

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(September 19th, 1984)

ARIFUKU KAGURA COMPANY

Watching traditional and ritualistic performances from other countries makes one realise the relative poverty of this country where such events are concerned. This it seems especially so with our religious activities; one can hardly take a *Gymanfa Ganu* on the road as a stage production. But when one thinks of the various dramatic, musical or dance rituals practised in many other countries as a means of bringing on rain, good health or appeasement of the gods, one realises the degree to which music and dance have in this country become almost totally separated from the natural events of our daily lives (except from rugby matches).

Not only that, but we seem to have lost, if we ever had it, the notion of ritual in the theatre and concert hall . . . the ability to create and appreciate the sophistication that comes from simplicity. We seem not to be able to differentiate too clearly between that sophisticated simplicity and naivety.

It has only been more recently, with the church parables of Benjamin Britten, the minimalist music of Riley and Glass and the hauntingly simple but lovely harmonies of Lou Harrison that there has been an attempt to return to the 'innocence' and freedom from 'high art' of dramatic and musical ritual.

It was salutary, then, to attend a performance by the Japanese Arifuku Kagura Company, who come from the Shimane Prefecture on Honshu and to witness ritualistic performances that reach back in an unbroken span across the centuries.

The performers often use, and speak through, elaborate masks, a practice that we in the west unfortunately dropped with the fall of Hellenic Greece. Seeing the masks used now, it becomes apparent how much is gained in the dramatic power of communication of character (and vocal characterisation) by their use.

The costumes were dazzlingly rich in their colours and embroidery, but the actions and themes were simple and the music reduced to an absolute minimum of drums and flute.

The performance consisted of the presentation of a number of rituals (for the sanctification of the acting area, for bringing good fortune) and traditional legends and ceremonies, enacted with a minimum of scenery but a maximum of effectiveness through the medium of highly stylised movement, music and speech.

Also evident was the concern for, belief in and appreciation of the quality of the present moment and a veneration of the individuality of the artifact at hand whether it was a rush mat or a bowl of tea. This attitude is so very far removed from that of the throwaway society for whom every article is something that can be replaced and from the TV society for whom it is future promise, not the present moment, that is the more important. (It is ironic of course that it is the schizophrenic Japanese who are amongst the current leaders in these latter attitudes also).

Music and art can not be separated from politics and life. Art (music) is a representation of an attitude to life.

There was one notable musical climax, an extended work for five drums (odaiko) bamboo flute (fue) and cymbal (tebira-gane) in which the drum sticks danced on the skins as though to a secret, long-breathed, inevitable rhythm of their own. When the music broke into a complex quick-time one realised that there was a combination of sophistication of rhythm and performance movement that has not been approached in Western music until Harry Partch and Steve Reich (and more controversially Lauri Anderson). Only in ballet have we preserved (if there ever was anything else to preserve) this kind of tradition. Whatever else there was in the pre-Renaissance period has been elbowed out of the way by the more 'artful' and manufactured surface quality of classical music.

In addition to the generally slow moving, mesmerising, sequences on the stage, the Arifuku Kagura Company produced one of the most dramatic scenic, slights of hand that I have ever witnessed when a giant, stylised spider's web of paper streamers was dropped suddenly and silently from a frame. As the characters became enmeshed in this metaphoric web, one realised that in its breathtaking simplicity, effectiveness and aesthetic beauty there was encapsulated a whole world of sophistication of preception and ritual that we have either lost or had never gained.