

GOING TRAVELLING?

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Japan's capital is brimming with a dazzling panoply of music, as Oliver Lamford discovers

Tokyo is one of the few places in the world that can give even a hardened urbanite that sense of a yokel's first venture into the big smoke. Towers loom and streets bustle whatever the time of day or night, and visitors are subjected to a constant barrage of light and sound. A foray to the Shibuya Center Gai crossing, made famous by the film *Lost in Translation*, shows Tokyo at its most hectic; vast crowds flow across the road, as J-pop buskers compete with cinema-size screens blaring adverts and jingles. But even when you leave the famous centres, Tokyo's streets continue to ring with music. Meandering carts sell hot sweet potatoes, advertising their wares by squeezing a mournful song from battered, tinny speakers. Every mainline station plays a unique jingle as trains depart (Ebisu hosts a theme from *The Third Man* though seemingly performed

by a child on a xylophone). Strange as it is, such muzak is comforting compared to the tsunami of noise released as the automatic doors of a pachinko parlour slide back, and the sound of roaring techno and rattling metal balls is hurled into the street.

Tokyo does not have one music scene, but many, and they are just as bustling, eclectic and eccentric as its streets. Despite Japanese society's (often deserved) reputation for uniformity, Tokyo hosts such a variety of idiosyncratic bars and musical communities that it can leave the itinerant music lover baffled by choice. That difficulty soon becomes a blessing once armed with a gig guide, and **Metropolis Magazine** (www.metropolis.co.jp) offers extensive

listings in English for jazz, world, rock, and clubbing, though for traditional music the **Tokyo Tourist Information Center** (www.tourism.metro.tokyo.jp) is by far the best resource. English speaking and extremely helpful, they offer information on performances and will even assist with bookings. The website is sparse, so contact them for more information.

For hundreds of years, Western influence was forcibly inhibited in Japan, but over the last century successive waves of Western music have flowed into Tokyo harbour, and prompted sonic booms in everything from classical and jazz to punk and hip-hop. The resulting Japanese artists have often been dismissed as imitative and inauthentic, but look past the pop and there are riches in store. Tokyo may receive the top-touring artists from all over the world, but the city's indigenous music has so much to offer that it demands exploration.



Rainbow Bridge stretching over northern Tokyo bay

TRADITIONAL MUSIC VENUES

Though Western styles and home-grown J-pop now prevail, numerous traditional forms of music remain strong. The folk-derived ballads of *enka* have long been popular, and a new generation of revivals has emerged, often blending ancient styles with Western elements. Beatles songs on the *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute) might not be to your taste, but the growth in interest such novelties bring is giving talented performers access to mass-market venues, as when the rising *taiko* star Leonard Eto recently played at the spruced-up **Shibuya Duo** (East Bldg, 1F, 2-14-80 Dougenzaka, Shibuya, www.duomusicexchange.com). But sometimes more unusual venues are necessary to find music untouched by modern forms.

Kabuki, the traditional popular theatre of Japan, is both intricate and accessible. The exuberant, aesthetic

showmanship makes for hugely enjoyable performances, but bear in mind that some feature more music than others; look out for the dance-dramas (*shosagoto*) in which massed ranks of *shamisen* (three-stringed plucked lute) weave a powerful and energetic sound. The **Kabuki-za** (4-12-5 Ginza, www.shochiku.co.jp/play/kabukiza/theater) is the prime dedicated venue and its beautiful facade is a tourist attraction in its own right. It offers earphone guides with excellent commentary in English. Interval *bento* lunch boxes and complimentary shouts from the audience add to the fun.

With its long pauses, extended guttural yelping, piercingly distorted flute, and sharp percussive strikes, the music of *nō* (the country's oldest form of musical theatre) requires as much patience as the stage performances, but is equally rewarding. Formalised around 600 years ago, it is so refined that there

is almost nothing left, but the little that remains is extremely potent. The slow pace may prompt narcolepsy in some, but amid Tokyo's frantic chaos, venues like the **Kanze Noh-gakudo** (1-16-4 Shoto, Shibuya, www.kanze.net) offer an oasis of concentration and subtlety.

Even older than *nō*, the ethereal chimes, clangs, and booms of *gagaku* (orchestral court music) create an atmosphere like no other. Concerts are very rare, but highly recommended, especially when part of a full performance with slow, graceful dances in rich costume and exotic mythological masks. The Nihon Gagakukai performs in August and November each year at the national **Kokuritsu Gekijo** (4-1 Hayabusacho, Chiyoda, www.ntj.jac.go.jp/english), which also presents a wide-ranging programme of traditional Japanese music, though the concert-hall style inevitably drains some of the atmosphere.



Crazy for Kodo – Sadogashima's Earth Festival

FESTIVALS

A far livelier place to hear traditional music is at one of Tokyo's many festivals held at one of the city's countless shrines, though there is a huge variety in size and content. Many feature exuberant street parades of portable shrines hefted through heaving crowds, which are accompanied by lively ensembles of drum, lute, and flute. One of the most famous is the **Tsukuda Matsuri** held over three days around August 6 at **Sumiyoshi-jinja shrine** (1-1-14 Tsukuda, Chuo). At the start of the year, the **Yasukuni Jinja shrine** (3-1-1 Kudan-Kita, Chiyoda, www.yasukuni.or.jp) near the Imperial Palace, puts on a show of traditional music and dance, and is also the venue for Obon dances and music in early July.

Earth Festival

Tokyo is an unbearably hot place in the late summer, so to escape the heat, head for this annual August festival of

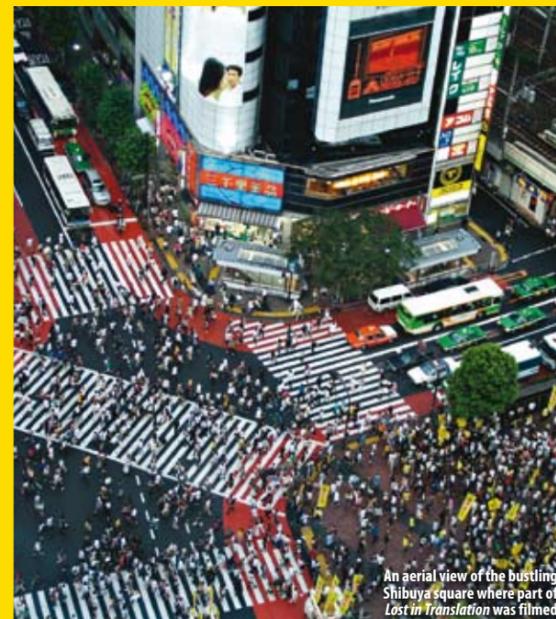
the world-famous *taiko* drumming group Kodo, which brings an international range of performers to Sadogashima, a remote island off the north coast of Japan. A long way from Tokyo, but by bullet train and ferry it can be reached in half a day.

www.kodo.or.jp

Tokyo Summer Music Festival

Within the city, the festival consistently provides an intelligent programme of events over the course of July, mixing tradition and innovation, local and international, with a world-class roster of performers. Last year's festival combined Youssou N'Dour with French break-dancing and Japanese folk song.

www.arion-edo.org/tsf



An aerial view of the bustling Shibuya square where part of *Lost in Translation* was filmed

CLUBS

The clubbing scene in Tokyo is huge and justifiably recognised as one of the biggest and best in the world, offering countless genres and combinations thereof. The scene is ever evolving, but **Air** (Hikawa Bldg, B1, 2-11 Sarugaku, Shibuya, www.air-tokyo.com), and **Womb** (2-16 Maruyama, Shibuya, www.womb.co.jp) hold steady places among the top-rank. More esoteric fare is served up at **Unit** (Ze House Bldg, B1F, 1-34-17 Ebisu-nishi, Shibuya, www.unit-tokyo.com), which tends toward avant-garde electro, and was recently filled with the fusion sound of the Oki Dub Ainu Band, so popular at WOMAD 2005 in Reading. Styles shift from night to night, so check the listings and go to the huge Tower Records or HMV in Shibuya to pick up discount flyers.

JAZZ VENUES

Tokyo's jazz musicians have been particularly underrated. The city's love affair with jazz has been long and intense, though it has now waned a little, and tastes have shifted slightly in a more saccharine direction. **Tokyo Blue Note** (Raika Bldg, 6-3-16, Minami-Aoyama, www.bluenote.co.jp) hosts the biggest international names, who before touring the globe occasionally drift around the corner post-performance to **Body and Soul** (6-13-9 Minami-Aoyama, www.bodyandsoul.co.jp), which, though rather boxy, is more intimate and affordable. For those who like their jazz as bitter as their whisky, the **Shinjuku Pit Inn** (Accord Bldg, B1 2-12-4, Shinjuku, www.pit-inn.com) offers a more experimental and home-grown array of artists.



The intricate facade of the Kabuki-za theatre

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