Inattention to the Metrical Structure in the Practice of Noh Chanting

FUJITA Takanori

Songs in noh drama have been composed following a set, "eight-beat" metrical structure. However, many teachers of noh chanting disregard this form of notation, and some students do not even know that all noh songs follow this eight-beat structure since they lack the opportunity to see and use this form of notation. This inattention to metrical structure impedes students' understanding of the rhythm of noh chanting.

This paper examines several conditions which inhibit students from comprehending the metrical structure of noh chanting. Teachers' and students' inattention to rhythmic structure has long been criticized by scholars of noh chant who are interested in understanding musical rhythm. Nonetheless, the problem continues and is widespread to the point that it can be called an institutional practice.

One result is that students face difficulties in perceiving correct rhythms during their lessons. Teachers of noh chant correct rhythms only through repetition without any reference to the metrical structure. By studying noh chant for several years, students become acquainted with the drum parts which transmit this metrical structure. Although singing with a drum accompaniment allows students to acquire some understanding of metrical structure, their level of understanding remains incomplete.

There are positive aspects of this inattention to rhythm as performances of the part of the main actor (shite) illustrate. The shite's solo part in noh drama, which is sometimes performed by amateurs and children, is exceptional in that it can be performed without any knowledge of metrical structure. Drummers take a subordinate role in accompanying this solo part. One result of this inattention to rhythm is an interesting tension between the drummers' part and the shite's solo.