



Plucking the forest sound: Borealism in Japanese enthusiasm for the Finnish kantele

Introduction

“I want to produce the sound of the Finnish forest on this green kantele.”
(Mitsuko Sato, Blog, 10 December 2009, accessed 5 August 2021.)



Figure 1. A five-string kantele painted green with *Unikko* as decoration, made in Sapporo, Hokkaido, in 2009 (courtesy of Mitsuko Sato).

Japan and Finland are geographically and culturally distant. As cultural exchanges have expanded over the past three decades, Japan has become known for its exceptional kantele friendship with Finland. Many kantele players in Japan relate their enthusiasm to the image of nature that emerged in their minds when they played the instrument. The blog excerpt quoted above shows one of the dimensions. Mitsuko

Sato, who built the kantele herself in Hokkaido (the Northernmost Island of Japan), is one of the lead players in the niche community. She associated the kantele and its sound with the landscape of Finland, visualizing this aspect by colouring the body green and decorating it with *Unikko*, the best-known motif of the Finnish brand Marimekko, to identify its Finnish roots (kantele あんさんぶる Blog, 10 December 2009, accessed 5 August 2021): Finland is known in Japan as the “Forest and lake country” (*mori to mizuumi no kuni*, 森と湖の国). This case reflects Japanese Borealist views of the kantele. The study examines this transnational musical phenomenon from the perspective of Borealism (Schram 2011), the aim being to find out what Northern characteristics spring to the minds of Japanese kantele enthusiasts, and how they are adopted and developed in Japanese environments.

Although Japanese enthusiasm for the kantele is exceptional, this cross-cultural musical fascination has yet to attract attention in music studies. The primary material used for this study comprises 18 interviews and participant observations conducted in Japan. The interviewees are professional and amateur players, referring to the few players who progressed from the amateur level to the extent that local audiences are willing to pay for their teaching and public events in the former case and those who play the kantele as a hobby in the latter. Discursive data supplementing this ethnographic study include Internet data, liner notes, CD covers, promotional materials (posters, leaflets) and a decorated instrument collected in the community. In combination they give a holistic picture of how the Japanese imagine the North through the kantele. Before examining the characteristics of the North conjured up in the minds of the enthusiasts, I will briefly discuss the kantele as played in Japan, and how the Japanese picture Finland.

The kantele in Japan and Japanese images of Finland

The kantele is a Finnish folk instrument. Similar psalteries are shared in expansive geographical areas surrounding Finland with the same and different names (*kantele* in Karelian, *kannel* in Estonian, *kokle* in Latvian, *kanklės* in Lithuanian and *gusli* in Russian) (Grove Music Online). The kantele’s status was elevated as a symbol of Finnish nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century when Karelia, which nowadays is shared between Finland and Russia, was viewed as a “stronghold of ancient Finnish culture” (Asplund 1983: 79). Since then, Finnish nationalists have used the kantele to distinguish Finland and its culture from its Swedish and Russian counterparts (Hill 2005: 114-121; Jaakkola & Toivonen 2004). Later on, the kantele became a national symbol that “set... apart from all other [Finnish] folk instruments” (Asplund 1983: 79).

Few countries in the world are more enthusiastic about the kantele than Japan, even if the number of enthusiasts remains relatively small compared to other popular foreign forms of musics and dances that have taken root there (cf. Savigliano 1992: 236; van Ede 2012: 73; Waseda 2013: 191; Kaeppler 2013: 220; Crowell 2016). Currently, Japan is known for its “kantele friendship” with Finland, enthusiasm having developed along several dimensions over the past three decades. Duo Rauma (consisting of Japanese kantele player Hiroko Ara and *morin khuur* player Haruhiko Saga) and a few individuals, including Makiko Oba, Sakiko Ishii and Rie Kuramasu, were awarded several prizes in the kantele competitions of 2013 and 2019 (Kanteleliitto 2019). The enthusiasm continued off-stage. Approximately three thousand youngsters in Hokkaido have learned to play the kantele since May 2008, when Yuji Itakura, an upper-secondary-school music teacher in Sapporo (the capital of Hokkaido) used the instrument to introduce world music in his class (Itakura 2009, Itakura i2018). Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic there were around 100-150 people playing the kantele regularly with a view to understanding Finnish culture, and hobbyist groups of this kind are to be found in Tokyo, Sapporo and Western Japan. The Japan Kantele Friendship Association (*Nihon kantele tomo no kai*, 日本カンテレ友の会 in Japanese, or only “*tomo no kai*,” JKFA) was established in Tokyo on 31 May 2008, the overseas branch of *Kanteleliitto*, the Finnish Kantele Association that was established in 1977 (Rahkonen 1989: 326). According to Masa Watanabe, former chairman of JKFA between 2011 and 2014, JKFA’s mission is to promote the kantele on a “nationwide” level in Japan (Watanabe i2018). Its three objectives are stated on its webpage: 1) to provide information about kantele artists from Finland; 2) to share videos of kanteles and similar instruments; and 3) to provide general information about Finland to its members (Japan Kantele Friendship Association website). After less than ten years, the local Finnish newspaper *Kouvola Sanomat* claimed in its edition of 6 August 2016 that Japan probably had the highest number of kantele players globally, outnumbered only by Finland (Onali 2016). This statement is bold and was probably speculative. The fact is that this cross-cultural music phenomenon lacks research within the field of music.

Most research on the kantele has been conducted by Finnish scholars and kantele-focused musicians, English publications being thin on the ground. Asplund’s (1983) book is one of the few that includes an English chapter covering the instrument’s history, the playing techniques, the tuning and the leading performers. Rahkonen’s (1989) doctoral dissertation, which is in the form of a monograph, examined kantele traditions based on extensive fieldwork conducted in Finland during the 1980s. He had already used the term “ultrastability” in his early work to theorise the instrument’s physical adjustments “to a changing environment . . . [that] remain[s] a unique, coherent entity” in terms of instrument variation (Rahkonen 1983: 241). Other English-language publications include Kastinen’s articles (2009; n.d. “Karelian

Kantele Tradition” and “He Played For One Day, He Played For Another, He Played For Yet A Third”), which focus on old Karelian improvisation traditions, and Aho’s (2016) study of the kantele from a cognitive perspective. More recent research has been carried out in fields such as education (Ruokonen et al. 2012; Ruokonen et al. 2014) and acoustics (Erkut et al. 2002; Penttinen et al. 2005), some of which are based on interdisciplinary methods (see Leisiö 2021; Kastinen 2021). Finnish folk music and the kantele outside of Finland are mentioned in a few articles concerned with the musical life of the Finnish diaspora (e.g., Edgar 1935; Niemelä 1999; Koskoff 2005: 180). Although the kantele has also been studied within artistic doctoral degree programmes in Finland (see e.g., Kastinen 2000; Koistinen-Armfelt 2016; Viisma 2019; Syrjälä 2020), the results remain somewhat inaccessible to non-Finnish speakers in that few have been translated into English. These previous studies are fascinating, showing how continuous attention is paid to different aspects of the kantele and its role in contemporary Finland and the overseas diasporic community. However, few studies have focused on the instrument’s global dissemination among non-Finnish-speaking people/communities, although ethnomusicologist Tina Ramnarine (2003: 214) did mention it in connection with her research on changing methodologies and ideologies in Finnish folk music education in the post-war era.

Nordic Europe has long been associated with two images in the Japanese mind. The first of these conveys modernity, dating back to the 1900s when the Japanese, and particularly politicians, admired the progressive, educated and advanced developments in the Nordic countries. As anthropologist Hideko Mitsui (2016: 170) argues, Japanese politicians in this era regarded Northern Europe (*Hokuō* 北歐 in Japanese) as “an aggregate of small but strong, modern and politically autonomous nations” for nation-building models. Sociologist Kenn Nakata Steffensen (2019: par. 1) notes how Japanese intellectuals sought an “alternative modernity” from the Nordic countries in the early twentieth century. After over a century of development, Finland became a “fascinating” country in Japanese eyes (Fuse 2021: ix), conceptualised as the “Finland boom” (*Finrando būmu* フィンランド ブーム) that peaked between 2000 and 2010 (endnote 2 in Ipatti 2019: 118). Fuse’s doctoral dissertation dedicates lengthy pages to the Finland boom (2021: 24-28), when Japanese people were impressed by the outstanding performance of Finnish students in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rankings.

In the second image, Nordic Europe is associated with the romantic notion of an unspoiled, pristine and authentic land where inhabitants live sustainably with nature. As part of Northern Europe, Finland is among the world’s geographically remote countries, with forests covering 70 per cent of its territory. SLOW FINLAND, part of Finland’s official tourist site Visit Finland, calls Helsinki “the world’s nature

capital”, and differentiates Finland from its European counterparts in terms of well-being given Finnish people’s exposure to nature, “as much as 75% of Europeans live in an urban environment. . . [however,] every Finn has access to a silent forest and a strip of shore where one can be in peace” (SLOW FINLAND n.d.). It is to be noted that the Japanese view of Finland, especially Finnish nature, is exceptionally positive, which promotes, in one way or another, prosperous tourism whereby the country has ranked highest as a dream travel destination for Japanese tourists in recent decades (Matilainen & Santalahti 2018; Visit Finland 2016; Lindblom et al., 2016; Varhama 2010; Komppula & Konu 2017). Previous studies (Winter 2009; Varamäki 2004) have implied that Japanese ideas of Finland are stereotyped and homogenized. Varamäki (2004: 2), for example, having conducted a survey questionnaire among tourists arriving at Helsinki airport, found that the Japanese thought of Finland as “nature oriented” with its forests, lakes, night-less nights, fjords, northern lights, winter, pure water and snow, with “imaginary attributes” including the Moomins and Santa Claus. Anthropologist Hideko Mitsui (2016: 175) further conceptualised a “utopian Other” with reference to the Japanese idealisation of Finland. Two examples, the first “World Satoyama Travelogue: Finland, Dialogue with Forests and Fairies” from 2007 (*Sekai Satoyama Kikō: Finrando Mori Yōsei to no Taiwa* 世界山紀行: フィンランド 森・妖精との対話), and the second “From Nordic Countries” from 2015 (*Hokuō no Kuni Kara* 北歐の国から), show how Finland was represented as the European periphery with the kantele’s sound as background music emanating powerful tranquility, mystery and magical power. As a result, Finland serves as the modern yet exotic other for the Japanese.

Japan has imported different forms of musics and dances from all over the world during the past century. Some of these have emerged as topics in academia, including the tango (Savigliano 1992), American southern music (Mitsui 1993), the rumba (Hosokawa 1999a), the salsa (Hosokawa 1999b), hip-hop (Cornyetz 1994; Condry 2001, 2006), rap (Manabe 2006), jazz (Atkins 2001), Hawaiian music (Kurokawa 2004), Latin music (Reyes-Ruiz 2005), American country music (Furmanovsky 2008), reggae (Sterling 2010), Irish music (Williams 2006) and gospel (Waseda 2013). The kantele is a folk instrument from Finland that established a niche community in Japan. How is Japanese enthusiasm for the kantele understood? What does it give to its enthusiasts? From their perspective it brings both musical joy and a sense of healing that motivated them to become practitioners. They choose terms from nature in naming performance groups: “*Laulu Puu*” (“singing wood” in Finnish), “*Puolukka*” (“lingonberry” in Finnish) and “*Lokki*” (“seagull” in Finnish) are some examples of how they associated the kantele with nature. I found Borealism an effective concept through which to examine this phenomenon.

Borealism, which derives from Edward Said's (2003 [1978]) *Orientalism*, is a type of exoticism that relates explicitly to stereotypical and homogenous ideas of outsiders about the geographical North and its people. The concept has expanded in Scandinavian studies and other fields in recent decades. Schram (2011: 8), having examined the ontological and epistemological distinction between the South and the North through the experience of contemporary Icelanders in transnational contexts, notes that the North is manifested as "the pendulum [that] has swung back and forth between the civilized and the wild" in foreign stereotypes. Understanding of Borealism has expanded based on different materials. For example, predetermined ideas of the North are represented in literature portraying its inhabitants as exotic, strange and enchanting others in feminist and ecocritical discourses (Lehtonen 2019). In addition, the foreign imagination of the North constantly shapes listeners' ways of hearing the music created in this area. Størvold (2018: 371) studied Borealism by analysing the Anglophone reception of the Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Rós, finding that "the techniques of musical spatiality, the unusual sound of the bowed electric guitar and non-normative uses of voice and language" articulated the images of the North. The focus in my study of this transnational move is on Japanese views and how they adopted and developed the kantele. I argue that the evocation of nature, the northern landscape, mythology and romantic images shaped Japanese portrayals and use of the ancient instrument for their purposes. In the following section I examine the characteristics of the North that emerged in the minds of kantele enthusiasts from the perspective of Borealism.

Imagining the healing North through the kantele's gentle and soft sound

The characteristic kantele sound – a soft, bright and reverberant timbre that gradually disperses into the air – depends on the string attachment, one end being fixed to a tuning pin and the other to a supporting bar on a fretless body (Aho 2016: 38-39; Kankaanranta & Sopanen n.d.). The volume is relatively low, but it nevertheless turned out to be attractive to Japanese enthusiasts. A hobbyist player from Sapporo referred to the kantele as well-suited to Japanese dwellings, which are usually small, and the unintrusive volume conforms to the social norm of not disturbing neighbours (Yamame 2021). Apart from the practical issues, the kantele's soft sound seems to resonate highly with human feeling, as another player from Sapporo remarked: "The kantele's sound is quiet, and it touches my heart" (Il 2016). Tomoko Onishi, a kantele instructor in Western Japan, pointed out that its soothing sound was particularly well-received among her elderly and middle-aged students because it evoked an immediate feeling of tranquility.

My students are mostly middle-aged and elderly women. They admire the sound because it brings a sense of calmness and peacefulness, inviting even older adults to play. (Onishi i2017.)

For the enthusiasts, the kantele's small volume has the capacity to tug at one's heartstrings. They associated the soft and bright qualities with nature. Fukuyama (pseudonym), an enthusiast from Tokyo who studied in Finland for a while, said that her mind was full of the Finnish landscape when she played the kantele. Apart from the varying levels of concentration required for practising, she remembered being in Finland when she listened to the sound. This case shows how nature was conjured up in the minds of practitioners, who experienced a transition to the Finnish landscape when they plucked the strings.

[T]he kantele . . . brought me back to Finland, where I studied for a while. When I started to play it in March 2007 I was able to connect with Finland again . . . Even though the [kantele] sound is metallic, there is no feeling of unpleasantness, it is very relaxing. Natural scenery and landscapes come to mind. The impression is of being wrapped in soft sounds . . . With songs that are light and made for rehearsing, or songs with which I can relax: it is as if the stress in my shoulders is released, and I have the impression that my sound is helping my whole body and my head to loosen up. Sometimes I even feel sleepy. When I'm working on those difficult songs or compositions [on the big kantele], I'm focusing on how to produce the best possible sound from my kantele, or I'm paying attention only to the sound I want. Either way, I'm concentrating purely on the sound. (Fukuyama i2017.)

Another two informants expressed similar feelings. The first one associated hers with images of birch trees and lakes that crept into her mind. These are typical global images of Finland, which she had visited twice in the previous two decades.

The reverberation is long, and there is resonance with other strings. [When I play the kantele, I feel] I'm seeing Finnish landscapes because I have been there – birch trees and lakes [emerge in my head]. (Sugano i2018.)

The second informant related the kantele to the gentle wind she felt when she listened to the performances of Finnish kantele player Eva Alkula, recalling a trip to Finland in the 1970s.

About twenty-five years ago [during the 1970s], I travelled to Finland and visited Sibelius's house in Hämeenlinna, which had just opened to the public.

I went to the lake and was very impressed by the scenery and the nature. When Eva Alkula [a Finnish kantele musician] came [to Japan to perform] in 1999, I heard the concert kantele for the first time. The music reminded me of my visit to Finland. I could still feel the wind brushing my face. (I3 i2016.)

As the three examples discussed above show, for Japanese enthusiasts the kantele excels in evoking images of nature, especially Finnish nature. They refer to its sound as soothing, mellow, soft, mild, delicate, light and quiet. As another interviewee pointed out, “the sound of the kantele is beautiful, like twinkling stars or sparkling snowflakes” (Kōno i2016). The sound was also associated with relaxation: “[playing the kantele makes you feel] like you are in a forest, surrounded by nature, and thus you do not feel any pressure or restrictions” (I2 2017). Although nature is inherently dynamic in its diverse forms, enthusiasts used various adjectives that have connotation of softness, such as “*sensai*” (delicate), “*karui*” (light), “*yasasii*” (sweet) and “*sukitōru*” (transparent), and “*shinpitekina*” (mysterious), to describe their feelings about the sound of various kanteles, regardless of their size, material, shape and aesthetics. The kantele is valued because of its soft sound that evokes tranquility, peacefulness and healing in Japanese minds.

Japanese thoughts on the kantele are rather homogenous. They associate it with nature and states of relaxation because of the feelings the string vibration evokes. One member of the Sapporo Kantele Club compared the kantele with the brass band that is popular in Japanese upper-secondary schools, which she found tiring and “artificial” because of the high volume. Conversely, the kantele restored her energy because of its “silence.”

I have played the piano since childhood and I joined the gospel chorus. I am tired of bands [with a loud volume], such as brass bands. The kantele sound is small, and I like [to] pluck a single string. It does not get very loud even if I play it harder; and it is not artificial - on the contrary, it blends into nature very well. I like to play it because of its “silence”: the strings resonate quietly, with a delicate (*sensai*) and soft sound. The sound is not deafening when I play it [a kantele string] hard. I like the silence, and thus the kantele interests me. (Ukumura i2018.)

It is suggested in some examples that silence represents the quality of the kantele sound and the chance to be free while playing it. Hobbyist player Yamame said she felt connected to nature through the kantele, and that she experienced greater musical freedom because she could set her own pace when playing the instrument. There was no need to think about the melody. She simply stopped anywhere, and continued developing what came to her mind. This narrative could relate to the reality in

the North, an area that is sparsely populated and thus offers more opportunities to enjoy personal space and to create.

I used to play an instrument called the Andes 25F [a recorder keyboard] and sometimes used it for live performances. It is just that the sound of this instrument is big/loud, and because you cannot control the volume, playing quietly inside a room is quite tricky. The kantele has a small sound. I like playing it because it makes me feel as if I am conversing with the world of nature, trees, wind, rivers and such. It is perfect for playing just for yourself. Also, you can just sound it out freely and enjoy it because you don't have to think about the melody. (Yamane i2021.)

In several cases the North is perceived to have unique expressivity. One enthusiast, for example, described the kantele as useful with the power to convey emotions, specifically referring to the capacity of smaller kanteles (five strings, the most traditional type) to express the richness of emotions because of their simplicity.

The kantele is a quiet and simple instrument with limited strings, but it can express emotions such as loneliness and delight. It sounds pure, cool, dry (Northern air) and simple, but sometimes talkative. It delivers strong messages about the player's feelings. (Watanabe i2018.)

As another informant noted, the kantele effectively taps into the "messages" conveying one's physical condition. The implication is that it enables enthusiasts to perceive nuanced changes in their bodies and minds.

The sound of the big kantele is different from that of the small one: its notes stretch out in a row (*tsuranaru*) whereas the small one recites (*kataru*) – they convey something that also includes a message to the player's body. (Kikuchi i2018.)

The above cases show how the kantele is experienced positively among enthusiasts, primarily because of the soft sound that is connected to Nordic nature, which the Japanese find fascinating. The North is silent and healing and thus provides a space for freedom. The positivity is taken further by professionals in public events. In the following I analyse images that reflect Borealism in the Japanese community. Figure 2 is a poster advertising professional player Hiroko Ara's live concert in a Japanese Nordic café in Kanazawa in 2018. Ara, who is based in Hokkaido, has been promoting the kantele for over thirty years through solo performances and joint events. Although the forest background is not exclusively Northern, the title "A gift from the forest: the healing kantele" already hints at Borealism - the kantele (カンテレ



Figure 2. A Poster advertising “A gift from the forest: the healing kantele”
(Courtesy of Hiroko Ara).

transliteration of kantele in *katakana*) is framed with the term “therapeutic” (癒し, *iyashi* in Japanese), and in the background the lights glimmer through swaying branches. The poster conveys the atmosphere at the event - audiences can expect comfort and relaxation created by the kantele with its forest roots.

Nature was also a preferred theme on CDs produced in Japan. During the 1990s and the 2000s a few Japanese professional players began to record kantele CDs as a means of self-promotion, and nature emerged as the foremost motif for these works. In the view of graphic designers commissioned with the task of selling kantele music to Japanese audiences, the kantele seemed to permeate nature and nature to permeate the kantele. I use four examples to elaborate this point.

My first example is the title, cover and back shell of *Koivun Tarina* (Birch Story, 2009), the CD of instrumental music featuring the concert kantele and the nineteen-string kantele recorded by professional player Mitsuko Sato and her group Mu. The CD cover (Figure 3) depicts a restful scene in which the birch leaves, a typical broadleaved tree species in Finland, blend with the sunset. The birch appears again on the back cover with the track list. This CD cover could depict a Finnish summer – the midnight sun remains visible as nature and life keep moving forward in the unending night. The wood colour of the concert kantele in the lower part is reminiscent

of wheat fields in summer when Finnish farmers harvest crops. This image is exotic to Japanese audiences because of the feeling of Northern peacefulness created by elements from a beautiful Finnish summer.



Figure 3. CD cover and back shell of *Koivun Tarina*, Mitsuko Sato and Mu, 2009
(Courtesy of Mitsuko Sato).

The North is elaborated by the metaphorical language in the liner note (Figure 4) – referring to the album as a “lyrical poem”. Associating the kantele with morning mist, lakes and wind that imply pure and gentle qualities fill it with expression. As I see it, the cover as a whole and the liner note “[offer] listeners a specific interpretative window through which to hear the music” (Størvoold 2018: 383).

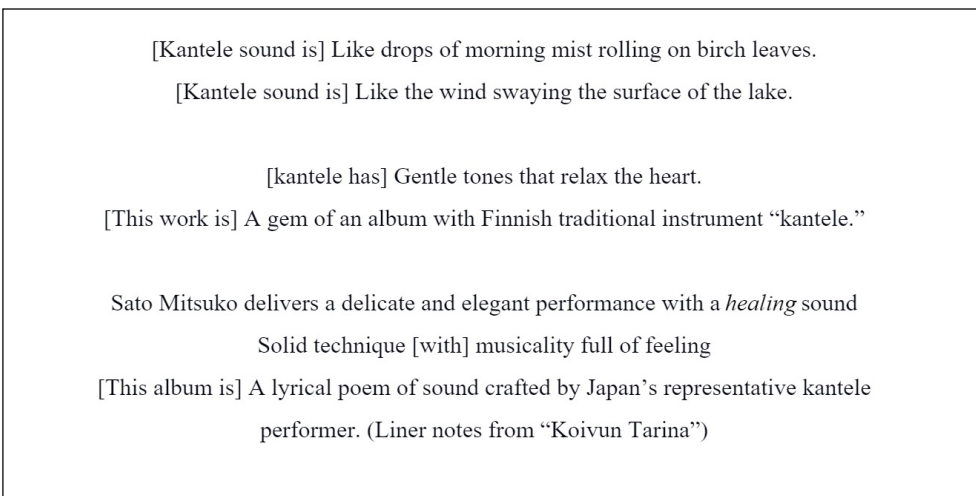


Figure 4. The liner notes of *Koivun Tarina*.

The North is also represented on the covers of two solo kantele albums, *Kantele* and *Kantele II*, my second and third examples. The two CDs were produced by professional player Masako Hazata, in 1998 and 2003, respectively. *Kantele* (Figure 5), consisting of traditional tunes, compositions and arrangements of classical music, integrates a concert kantele into the lower part of the cover image, and a snowy forest scene in the upper part. The cover refers explicitly to the Finnish forest. *Kantele II* (Figure 6), which mainly features Masako Hazata's compositions, continues the style of *Kantele* but without explicit reference to Finland – the concert kantele in this example is surrounded by water and snow-capped mountains, which are more reminiscent of Norway. Most of the landscape in Finland is less than 200 metres above sea level, and even in the far North, which borders Norway, the hills are relatively flat reaching only between 200 and 400 metres. The two CD covers use images of nature (from different parts of the North) to symbolise kantele music, which seems to highlight the harmony with its stillness.



Figures 5 and 6. The CD covers of *Kantele* (left, 1998) and *Kantele II* (right, 2003) (Courtesy of Masako Hazata).

My fourth example is the CD *Birds and The Tree* (Figure 7), an album that includes improvisations and Hiroko Ara's kantele compositions explicitly inspired by traditional Finnish, Swedish, Mongolian and English folk music. The prominent motif on the cover is the symmetry of elements from nature, including birds, plants and some long fruits painted in gentle colours. The motion of the creature seems to represent the power of kantele music – birds that initially rest on the tree spread their wings and fly.



Figure 7. CD cover and inside image of *Birds and The Tree*, Hiroko Ara, 2016 (Courtesy of Hiroko Ara).

Not only is nature experienced by practitioners and listeners, it is also reproduced by professionals in a discursive manner. I focus in this section on the Japanese experience of the kantele, suggesting that the sense of being healed is attributable to the instrument's gentle sound. The kantele heals because the Japanese view it through the prism of (Nordic) nature. Professional players have taken the connection to nature further, using it as a theme to frame their musical works or as images for public events. These cases imply that homogenous ideas of the North, or Borealism, are at play among kantele enthusiasts in their niche community: the instrument's gentle sound symbolises the harmony and peacefulness of nature in the North. In the following section I continue to examine how enthusiasts adopt the qualities of the kantele in Japanese contexts to gain an understanding of the Japanese ideas of the North.

Adopting the kantele in Japan

This section examines the new meanings ascribed to the kantele in different Japanese contexts. Firstly, I focus on how the sound functions as a shelter in the minds of Japanese enthusiasts. Secondly, I continue to investigate how the kantele is adopted and developed as a valuable tool to inspire the imagination.

Regaining energy in a (imagined) retreat

One of the new meanings that was attached to the kantele is that it serves as an “escape,” a retreat where the Japanese people feel effective to regain energy. This is

attributable to its excellent evocation of nature. Based on my participant observation in the kantele club Pieni Tauko in 2016, I examine the social functions of the kantele in the Japanese environment. Pieni Tauko was founded in January 2010 in Tokyo. Its members are primarily residents of Tokyo or adjacent cities from multiple backgrounds, and many of them are learning Finnish via the Finnish Church (*Suomi Kirkko*) in Tokyo. “Club,” or *dōkōkai* in Japanese, literally means a gathering of like-minded people. In the case of Pieni Tauko, the members are keen to explore Finnish culture by playing the kantele. Professional player Masako Hazata and senior player Haruna Ishii lead the five-string and the fifteen-string kantele groups, respectively. Haruna Ishii, one of the instructors, pointed out that the kantele’s exceptional sound attracts Japanese fans – the quality is therapeutic and, in her view, indescribable.

The kantele is new to me, and it is different from other instruments. Some people say its sound resembles the harp or a music box, and it’s true. It is hard to describe the sound of a kantele in words. I can only say that it’s a healing sound. I thought it was very special when I heard it for the first time. (Ishii i2016.)

According to Pieni Tauko’s statement on its homepage, the club aims to provide a welcoming environment in which people from all backgrounds meet to play the kantele together, aimed especially at those who are “packed with work,” “panic with their studies,” and “are swamped with care and household duties (Pieni Tauko 2010). In Japanese minds, the instrument is suitable for those who are “stressed out” because it seems to enhance the well-being of those who reside/work in metropolitan areas and feel trapped by different responsibilities. In this sense, playing the kantele is equivalent to taking “a break,” “an interval” or “an interruption” in the day, as reflected in the club’s name: *Pieni tauko* means “a small pause” in English. We might assume that one will (re)gain energy from a momentary halt for kantele playing, which creates a “sound forest” of temporary silence because of its long and lasting string vibration. For some listeners, silence or tranquility could be an “inner trip,” articulated by the string vibration (Kurokawa 2004: 12), that fosters not only relaxation but also introspection. The following two examples are illustrative of this point.

It is a feeling of going inside, I like it when the reverberations get mixed and then fade away. . . Sometimes when I’m playing by myself in my room, my sensations become pleasantly at one with the sound, it’s almost like meditation. (Horioka i2017.)

The sound is pure and wild [the nuance is untamed, natural]. Playing the kantele is very effortless and fun as if your head feels absent-minded, vacant. (Imaizumi i2017.)



Figure 8. The leaflet advertising an “Afternoon kantele concert” (Courtesy of Junko Sugano).

Figure 8 serves as an example to enhance understanding of the quality of silence and elaborate on how it is represented through visualisation in Japan. It depicts an event leaflet produced by Junko Sugano, a member of the Sapporo Kantele Club who volunteers to create posters and flyers as a way of supporting the club’s activities (Sugano i2020). The written language is entirely in Japanese, except for the concert venue, AMICA, and the event time, “afternoon.” Sugano pointed out that her inspiration stemmed from *Pihlaja* (the rowan tree on the left side), a common tree species throughout Finland (Sugano i2020). Her use of elements from Nordic nature as image motifs is consistent with the cases mentioned earlier. Where it differs from earlier examples is that she combined the kantele as part of the Nordic nature - on the plant are many five-string kanteles that could be its leaves. The bigger round objects seem to be the tree’s flowers (white in reality), and the smaller ones may be its fruit (red in reality, similar to *puolukka*, lingonberry in English). The kantele seems to produce a natural sound – the fruits on the leaves fall and become musical notes that cause ripples. The image represents a natural environment devoid of humankind and creatures, which seems to display tranquility as the core quality of the kantele sound.



Figure 9. Sapporo Kantele Club's flyer advertising its "Pikku Joulu" concert (Courtesy of Junko Sugano).

As suggested in the other two examples, Figures 9 and 10, the kantele's extraordinary sound enlivens spirits, in addition to providing a tranquil haven of peace and serenity. Figure 9 is a flier advertising a "Pikku Joulu" concert produced by Junko Sugano. *Pikku Joulu*, a Finnish term that literally means "little Christmas", refers to the pre-Christmas period when colleagues and friends have fun drinking mulled wine (*glögi*) together, and was adopted by the Sapporo Kantele Club for its year-end presentation concert. This image includes various elements that are not necessarily inspired by nature: surrounding the concert information at the centre are bushes, Christmas trees, stars and quaver notes. Sugano cites the Moomins, the best-known Finns in Japan (Varamäki 2004: 72), given new styles as the two creatures in the bottom corners (Sugano i2020). Unlike earlier work, this image highlights the kantele's different but paramount quality – the sound can wake creatures and make them dance. The concert was scheduled for November when the nights become longer in Hokkaido, a high-latitude area where people are less active due to falls in temperature. However, a festive spirit pervades the poster image, represented by the dancing and moving of the different elements. One might assume that they are reacting to the kantele, the only instrument on the flier. The image depicts a realm in which the kantele processes magical power to produce energy.



Figure 10. The Fairy Ring kantele (Courtesy of Yamame, artist, Sapporo).

Next, I analyse the decoration on the “Fairy Ring Kantele” (Figure 10), a decorated five-string instrument made in Sapporo, to shed light on the Japanese perception of magic sound. Yamame, the local artist who made and decorated the instrument, revealed that she was inspired by fairy rings (Yamame i2021).

The designs I made for this kantele have double meanings, they represent the sound of the kantele that rings out, but I also imagined “fairy rings” and the fairies that dance to its music. The small circles represent the sound, the fairies, and the mushrooms. Continuing from there is the melody, the footprints of the dance, spawn and spores. (Yamame i2021.)

Many circular shapes decorate the surface of this kantele - three big, hollowed circles and six smaller solid ones painted in soft colours that fall along the blue-green axis and adorned with delicate brush strokes in white. Adopting a fairy ring for decoration reflects Japanese Borealist views of the kantele. Fairy rings are a natural phenomenon whereby mushrooms grow in circular formations on lawns and in fields and forests. European folk tales interpret them as the footprints of fairies who dance at night. Yamame’s combination shows her perception of the kantele – it has the magic that makes listeners (creatures) dance.

The Japanese Borealist view of the kantele is probably shaped by the *Kalevala*, a poetic song collection compiled by physician and philologist Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) based on materials collected in eastern Finland and Karelia. In its dramatic

story this Finnish epic depicts the kantele as having a deep, intimate connection with nature - the sorcerer Väinämöinen made the first ever kantele using a pike jawbone and horsehair as the primary materials, and he lured forest creatures deeper into the forest. Kakutan Morimoto's Japanese translation of *Kalevala* was published in 1937, the first translation outside Europe, financed by the Finnish government and limited to 400 copies (Kalevala Society "Translations of Kalevala"; Finnish Embassy in Japan; Ilomäki 2009). The following excerpt gives some details of the story that might have inspired Japanese fascination with the kantele.

There was none in the forest running on four legs or hopping on foot that did not come to listen [and] marvel at the merriment. . . the air's nature daughters and the air's lovely lassies marvelled at the merriment, listened to the kantele. . . there was no creature not in the water either moving with six fins the best soul of fish that did not come to listen (The Kalevala, 1989[1849]: 539–541).

The above analysis of the different materials that comprise the kantele demonstrates two contrasting qualities in Japanese Borealist ideas, namely silence and vitality, that heal and enliven the spirit of listeners. The two qualities are adopted in new contexts in which they obtain social meanings and are experienced positively by Japanese enthusiasts.

The magical North that inspires the imagination

Some of the examples show how the kantele is taken further in the Japanese environment and used for cultural events that are irrelevant to Finland but fit local expectations. Below I use my participation in *rōdoku* to elaborate on this point. During my back-and-forth fieldwork in Japan, I found that many enthusiasts used the kantele to produce background music for *rōdoku* (story reading 朗読, also known as *yomikikase* 読み聞かせ). This is an activity in which a narrator reads a book or literary work publicly, for which the kantele is suitable due to its low volume (which in reality some Finnish people view as a weakness that hinders its development in ensemble music; Sirén 2003: par. 5; Djupsjöbacka 2019). An audience member I met at a story-reading event on 10 June 2018 in Sapporo ("Time for Kantele, Songs, and Picture Book"), told me that the narrator's voice on its own would be too dull and "dry" for a story. This shows how the kantele enriches the atmosphere in story reading; in the words of musicologist Jonathan Bellman (1998: xii), "exoticism is not about the earnest study of foreign cultures; it is about drama, effect, and evocation. The listener is intrigued, hears something new and savory, but is not aurally destabilized enough to feel uncomfortable."

In my view, the kantele does not go unnoticed in this context, and does not, in the end, stay in the background. After all, the sound is adopted to inspire the imagination because of its unlimitedness, just as nature is devoid of boundaries set by cultures, nations and other attributes of human beings. Adding the kantele sound to a story is meant to contribute to the overall ambience by offering audiences affective experiences. With its roots in the North, the kantele's exotic sound has previously undiscovered potential that does not limit the audiences' imaginations in the story reading. According to some enthusiasts, its otherworldly timbre and Northern roots symbolise freedom and imagination. During the years I was conducting research in Japan I was constantly asked (generally by Finns) if the *koto*, the traditional Japanese stringed instrument, motivated the Japanese to play the kantele. The question is logical in that the two stringed instruments share an ontological similarity. However, the number of kantele enthusiasts stimulated by the *koto* was surprisingly small. Mitsuo Iguchi, a former chairman of the Hokkaido-Finland Society, was among the few people to mention the *koto* in the interview. He began to build a close relationship with Finland in the 1980s. During a three-week visit in 1989 he bought a kantele from a factory in Kaustinen (a municipality in Finland known for its summer festival of folk music) for his wife, a *koto* player. The organological similarity of the instruments may have motivated Iguchi's purchase. However, his wife did not play the kantele for long because of the uncomfortableness and the differences in playing techniques, as well as the gaps between the strings, and she gave it to someone else (Iguchi i2018). Most significantly, it is clear from Iguchi's interview that the two stringed instruments have a contrasting sound quality.

You know, the *koto* is very popular in Japan. Several of my friends play the *koto*. But the sound of *koto* is *pīnpīn*; the kantele sound is very soft. (Iguchi i2018.)

Iguchi's perception of sound differences was elaborated by another player who explained that "the *koto* has a very strong articulation, the kantele has a more overflowing sound" (Imaizumi i2017). The *koto* also seems to be less appealing to some Japanese not only because of its reverberation but also due to its image, as one enthusiast pointed out: "When you hear [the sound of the] *koto*, you immediately recall "Japan" very strongly, and a non-Japanese landscape will never come to mind [if I play the *koto*] (Fukuyama i2017). The kantele sound's flow is something that is fascinating. Using the onomatopoeic "*kira kira*," in Japanese, one player pointed out that the sound resembled something that sparkles (Horioka i2017). Another noted that the *koto* and the kantele came from different places: "the kantele has a healing sound that seems to fall from the sky; the Japanese *koto* wells up from the earth" (I4 2017). As I see it, these narratives manifest Borealism. Although both stringed instruments are categorised as zithers, they conjure up different images in Japanese



Figure 11. A Poster advertising a “Kantele Concert” in 2019 (Courtesy of Century Royal Hotel, Sapporo).

minds because of the reverberation: Japanese versus foreign (Finnish/Nordic), musical perfection versus creative freedom, ground versus sky, tense versus soft, Japanese aesthetics versus foreign expressions, and familiar versus mysterious. Although more and more Japanese people nowadays are returning to study the *koto* as a way of understanding their traditional culture, the instrument is still associated with a certain formality that makes some people hesitate to choose it as a hobby, especially those who assume that it will take years to find any joy because one has to master the playing techniques first. As shown, the *koto* is attached only to Japan. This is probably why the kantele is adopted in story reading – its otherworldly sound fires the imagination.

Flow as the kantele’s sound characteristic is visualised in Figure 11, a poster advertising a commemorative event in 2019 celebrating a centenary of relations between Finland and Japan. The image refers to the Northern Lights, or the Aurora Borealis, a natural display in the North (around the Arctic, and especially in Lapland, Finland’s northernmost region). Many people, especially Asians, associate this with romantic notions such as happiness, magic and good fortune. The dynamic Aurora covers the whole poster, from the sky to the concert title, including the map of Finland and the anniversary icon. Most significantly, a river of musical notes crosses the

sky and develops into different shapes, twisting and curling, seemingly representing the flow of the kantele sound descending from heaven towards the earth, echoing the stunning movement of the Northern Lights. Borealism is evidenced in the poster, in which the kantele music symbolises magic.

Conclusion

This study examined the kantele boom in Japan from the perspective of Borealism. First, I analysed enthusiasts' experiences, perceptions and visual representations of the kantele. Second, I investigated their adoption and development of the kantele "at home". The results reveal Borealism at work in their minds, affecting views and developments of the kantele, a folk instrument with Nordic roots.

Several conclusions could be drawn from the analysis. First, enthusiasts sustain an extremely positive attitude towards the kantele because of the pleasure they gain from playing and listening to it – Borealism connects them to various natural scenes. Some interviewees discussed how it enhanced emotional well-being, relating the benefits of its sound evocation. In their view, the gentleness of the sound inspired feelings of open space, equated to musical freedom. Second, the kantele and its sound were adopted in Japan, where it gained new social functions and meanings. On the one hand, the two contrasting qualities of its exotic sound – silence and vitality – were considered useful in terms of healing and enlivening the spirit of listeners and practitioners. On the other hand, the kantele became a source of compensation for what was missing in Japan. It was practical in the story-reading session because it inspired the imagination of audience members. This quality is lacking in traditional Japanese instruments, which are constantly associated with formality and the image of Japan. Although the kantele belongs to a family that includes a variety of instruments of different shapes, sizes and aesthetics, it is an excellent tool in itself in terms of connecting nature and creative inspiration regardless of the diversity.

The aim in this article was to bring new insights into kantele studies that lack a global/transnational/transcultural perspective. Borealism served to explain how the kantele has established a niche community in Japan. It is as healing as Finland's natural environment in Japanese views. Enthusiasts see the folk instrument through the prism of nature, be it Finnish/Nordic or without a specific location. From their Borealist perspective, the kantele and nature are intimately connected, thus one can create an immediate forest for oneself by plucking the strings. The magical power of the sound has been exaggerated and developed by Japanese enthusiasts for their own purposes at home, where the ancient instrument has taken on new meanings.

Research materials

Interviews/conversations

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Interview in possession of researcher.
- Horioka, Mayumi (i2017) Online interview by the author. 8 March 2017.
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- Iguchi, Mitsuo (i2018) Interview by the author. 8 June 2018. Sapporo, Japan.
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- Imaizumi, Kana (i2017) Online interview by the author. 2 March 2017.
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- Itakura, Yuji (i2018). Interview by the author. 24 June 2018. Sapporo, Japan.
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- Ukumura, Naemi (i2018) Interview by the author. 29 May 2018. Sapporo, Japan.
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- Watanabe, Masa (i2018) Interview by the author. 9 June 2018. Sapporo, Japan.
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- Yamame (Artist name) (i2021) Email interview by the author. 26 March 2021.
Interview in possession of researcher.
- I1 (2016) Interview by the author. 19 October 2016. Sapporo, Japan.
Interview in possession of researcher.
- I2 (2017) Online interview by the author. 10 March 2017. Interview in possession
of researcher.
- I3 (2016) Interview by the author. 24 October 2016. Sapporo, Japan.
Interview in possession of researcher.
- I4 (2017) Online interview by the author. 3 March 2017.
Interview in possession of researcher.

Participant observations

2 lessons at Pieni Tauko, 15 October 2016, Tokyo, Japan. Story reading event
 “Time for Kantele, Songs, and Picture Book,” 10 June 2018, Sapporo, Japan.

Internet data: blogs, homepages, and fans’ pages

Japan Kantele Friendship Association (日本カンテレ友の会, *Nihon Kantele Tomonokai*) <https://music.ap.teacup.com/kantelejapan/>
 kantele あんさんぶる (Mitsuko Sato) <https://yellow.ap.teacup.com/kantele/>
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