

Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music: Intercultural Encounters in Performance in Education (PIE)

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Abstract

This paper reports on Ainu artist and musician Motoi Ogawa's performance lectures given in two English-medium liberal arts elective courses, *Culture (Ethnomusicology)* and *Performance in English* at Komazawa University in Tokyo, during June 2025. The flow of classroom activity surrounding the performance, including pre-teaching and post-lecture reporting is detailed, and important themes from student responses in the form of "messages to the artist" are presented. The paper discusses the potential benefits to both cultural and linguistic learning of inviting visiting artists into a Performance in Education (PIE) classroom. In this case, the inclusion of an essentially Japanese language-based activity within an English medium class illustrates how diverse linguistic resources can be positively juxtaposed and integrated for meaningful English language learning. In addition, based on in-class teacher observation and written feedback from students, direct contact with an Ainu culture bearer resulted in considerably greater levels of student engagement and interest when compared with the mere provision of information about Ainu culture and prerecorded digital examples of performance.

Performance in Education (PIE) encompasses a vast range of performance styles and genres, while the educational contexts, processes, and problems to which these could be potentially applied are almost limitless. At the same time, efforts to improve and strengthen theoretical models, research practice in PIE, and gain helpful insights on effective

approaches to evaluation and testing that can be positively applied to PIE are also underway (Kluge, 2018). Such work speaks to the ways music, drama, and the performing arts benefit the development of vocabulary (Meiliana et al., 2024; Milord, 2007), pronunciation (Kartal, 2023; Misa, 2024), motivation and engagement (Brown & Novak, 2007; Vallejo & Pérez Ortega, 2024), and cultural understanding (Crooke et al., 2024). It also suggests that live performance can have a positive impact on the cultivation of empathy and social skills (Rathje et al., 2021) and attaining stronger emotional and physiological engagement in learning (Karkou et al., 2022).

Within this stream of activity, beyond the fundamentally intercultural nature of EFL classes taught by instructors with backgrounds outside Japan, the inclusion of “world music” or ethnomusicological resources provide broad opportunities for cultural learning in the classroom (Menezes, 2025). Recent examples of such work include the use of traditional performances such as the Māori *Haka* to teach Japanese students about culture (Cotter, 2020), and the author’s own work exploring the ways Filipino and Japanese students perceive traditional Japanese *Noh* (Rockell, 2024).

As reported on in this paper, intercultural PIE teaching and research takes the form of research-led teaching in the English-medium elective classes *Performance in Education* and *Liberal Arts – Culture (Ethnomusicology)* taught at Japanese universities in Tohoku and Tokyo over the last decade. Both of these courses culminate in the performance of an English Language Noh-style play co-created with students. *Performance in Education* offers ample opportunity to promote physically mediated musicality, while in *Culture (Ethnomusicology)*, pre-recorded performances provide the impetus for reflection, discussion, and further independent exploration. Here, students are encouraged to view performances focussing in turn on aural, visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic elements of performance, which in combination can be thought of as semiotic clusters (SC) (Rockell, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when live performance activity and face-to-face teaching were particularly limited or restricted, turning to digital performance resources (DPR) such as pre-recorded performances was invaluable in helping PIE activity to continue. The benefits of DPR notwithstanding, including tireless repetition, the ability to stop and start a digital recording at any

point, and the ability to engage with the performance asynchronously, it may be the case that the attractive features of *live* performance, whether as a participant or as an audience member, act more effectively to draw many people to PIE.

My personal experience of a performance by a visiting ballet dancer and violinist to an agricultural community hall near my rural primary school in West Melton, New Zealand, during the 1970's made a strong and lasting impression. This performance, which included excerpts from the ballet *Swan Lake* and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, helped to stimulate an ongoing interest in PIE. Indeed, school visits by performers from national arts organizations such as the Royal NZ Ballet and NZ Symphony Orchestra continue to this day. The situation is similar in neighboring Australia, where the programs of major companies such as *Musica Viva* (music) and *Bangarra Dance Theatre* give students valuable opportunities to encounter the performing arts firsthand. In Japan too, schools regularly host visiting performers through government programs such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs and NPOs such as *MUSIC SHARING*. At the same time, while scholars have been interested in this phenomenon for some time (e.g., Boyer, 2025; Holdus & Espeland, 2013), the area does not appear to have been strongly researched. With this situation in mind, post-COVID, I have begun initial, exploratory investigations and taken first steps by inviting guests to Tokyo to perform or offer live mini performances/lectures to my students.

In the current paper, I report on the visit of Motoi "ToyToy" Ogawa, an Ainu artist, culture bearer, and performer from Hokkaido in June 2025. This visit helped draw students' attention to the sensitive issues that Ainu musicians have faced, such as forced cultural assimilation (Ruiz, 2024; Uyeda, 2021), loss of language (Tsahelnik, 2025), and breakdown of intergenerational cultural transmission (Nummelin, 2025). When cultural and linguistic transmission is interrupted in this way, issues such as reliance on historical recordings rather than live performance, commodification and touristic-oriented representations of questionable authenticity, and an underlying lack of resources and support for traditional performance also arise (Uyeda, 2021). Ogawa's direct contact with students during his lecture performance allowed him to touch upon such problems as he shared his personal story.



Figure 1

Motoi Ogawa, “ToyToy” plays the tonkori during a performance/lecture for students at Komazawa University, 2025

Educational cooperation with Ogawa was made possible thanks to the area studies-related Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research for research on fish skin and sustainability in the fashion industry. As part of a research team led by anthropologist Yuko Nishimura, I was invited to expand the idea of sustainability beyond material culture and artifacts to encompass the preservation and transmission of cultural practices, including the performing arts. My primary area of interest was the *tonkori*, a plucked, 5-string zither associated with the Ainu people of Hokkaido, pictured in Figure 1 above, played by Motoi Ogawa. Initial investigations, including an exploratory visit to Hokkaido in 2024, prior to the 2025 performance lecture visit, prompted me to report how Ogawa, the son of prominent Ainu activist Ryūkichi Ogawa, learned to play the tonkori independently. Deliberate work supporting the transmission of the art of the tonkori is also being carried out in Hokkaido by ethnomusicologist Rie Hochi, based at the Hokkaido Museum, and in Tokyo, where tonkori expert Nobuhiko Chiba offers lessons online and through the Tokyo College of Music. (Nishimura et al., 2025).

After making these observations, I interviewed Ogawa in Ebetsu on a subsequent research trip to Hokkaido in early 2025, primarily examining the compositional process and

background to his 2016 album *ramu* (Ogawa, 2016). On this occasion, I invited him to perform for my students in Tokyo, and we began to make preparations for his visit.

Visiting Artist: Flow of Classroom Activity

Ogawa's visit to Komazawa took place in session ten of the fifteen-session spring semester 2025. This section describes the main flow of activity before, during, and after his performance lectures.

Before Visit: Pre-teaching & Preparation

Pre-teaching involved a mini-lecture, multimedia activities, discussion/presentation, artist greeting, question preparation, and deciding which facilitator roles student volunteers would carry out during the visit. In session three, I gave a mini-lecture (15 minutes) in English on Ainu history, culture, and musical instruments, including the *tonkori* and *mukkuri*. Next, students were asked to watch a publicly available video clip touching on recent Ainu socio-political issues and to complete a cloze or "gap-fill" based on the video text. This was provided to students via Moodlecloud. Following this, in the same class session, students were divided into small groups of three to five students for discussion/presentation activities. Topic choices included a detailed investigation of a specific Ainu musical instrument, possible avenues for the preservation and transmission of Ainu music and musical instruments, and discovering more about a chosen location in Hokkaido.

To maintain a sense of expectation prior to Ogawa's visit, I called his private cellphone number during class session seven and encouraged the students to greet him heartily in English, saying "Welcome to Tokyo, ToyToy!"

In session eight, at Ogawa's suggestion, students were shown part of his talk *Tradition for the future –Coexistence without dependence* (TEDx Talks, 2015). They were asked to view the entire video for homework and were requested to prepare at least two questions they would like to ask Ogawa directly if the opportunity arose during his visit.

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In session nine, just prior to Ogawa's visit, volunteer facilitator roles were assigned, which included meeting the artist at the main campus gate, guiding him to the classroom, presenting him with a bouquet of flowers, giving a thank you speech, and helping with classroom set-up (moving chairs and tables, insuring there was a suitable performance space for the performer and electronic socket access for his amplifier, etc.). These preparations were facilitated using English as a directive language from the teacher to students, and the language used when students asked the teacher for clarification. Discussion between students took place mainly in Japanese. They also had recourse to the popular Japanese game, *janken* (rock, scissors, paper) when deciding facilitator roles.

During the In-Class Lecture Performance(s)

The lecture performances were held on two subsequent days, on Tuesday after lunch in the Performance in English elective class, and on Wednesday morning in the English medium culture (ethnomusicology) class. These were separate classes, and made up of a varied cross-section of students, since the elective classes are not restricted by student year or major subject of study. A similar format was followed on both days, beginning with brief greetings in the Ainu language, followed by the sharing of Ogawa's personal story and the difficulties he experienced as an Ainu during his childhood in Sapporo. He also talked about the personal realizations he made during his time studying at college in Okinawa, and the journey towards his current positive stance of "coexistence without dependence" living as an Ainu in contemporary Hokkaido.

When Ogawa introduced the *tonkori*, he invited students to come forward individually and experience the *tonkori*'s vibrations directly, while he held the instrument against their bodies as it was plucked. He also performed an extended *tonkori* solo utilizing all of the instrument's timbral resources. A particularly poignant moment occurred during his second lecture performance when a pause after a staccato chord was followed what appeared to be spontaneous block chord harmonics (a harmonic is a high pitch produced by lightly touching an instrument's string at certain node points rather than pressing it down when it is plucked).

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The performance culminated in a vocal performance with tonkori accompaniment in which Ogawa encouraged students to sing along during refrain sections made up of Ainu-language non-lexical vocables, vocal sounds with no clear semantic meaning but which function musically, providing rhythm, timbre, mood, and emotion.

During the performance in English class Ogawa also encouraged students to use these sounds in a round (a musical piece where several voices repeat the same melody but start at different times). The kind of round he encouraged, however, was one in which singers could join in at any random point, unfettered by the idea of standard, fixed entry points and *kata* [form, pattern, or model].

On each of the two days, the session finished with question time, a thank you message, and the presentation of gifts from student volunteers. The only significant problem that arose in relation to these performances was the need for ample time—at least ninety minutes—to tune the tonkori, and for the performer to warm up (taking into consideration acoustics, temperature, humidity, etc.). Since these are problems specific to musicians working with sensitive, wooden instruments, and may not be immediately understood by educational administrators, careful planning to ensure that classrooms are available in the previous period and can be reserved for two consecutive class periods would benefit those intending to invite visiting artists such as Ogawa.

Post-performance

Ogawa's lecture-performance had been conducted mainly in Japanese, with some Ainu language-based content appearing in his songs and in his initial greetings. Post-performance, however, the focus returned to English when students were asked to complete a reflection paper. This task was presented to students using the essay quiz option of the author's Moodlecloud course, and was to be completed in English within one week after the performance-lecture. The quiz included a section in which students were able to write messages to the artist. These were sent in their original English versions by email to Ogawa and his partner in Hokkaido the following month, who were encouraged to take a copy of the student messages to the manager of Heights Center English School, a personal friend of Ogawa, for a more personal translation or

interpretation and discussion of the contents. Students' messages to the artist were sometimes quite personal in tone, and for privacy reasons, only prominent themes from the messages appear below.

Prominent themes from students' "Messages to the Artist."

- The tonkori's impressive timbre and the impact of hearing its 'unique, mysterious, and wonderful sound' for the first time live.
- The emotional impact of Ogawa's narrative that included sharing difficult childhood experiences of discrimination as an Ainu.
- The desire to share what was learned in the performance-lecture with others.
- The idea that, despite having learned something about the Ainu previously second-hand through formal education, only by hearing stories directly from Ogawa could one come to understand.
- Gratitude and empathy with Ogawa's position on the part of students with mixed cultural backgrounds and the desire to eliminate all discrimination from Japanese society.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this initial exploratory study was mainly to report one of the author's PIE activities. At the same time, although purely anecdotal, it was interesting to note that based on in-class teacher observation and written feedback from students, direct contact with Ogawa during his visit appeared to have stimulated considerably greater levels of student engagement and interest when compared with their reaction to the lecture about Ainu culture given by the author earlier in the semester or having students watch digital examples of Ainu performance. Indeed, students were impressed by the live tonkori in a way they had not been after merely viewing the multimedia, and Ogawa's performance lecture seemed to touch certain students deeply and completely turn around their attitude in class.

The kind of deep transmission and embodied knowledge that Ogawa brought to students is what the intended meaning of "wisdom" in the title of this paper refers to. Evocative, though perhaps imprecise, the term captures the kind of lived-experience so vividly brought to life in the classroom through Ogawa's narrative and musicality, and while it might be foolish to speak of a "turn towards wisdom" in the current age, its importance has not escaped the scholarly gaze (Kallio & Tynjälä, 2025; Lähteenkorva et al., 2025, Ryan, 1999).

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This exploratory study also revealed other areas that invite ongoing future investigation with a more rigorous, pinpointed research design. For example, the combination of English, Japanese, and Ainu languages highlighted the need to explore useful ways of working with multiple languages in the classroom. The classroom visit reported on here involved Japanese and Ainu (Ogawa to students) embedded within English (English medium class) embedded within Japanese (the main language of the broader environment in which the English language class takes place). The functional flow between languages, and possible deliberate implementation of languages other than English in projects like this one for meaningful English language learning warrants further investigation.

In addition, the differences between digital performance resources and live performance could be examined more carefully in future work, not as an attempt to argue for one over the other but rather to discover better ways to engage with them individually and in combination for the benefit of students (Kim & Kim, 2024; Swarbrick et al., 2019).

Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, the timing, frequency, content, and manner of delivery of the pre-teaching prior to a visiting artist's performance, as well as the nature of post-performance reporting, could be carefully examined in future research in an attempt to maximize the educational benefits of visiting artists in PIE. At the time of writing, Ogawa has agreed to offer annual performance-lectures to students in Tokyo beginning in 2027. With his help, and that of other visiting artists, it is hoped that an increasing number of fruitful intercultural performance encounters can take place, and he can continue to promote the sharing of wisdom through PIE.

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Kim Rockell, originally from New Zealand, is an ethnomusicologist and classical guitarist active throughout the Asia-Pacific region. In Japan he had the opportunity to experience traditional *Noh* theatre, inspiring him to experiment with original English language *Noh*-style plays as a member of PIE. He draws on a range of musical strategies when teaching Performance in English and World Music and Culture courses at Komazawa University in Tokyo. Kim also supervises Music Liberal Arts Graduation theses at the Tokyo College of Music.

