ja-Sager*.

Musically, Weill uses a deliberately sparse orchestration, more similar to *Noh* orchestration than early 20<sup>th</sup>-century opera instrumentation, to accentuate focus on critical

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<sup>111</sup> Ian Kemp, "Harmony in Weill: Some Observations," 11-15.

<sup>112</sup> Translation: CKH, 2023.

<sup>113</sup> Stephen N Atkins, "Tonal Architecture in Selected Works by Kurt Weill" (Masters Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong, 1995), 107-128, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48542424.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Humphreys, "Expressions of 'Einverstaendnis': Musical Structure and Affective Content in Kurt Weill's Score for 'Der Ja-Sager'" (PhD diss., University of California, 2008).



thinking. Tonally, he distilled the music to its fundamental requirements, focusing on minimalist yet intense expressions.<sup>115</sup>

*Noh's* techniques can also be seen in *Der Ja-Sager's* staging through stylized movements, diverging from naturalistic acting and echoing symbolic, ritualistic movements of characters seen in *Noh's* performances. The sparsity of costumes in *Noh* opera is taken a step further in *Der Ja-Sager*, with the complete omission of costumes, makeup, elaborate sets, and lighting cues during the 1930 production.<sup>116</sup>

### **Analysis: Did Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill successfully avoid Cultural Appropriation in their Adaptation?**

Unlike operas that leveraged Asian plots for their visual spectacle, Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill did not use *Noh* opera as a mere flash. Instead, the team seems to have drawn inspiration from *Noh* to serve their artistic and ideological purposes. Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill maintained austerity across performance aspects in their adaptation to minimize the emotional involvement of participants and the audience. The goal was to stimulate critical thinking skills and political awareness, and *Noh's* performance aspects enabled them to deliver on this objective effectively.

The staging in *Ja-Sager*, parallel to the staging aspects in *Noh*, also emphasizes philosophical thought over the emotional manipulation of the audience, aligning with the overarching target of preventing undue emotional bonds. In *Noh*, characters are depicted as

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<sup>115</sup> Kemp, "Harmony in Weill: Some Observations," 2024.

<sup>116</sup> Stege, "Neue Musik Berlin 1930," 646.

archetypes rather than naturalistic individuals, employing stylized movements that diverge from naturalistic acting and resonate with the symbolic and ritualistic core of the performance, another aspect that *Der Ja-Sager* likewise embraces.

*Der Ja-Sager's* original performance design omits yellowface, which was, at the time, a commonplace in Western theatrical productions influenced by the fad for Japonisme. Designing *Der Ja-Sager* without racial stereotypes or caricatures suggests the creators' intellectual sensibilities regarding the use of cosmetic racialization (and the stereotyping that accompanies that practice) and perhaps that such an approach would invite unnecessary (and perhaps distracting) thought patterns on their way toward their didactic goals.

It is of note that *Der Ja-Sager* diverged from the original *Noh* opera *Taniko* in its ending, omitting the divine revival of the child who had faithfully followed the law of the land. Still, *Der Ja-Sager* remains a study of human rituals rather than spiritual transcendence. Hauptmann and Brecht's removal of poetic sections and lyrics further emphasizes their philosophical approach. Lyricism did not serve a purpose and thus was not necessary.

After the premiere of *Der Ja-Sager*, the trio created *Der Nein-Sager* (No-Sayer) at the request of the student cast and audience who attended the premiere. This addition was made to reinforce the message of independent thought by giving the boy the option to deny his inevitable death by saying "No." The two operas were intended to be performed as a set.

In closing, no evidence suggests that Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill used *Noh* opera and created a hegemonic, exotic, and culturally appropriating adaptation. Instead, their integration of *Noh* elements appears to have been a deliberate artistic choice to achieve specific artistic

and ideological goals. By drawing on elements of *Noh* opera to create intellectually thought-provoking theater, Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill offer a model for how art can respectfully address pressing social issues and inspire audiences to engage with the world around them critically.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance by Benjamin Britten and William Plomer**

#### **Introduction**

*Curlew River* is an opera by Benjamin Britten<sup>117</sup> and William Plomer<sup>118</sup> based on the 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Noh* opera *Sumidagawa* by Jūrō Motomasa (1395–1432 AD). In 1956, Britten attended a performance of *Sumidagawa* by the *Umetani* Group of the *Kanze* school, featuring Takehisa Umewaka as *Shite*, at the Suido Basho Theater in Tokyo. Britten attended this performance at the recommendation of his friend and frequent artistic collaborator William Plomer.<sup>119</sup> Plomer had previously lived and worked in Japan, immersing himself in Japanese culture. He was convinced *Noh* opera would inspire Britten's musical genius. Initially taken aback by the performance practice, Britten's perception quickly shifted as he became captivated by *Noh's* intense stylized art.

"At first, it seemed too silly...."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Peter F. Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," *Music & Letters* 69, no. 2 (1988): 229–43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/855218>.

<sup>118</sup> William Plomer, *The Autobiography of William Plomer* (New ed. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).

<sup>119</sup> Mervyn Cooke, "Britten and the Sho," *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1743 (1988): 231–33, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/964946>.

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin Britten, ed. Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Vol. 4* (Boydell & Brewer: 2008), 409.

“The memory of this play has seldom left my mind in the years since. Was there not something—many things—to be learned from it?”<sup>121</sup>

Britten became so fascinated with *Noh's* art form that, upon his return to England, he instantly contacted Plomer to engage him as the librettist for an English adaptation of *Sumidagawa*.<sup>122</sup> Britten and Plomer worked for eight years to complete a unique adaptation that weaves aspects of Western opera, a complete *Noh* opera plot, and *Noh* musical and performance aspects. Notably, Britten and Plomer were deeply committed to avoiding the superficial treatment of *Noh* in their creation and expressed concerns about preserving their adaptation's authenticity and integrity. In a letter to Plomer in 1959, Britten said,

"I have been very worried, lest the work would seem a pastiche of a *Noh* play, which however well done, would seem false and thin."<sup>123</sup>

### **William Plomer (1903-1973)**

William Plomer was born on December 10, 1903, in Transvaal, South Africa. Plomer received his education in England and became known as a writer, heavily influenced by his South African heritage. His first novel, *Turbot Wolfe*, written in 1925, sparked a scandal because of Plomer's sensibilities regarding the treatment of whites toward Black people, going so far as to portray some of his white characters in the book as villains.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Benjamin Britten, Paul Kildea, *To the Music Lovers of Japan* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 157.

<sup>122</sup> Plomer, *The Autobiography of William Plomer*, 404.

<sup>123</sup> Britten, eds Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976: Volume Five* (Boydell Press, 2010), 130.

<sup>124</sup> Plomer, *The Autobiography of William Plomer*, 404.

Plomer was a versatile writer, his genres ranging from poetry to novels to opera libretti and more. He was one of the founders of a South African magazine called *Voorslag* (Whiplash<sup>125</sup>). This magazine sought to expose the racist currents in South African society unabashedly. The magazine, however, stoked the ire of the South African public and was shut down because it was deemed too offensive. After the magazine failed, Plomer traveled throughout Europe and Asia. These travels led him to Japan, where he stayed for two years, furthering his writings, traveling the country, and engrossing himself in Japanese culture. He also taught English at the Tokyo School for Foreign Language and later at a privileged private high school.<sup>126</sup>

Plomer wrote four opera libretti for Benjamin Britten, beginning with *Gloriana* (1953), then *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).<sup>127</sup> He was an avid writer of letters, and much of his correspondence is still available for reading.<sup>128</sup> During World War II, he served the British Naval Intelligence and became the senior editor at *Jonathan Cape* Publishing House. In 1968, Plomer was awarded the honor of Commander of the Order of the British Empire, honoring his status as a highly regarded member of British society. He died on September 21, 1973, in East Sussex, England.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *Dictionary of South African English*, s.v. "Voorslag," accessed April 07, 2023, <https://dsae.co.za/entry/voorslag/e07754>.

<sup>126</sup> *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, s.v. "Plomer, William," accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/plomer-william>,

<sup>127</sup> Plomer, *The Autobiography of William Plomer*, 404.

<sup>128</sup> Plomer Collection, 1870-1973 (predominantly post-1920), Durham University Archives, GB 33 PLO' on the Archives Hub website, accessed September 10, 2023, <http://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb33-plo>.

<sup>129</sup> Plomer, *The Autobiography of William Plomer*, 404.

### **Benjamin Britten (1913-1976):**

Benjamin Britten's body of operatic works spans more than three decades. It includes numerous masterpieces inspired by a wide range of literary sources - modern, ancient, domestic, and foreign from *Peter Grimes* (1945) to *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), and *Death in Venice* (1973). Britten is an enduring musical figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of the quality and complexity of his ability to seek out and create new styles and musical forms, some of which were inspired by music from outside of the Western classical music realm; for example, he borrows the sound of Balinese Gamelan in his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1957).<sup>130</sup>

*Curlew River* proved to be a turning point for Britten's compositional style, as he began to create several fusion pieces after this particular opera. *Curlew River*, however, remained his only opera directly influenced by *Noh*.<sup>131</sup>

### **Britten and Plomer's Relationship with the Source Material**

In 1956, William Plomer, a prolific author and long-time resident of Japan, encouraged his collaborative partner, Benjamin Britten, to attend a *Noh* opera during Britten's 12-day stay on the Japanese Archipelago.<sup>132</sup> Britten followed Plomer's advice and attended the *Noh* opera *Sumidagawa* by Jūrō Motomasa, a Japanese playwright active during the Ashikaga period (1336 – 1568 AD), at a *Noh* opera house in Tokyo. The performance deeply affected Britten.

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<sup>130</sup> Mervyn Cooke, "Benjamin Britten and the Balinese Gamelan," *Indonesia Circle. School of Oriental & African Studies Newsletter* 18, no.52 (1990): 22-24, DOI: 10.1080/03062849008729733.

<sup>131</sup> Paul Kildea, "Benjamin Britten: A Life in The Twentieth Century (London, 2013).

<sup>132</sup> Mikiko Ishii, "The Weeping Mothers in Sumidagawa, Curlew River, and Medieval European Religious Plays," *Comparative Drama* 39, no. 3 (2005): 287-305, [doi:10.1353/cdr.2005.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2005.0025).

"But soon we began to catch on a bit, & at the end, it was very exciting ....."<sup>133</sup>

"The simple touching story, the economy of the style, the intense slowness of the action, the marvelous skill and control of the performers, the beautiful costumes, the mixture of chanting, speech, singing....it all offered up a new 'operatic' experience..... "

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Of course, as experienced artists, Britten and Plomer wanted their endeavor to succeed. Both creators knew that *Noh's* distinctive acting and singing styles were not necessarily familiar to Western audiences, so they decided that a familiar Western setting would smooth the divide between their audience and the material. To do so, the team placed the opera plot in a medieval catholic rite setting. As a child, Britten had been exposed to Anglican church rituals and plainchant and had studied medieval mystery dramas that used churches as performance venues.<sup>135</sup> Britten was also familiar with using churches as a venue for his music, for example, during the Aldeburgh Music Festivals, which Britten had co-founded in 1948 in Suffolk.<sup>136</sup> Subsequently, using a church as a venue for the performance of *Curlew River* was a pragmatic and natural choice for Britten and Plomer.

One of the components of *Noh's* performance practice that Britten borrowed for the original production of *Curlew River* was a set similar to that of the standardized

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<sup>133</sup> Benjamin Britten, ed. Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Vol. 4*, 409.

<sup>134</sup> William Plomer, *Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance set to Music by Benjamin Britten*.

<sup>135</sup> Benjamin Britten, eds. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life, The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, and Diaries, Volume One, 1923-39* (London: Faber, 1991).

<sup>136</sup> "Archive of Aldeburgh Music and its preceding administrative bodies, 1971-2014," Britten Pears Arts Archive, GB 1111 ALD' on the Archives Hub website, accessed November 10, 2023, <http://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb1111-ald>.

*Noh* stage construction, which he requested be constructed in the church venue. Additionally, Britten and Plomer decided to use an all-male ensemble even though there are female characters. The decision to recontextualize the original *Noh* plot as a Catholic Church rite performance leverages a convenient parallel between the all-male structures of *Noh* opera troupes and Catholic all-male leadership structures. Musically, the religious Gregorian chant *Te Ante Terminum* served as the opera's root musical *leitmotif*, anchoring *Curlew River* within Britten's religious-themed one-act Church parable trilogy together with *The Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*.

When Britten's and Plomer's *Curlew River* premiered in England in June 1964, it provoked criticism mainly centered on the creator's intent.<sup>137</sup> Although Britten had been previously labeled 'conservative' and 'unadventurous,' this new piece puzzled the critics because of the novelty of its sound.<sup>138</sup> Critic Jeremy Noble mentioned that, as in *Noh*, Britten's music for this piece seemed to play a submissive role, mainly because of the very small orchestra and cast. The last opera he composed before *Curlew River*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, called for no fewer than thirty instrumentalists and included fifteen percussion instruments compared to only seven players for *Curlew River*.

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<sup>137</sup> For a knowledgeable digest of critical reactions to Britten's work, see Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London, 1979), 2-3.

<sup>138</sup> Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," 229-43.



## **Original Plot: *Sumidagawa* by Jūrō Motomasa (1401-1432 AD)**

### **Synopsis**

*Sumidagawa* is the story of a woman driven to madness by the yearlong search for her kidnapped son. She encounters a traveler and a ferryman on the banks of *Sumida* (a river running through modern-day Tokyo) and asks to cross the river with them. During the crossing, the Ferryman tells the story of a child he had met this very same day a year ago after the child had managed to escape some slave traders. The travelers and the Ferryman observe a Buddhist service on the other side of the river, and the Ferryman explains that the service is in honor of the boy, who had faced a sudden illness and looming death with tremendous bravery. The woman cries in anguish as she realizes the perished child must be her son. The Ferryman takes her to her son's grave, where she prays until she suddenly hears her son's voice. He appears before her, but although she attempts to touch him, he disappears, never to be seen again. Finally, she regains her sanity because she fully accepts the reality of her son's death.<sup>139</sup>

### **Characters (in order of appearance)**

**Waki** (Secondary actor): Ferryman

**Wakitsure** (Companion secondary actor): Traveler

**Shite** (Main actor): Woman

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<sup>139</sup> "Sumida-Gawa (Sumida-Gawa River)," *Noh Plays Database: Sumida-gawa (Sumida-gawa River) : Synopsis and Highlight*, accessed November 8, 2023. [https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program\\_012.html#:~:text=In%20Musashi%20Province%20at%20dusk,decides%20to%20wait%20for%20her](https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_012.html#:~:text=In%20Musashi%20Province%20at%20dusk,decides%20to%20wait%20for%20her).

**Kokata** (Child actor): The Ghost of the Boy, dressed entirely in white

### **Production details**

- ❖ Traditional *Noh* orchestra
  - Ōtsuzumi
  - Kostuzumi
  - Fue
- ❖ Small chorus
- ❖ Traditional *Noh* stage
- ❖ Length, circa one hour and thirty minutes in one act. <sup>140</sup>

### **Synopsis of *Curlew River***

After introducing the plainchant *Te lucis ante terminum* sung by several monks, the Abbot narrates the story's opening, which takes place at the banks of the fictional *Curlew River* in early medieval England. Here, a costume change happens on stage, and the Abbot becomes the Ferryman, talking with a traveler who urges him to wait at the crossing so that a woman he has met on the street can join. The woman arrives, and the Ferryman hesitates to let a demented woman on board; however, the Traveler and the chorus advocate for her to join them. During the crossing, the Ferryman tells the story of a boy who came to him a year ago, asking him to cross the river. He remarks that the boy was too exhausted from his successful

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<sup>140</sup> "Sumida-Gawa (Sumida-Gawa River) : Details," *Noh Plays DataBase*, accessed November 8, 2023, [https://www.the-Noh.com/en/plays/data/detail\\_012.html](https://www.the-Noh.com/en/plays/data/detail_012.html).

efforts to escape slave traders and perished. The Madwoman is in anguish because she realizes he is talking about her child. The Ferryman takes her to the grave of her son, and after fervent praying, she suddenly hears the voice of her son, who is telling her to regain her calm since he is now at peace. With her heartfelt exclamation of the word "Amen," her dementia is taken from her as a sign of reaching inner peace. The actors don their monk robes and finish the play with the same plainchant melody from the beginning.

### **Characters (in order of appearance)**

Monks—Three Tenors, three Baritones, and three Basses.

Abbot—Bass

Ferryman--Baritone

Traveler--Baritone

Mother--Tenor

Child--Treble

### **Premiere production details**

#### ❖ Orchestra

- Flute
- Horn
- Viola
- Double bass
- Harp

- Chamber organ

#### Percussion

- small drums
- five small bells
- large gong<sup>141</sup>
- ❖ Unconducted<sup>142</sup>
- ❖ Costumes: muted colors and monk robes<sup>143</sup>
- ❖ Lighting: muted with a few highlights<sup>144</sup>
- ❖ Location: A church at Orford as part of the Aldeburgh Festival<sup>145</sup>
- ❖ Set: Custom Designed Stage with cardinal directions in mind<sup>146</sup>
- ❖ Physical Presentation: use of stylized gestures.<sup>147</sup>

### **How *Curlew River's* Musical Character Serves its Dramatic Intention**

Britten and Plomer identified universal plot themes found in both Western opera and Japanese *Noh*, inspiring them to incorporate these shared elements into *Curlew River*. Britten's desire to break away from the weight of 19th-century operatic traditions likely made *Noh* an

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<sup>141</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Rehearsal Score* (London: Faber Music Ltd, 1997), vi.

<sup>142</sup> Benjamin Britten and William Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River* (London: Faber Music Ltd, 1997), 3.

<sup>143</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 4.

<sup>144</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 3.

<sup>145</sup> Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," 229–43.

<sup>146</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 1.

<sup>147</sup> Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," 229–43.

appealing and effective tool for reimagining the form. The unique characteristics of *Noh*, which are so different from traditional European practices, provided him with new artistic possibilities for reshaping opera. Central to both *Sumidagawa* and *Curlew River* is the theme of overcoming grief. The plot of *Curlew River* mirrors that of *Sumidagawa*: a mother, consumed by grief and trauma, embarks on a quest to find her kidnapped son. Confronted with the reality of her son's death, the mother faces a pivotal moment of reckoning as she stands before his grave. Will she surrender to her overwhelming despair and descend fully into madness, or will she find the strength to overcome her grief? Britten and Plomer express this crucial moment of resolution in Christian terms, while the mother in the original *Noh* opera finds sanity through a Buddhist conception of acceptance - two distinct religious traditions but very similar conclusions. Many components of *Curlew River*'s production and dramatic focus reinforce the message of peace and acceptance as a principle of what one could call 'spiritual education.' Musically, Britten achieves this by using stark pitch content with a strong tension between the Mother and the rest of the characters. D3 is the core pitch of the whole opera, as many melodic lines begin or end on it. The Abbot's and chorus's music weave between D3, F, F#, A3, and C4. Imitating the Japanese Sho (mouth organ), the chamber organ accompanies mainly the Abbot and the chorus. The Ferryman's music and vocal lines are centered around A3, his primary accompanying instrument being the horn. Nearly all his entries feature a forte-piano, followed by a *leitmotif* of sextuplet sixteenth notes (Image 9). The Ferryman does deviate from the primary pitch throughout his sung parts but always returns to A, indicating the routine nature of his ferryman's duties.

On the other hand, the Madwoman's vocal line and music move through various pitches and modulations to reflect her insanity. Her primary pitch, the D#5, is a half-step from the Abbot's D3 in the lower octaves and a tritone above the Ferryman's A3. Her secondary pitch, G#4, is a halftone from the Ferryman's A#3 and a tritone from the Abbot's D#3, showing the dissonance and discord with the other characters. Her pitches drive the harmonic and dramatic content, especially with her constant modulations, undulating in her madness, always moving toward the D#5, represented by fast major-minor shifts. The Madwoman's primary instrument is the flute, representing the Curlew birds constantly on her deranged mind. She has a six-pitch motive descending by major 7<sup>th</sup>, between D#5 and E4. This motive becomes very intense when she discovers that her son is dead (Image 10). The Traveler has neither a set *leitmotif* nor a set instrument, borrowing music from other characters and never developing a core pitch. In this way, Britten ingeniously indicates that the Traveler is just that, a traveler with no "home" to return to. The Traveler's borrowing of pitches from other characters in this opera, however, indicates contact, an occurrence mainly found in the Traveler's interaction with other people. The central question of Britten's *Curlew River* is, as in the *Noh* original, will the Madwoman overcome her grief? Seeing and interacting with the ghost of her son resolves her D# into an E. While meeting her dead son, her music becomes much more balanced, with diatonic 3rds on F and C, demonstrating the settling of her conflict. Britten uses the Madwoman's *leitmotif* pitches during her dead son's final sung, "Amen," illustrating her acceptance of the situation and anticipating the beginning of her subsequent mental healing process.

10 As before  
(Come sopra)  
FERRYMAN  
FAHRMANN

To-day is an im - por - tant day,  
9 Heut' ist ein be - son - d'rer Tag,

Ma - ny people need the fer - ry  
Vie - le wol - len auf die Fäh - re,

Hn.

Vla. p

Db p

Image 9. Rehearsal score of *Curlew River*.<sup>148</sup>

my hope is swept a-way! —  
meine Hof - fen weg - ge - spüht!

Image 10. Rehearsal score of *Curlew River*.<sup>149</sup>

### **Noh Practices used in *Curlew River***

As mentioned above, Britten required a custom stage built on top of the existing performance space. This stage was modeled after the traditional *Noh* stage, featuring a long bridge entrance, a dedicated space for the orchestra, and areas for certain staging moments and particular characters (Figures 3 and 4). The *Curlew River* stage was also built with the

<sup>148</sup> Image 9., Rehearsal score of *Curlew River*, Page 11, second system, measure one and two. *Curlew River*, Text by William Plomer, Music by Benjamin Britten, ©1966 by Faber Music Ltd Reproduced by kind permission of Faber Music Ltd, All Rights Reserved.

<sup>149</sup> Image 10., Rehearsal score of *Curlew River*, Page 75, second system, first measure. *Curlew River*, Text by William Plomer, Music by Benjamin Britten, ©1966 by Faber Music Ltd Reproduced by kind permission of Faber Music Ltd, All Rights Reserved.

cardinal directions of South, West, East, and North to help the audience retain their bearings during the play when the performers mentioned directions.<sup>150</sup>

Unlike traditional Western classical opera scores but similar to *Noh*, *Curlew River* does not prescribe metrical or durational units to its melodic content, resulting in unpredictable lengths of the bars.<sup>151</sup> Adding to the unpredictability, there is no conductor, and different *tempi* are assigned to the characters. Therefore, *leitmotifs*, rhythms, and melodies will overlap throughout the opera in imprecise ways. The orchestra accompanies characters with musical *leitmotifs*, their musical developments continuously contrasting, clashing, and overlapping.

Also, similarly to *Noh*, Britten stages *Curlew River* using ritualistic actions for individual characters as a strategy for keeping an unconducted ensemble organized. He assigns specific movements to the most prevalent character in each scene, the gestures tied to specific words and actions.<sup>172</sup> Britten admits in his production notes:

"Considerable rehearsal time is needed to achieve this integration....."<sup>152</sup>

Britten's performance notes state that movement used by the performers and production details should be as scarce and economical as possible, just like a traditional *Noh* performance.

"... the miming, which plays an integral part, is symbolic and should be pared down to its quintessence...

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<sup>150</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 1.

<sup>151</sup> Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," 229–43.

<sup>152</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 3.



"Every movement of the hand or tilt of the head of a performer should assume immense meaning .....must be designed and executed with the utmost intensity."

His notes also mention how mentally and physically taxing such a performance practice is; the whole cast of *Curlew River* underwent intensive movement instructions and physical education before the production began and maintained them throughout the production.<sup>153</sup> Such particular training is unusual for the Western opera singer but commonplace for *Noh* performers, as mentioned in Zeami's treatise *Fushikaden*.<sup>154</sup>

The lighting of *Curlew River* also corresponds closely to *Noh's* performance practices; Britten's notes state that lighting should be simple, and no theatrical effect must be attempted besides using view spotlights and pageant lanterns to enhance the atmosphere.<sup>155</sup>

In another big nod toward *Noh*, Britten instructs the three main characters of *Curlew River* to wear masks in the beginning, and actors were instructed to intensely work on using masks in front of the mirror or in front of each other to learn all effective angles of operation. Emotions the performer wants to convey should not be expressed with the face or eyes but with ritualistic movements of the head, hands, or body, thus supporting the end goal of removing all naturalism from the performance.<sup>156</sup>

*Curlew River* also uses the *Noh* feature of female impersonation by a male actor because this aspect follows Japanese and British medieval performance traditions of only allowing male

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<sup>153</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of the NŌ Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 2.

<sup>156</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 3.

performers on stage.<sup>157</sup> Britten mentions that there should be no question about the actors merely representing characters, not imitating them, meaning that the acting in *Curlew River* should adhere to ritualistic movements representing the emotions of the characters rather than following naturalistic acting in which movements of the actors spring from the emotions and actions of the characters. To implement this ritualistic approach, Britten emphasizes that every movement of all characters, whether solo or in groups, must be methodically choreographed and predetermined, specifying the exact positions where performers come to a halt on stage and the pace at which they move.<sup>158</sup>

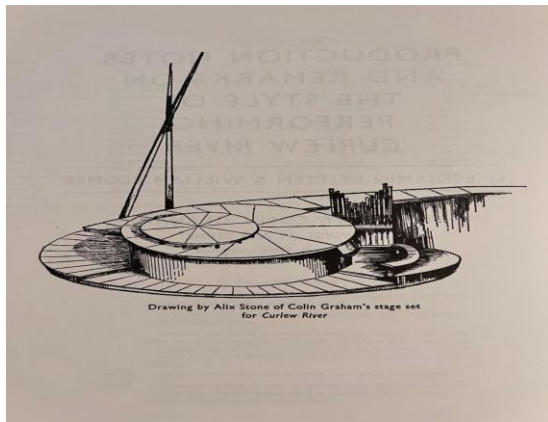


Figure 3. Drawing by Alix Stone of the *Curlew River* production for the Aldeburgh Festival, 1964, England.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Minoru Fujita, *Transvestism and the Onnagata Traditions in Shakespeare and Kabuki* (Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 24.

<sup>158</sup> Britten and Plomer, *Production Notes and Remarks on the Style of Performing Curlew River*, 3.

<sup>159</sup> Figure 3., *Curlew River*, Text by William Plomer, Music by Benjamin Britten, ©1966 by Faber Music Ltd Reproduced by kind permission of Faber Music Ltd, All Rights Reserved.

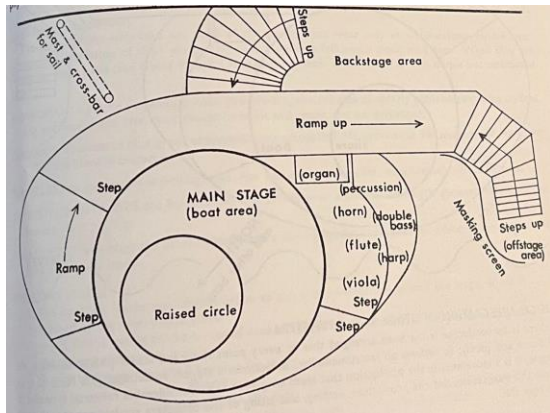


Figure 4. Diagram by Mark Livingston for the *Curlew River* production, Aldeburgh Festival, 1964, England.<sup>160</sup>

**Analysis: Did Britten and Plomer successfully avoid Cultural Appropriation in their Adaptation?**

Britten and Plomer began their creative process by obtaining the most accurate translation, utilizing Plomer's academic connections in Japan, and collaborating with Japanese scholars through the Japanese classics' translation committee. This endeavor was supervised by Plomer's close associate, Prof. Sanki Ichikawa.<sup>161</sup> One of Britten and Plomer's first thoughts toward their homage to *Noh* was the need to avoid creating a "pastiche" or parody of the original, like so many other European works that have their original inspiration in Japanese roots, failed to do.<sup>162</sup>

When comparing this effort to *Der Ja-Sager*, it is important to consider that more than thirty years had passed, including the impact of World War II. During this time, popular views of

<sup>160</sup> Figure 4., *Curlew River*, Text by William Plomer, Music by Benjamin Britten, ©1966 by Faber Music Ltd Reproduced by kind permission of Faber Music Ltd, All Rights Reserved.

<sup>161</sup> Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's *Curlew River*," 229–43.

<sup>162</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, Vol. 5*, 130.

Japan shifted dramatically in the Western world. Meanwhile, Western scholars continued to gain a deeper understanding of the subtleties and depth of Japanese musical practices, moving beyond the superficial qualities that had historically characterized Japan in the Western perspective. To put it simply, Britten and Plomer had easier and more complete access to knowledge about *Noh* and Japanese theater, and that fact is made clear by the extent to which they incorporated meaningful features of that form in their work.<sup>163</sup>

That said, questions remain about the fleeting nature of Britten's interest in *Noh* techniques as a tool. Was this a transient curiosity for Britten? Or did he continue to honor the insights that can be drawn from a *Noh* approach to theater as a philosophical experience in less explicit ways in his later operas? This is an interesting potential question for future research.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, examining cultural appropriation in *Der Ja-Sager* and *Curlew River* has revealed distinct cultural dynamics and motivations within Japanese *Noh* adaptations in Western opera. Through an in-depth analysis of both works, several key insights emerge: Britten and Plomer deeply respected *Noh* opera and its intricate performance traditions. Their commitment to avoiding a parody in their adaptation of *Noh* underscores their dedication to treating the source material with reverence and authenticity. Britten and Plomer made a great effort to obtain accurate translations and collaborate with Japanese scholars to ensure a nuanced understanding of *Sumidagawa's* themes and plot. Likewise, the actions detailing all

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<sup>163</sup> Britten, ed. Gishford, *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on His Fiftieth Birthday*, 169.

Heather Wiebe, ed. Philip Rupprecht, *Curlew River and Cultural Encounter* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166.

performance aspects of *Curlew River* indicate a much more in-depth knowledge of the art form of *Noh* than previous composers exhibited. In addition, the thematic parallels between *Sumidagawa* and *Curlew River* highlight Britten and Plomer's awareness of universal human experiences embedded in Western and Japanese operatic traditions. Their adaptation thoroughly and respectfully integrates *Noh* elements into a Western operatic context, exploring themes of grief, faith, and spiritual transcendence.

On the other hand, Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill approached *Noh* opera as a vehicle for their distinct ideological purposes in *Der Ja-Sager*, avoiding emotional connections in favor of stimulating critical meditation on politics and morality. The fact that the source's origin came from a centuries-old performance tradition aimed at achieving a zen state of mind seems to have been an afterthought. The fact that the source was also a highly elite art form only for trained and guild-approved professionals was not considered a significant concern. However, the absence of yellowface and the deliberate avoidance of exoticism in their adaptation make their adaptation less subject to accusations of tokenizing Asian culture for its entertainment value. To that extent, *Der Ja-Sager* rises above the fray amongst its Asian-fetishizing contemporaries.

Ultimately, both adaptations emphasize the universality of human experiences, and in that regard, they excel in transcending cultural boundaries. While hegemonic behaviors are still noticeable, particularly in *Der Ja-Sager*, my research highlights that both creative teams were deeply impressed by *Noh* opera, leading them to make considerable efforts to create adaptations that avoided exoticism. Could more research have been undertaken? Certainly, especially in the context of today's heightened cultural awareness nearly a century later.

However, these artists broke away from the trend of Japonisme during its peak and laid the groundwork for how cross-cultural influences can enhance artistic expression and stimulate critical reflection on societal issues when approached with respect and awareness.

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