

The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity and Meaning (Soas Musicology)



The Japanese geisha is an international icon, known almost universally as a symbol of traditional Japan. Numerous books exist on the topic, yet this is the first to focus on the gei of geisha a the art that constitutes their title (gei translates as fine art, sha refers to person). Kelly M. Foreman brings together ethnomusicological field research, including studying and performing the shamisen among geisha in Tokyo, with historical research. The book elaborates how musical art is an essential part of the identity of the Japanese geisha rather than a secondary feature, and locates current practice within a tradition of two and half centuries. The book opens by deconstructing the idea of geisha as it functions in Western societies in order to understand why gei has been, and continues to be, neglected in geisha studies. Subsequent chapters detail the myriad musical genres and traditions with which geisha have been involved during their artistic history, as well as their position within the traditional arts society. Considering the current situation more closely, the final chapters explore actual dedication to art today by geisha, and analyse how they create impromptu performances at evening banquets. An important issue here is geisha-patron artistic collaboration, which leads to consideration of what Foreman argues to be the unique and essential nexus of identity, eroticism and aesthetics within the geisha world.

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