

The Kabuki is one of the three major genres of theatrical art in Japan. The word literally means Song-dance-theatre and the Kabuki is a spectacular synthesis of theatre, music, and dance. There is a vast repertoire of Kabuki plays allowing for a great variety of dance dramas. Each one-day performance, consists of one or two dramas based on stories, which usually have no relation between them.

Nagauta Shamisen music is used as the accompaniment of the dance drama, and also as background music for dramas of other types. The Shamisen is a lute made of a small square wooden body covered with cat skin or dog skin on both sides fixed to a thin, long (88 cm.) wooden stick, at the end of which a peg box is attached. The three silk strings of various thickness, are usually tuned either to do-fa-do, do-sol-do or do-fa-si flat. They are plucked with a large ivory or wooden plectrum shaped like the leaf of the Ginko tree. Although the size of the instrument is always practically the same, delicate differences of timbre are obtained by altering the thickness of the strings and of the skins, the size of plectrum, the weight of the small bridge etc. There are several schools of Shamisen music and also different styles suited for various occasions such as, for instance, theatre music and home music. According to schools there are subtle differences in timbre, and in playing technique.

The music presented here (Side 2, N. 3) is the end of a typical dance drama called Kanjinchō. This historical drama tells the story of a young hero Minamoto Yoshitsune who had to escape from the capital Kyoto to the northern country, because of a struggle with his brother Minamoto Yoritomo. The hero and his attendants, disguised as a humble guide and itinerant priests, tried to pass through a police control at Ataka. The chief officer of the barrier recognised that they were the team of Yoshitsune, but moved by the tragic misfortune of the hero he allowed to go through. In the end of the drama, a brave attendant, Benkei, dances, drunk with the wine the officer offered them, while the team passed through the barrier. The music here recorded shows this last climax scene which is accompanied with the Shamisen piece, Nagauta. The fairly long instrumental interludes between the songs are performed on the Shamisen, flute and drums, and bring out the musical climax of this long drama.