

Rokudan and Gregorian Chant Credo

By Tatsuo Minagawa, musicologist

Foreword

It is generally assumed that Western music was introduced into Japan around the time that the nation opened up to the world at the start of the *Meiji* era in the second half of the 19th century. But in reality it had already appeared in Japan some four and a half centuries ago, at around the time that the missionary Saint Francis Xavier arrived at Kagoshima in 1549 and began to propagate the Christian faith. Christianity is a religion that places great importance on music, and the transmission of Christianity would inevitably have been accompanied by the introduction of Christian chants.

In 1552, three years after the arrival of Saint Francis Xavier in Japan, a Christmas Mass was celebrated and sung in Yamaguchi. Colleges of divinity were established throughout the country during the 1580s, and it was at these seminaries that education was provided not just in the Christian faith but also in music, with students being required to take practical lessons in singing and instrumental performance for one hour a day. Under these conditions it was only natural that the young Japanese men who studied in the seminaries should have become increasingly proficient at music.

In 1582, four young men, who had studied at the seminary at Arima in Kyushu, left on a visit to Europe as members of the so-called *Tensho* mission. They had already acquired a degree of proficiency in Western music within Japan, and astonished Europeans by undauntedly playing large pipe organs in Europe. On the occasion of their visit to Venice, the organist of the church of San Marco, Andrea Gabrieli, composed a mass to

welcome the mission.

The young men returned to Japan eight years later in 1590. One of the items they brought back from Europe was a printing machine. This machine enabled them to print a considerable quantity of Christian literature, an example of which was the *Manuale ad Sacramenta Ecclesiae Ministranda*, printed in 1605 at Nagasaki, which includes nineteen Latin chants along with the musical notation thereof. However, the gradual trend towards the importation of Western music came to a decisive end as a consequence of the prohibition placed on Christianity from 1614 onwards. Along with churches, musical instruments and notation were destroyed and burnt as symbols of heretical religion, and even performance of Western music was likely to place the performer's life at risk. The only historic musical record that survived in this context is the *Manuale ad Sacramenta*.

The barrier that rises up before historians attempting to investigate Western music during the early Christian ('*Kirishitan*') era in Japan, is the complete lack of historic musical materials and the uncertainty and vagueness as to what materials exist. These were the conditions under which I published a study entitled *Yougaku toraikou: Kirishitan ongaku no eikou to zassetsu* [A Study of the Introduction of Western Music in Japan: The Glory and Collapse of *Kirishitan* Music] (The Board of Publications – The United Church of Christ in Japan, 2004), in which I examined the *Manuale ad Sacramenta* and also links between Latin hymnody and the '*Oratio*' prayers still handed down today among the descendants of the former clandestine Christians ('*Kakure Kirishitan*') on Ikitsuki Island in Nagasaki Prefecture.

However, having conducted further detailed investigation thereafter, it became necessary to review many of the issues that I had tackled in my earlier study, in particular the links between the *koto* piece *Rokudan* and the Latin Credo.



Synchronized performance of Rokudan and the Latin Credo on July 2012, in Rome

Links between the *koto* piece *Rokudan* and the Latin Credo

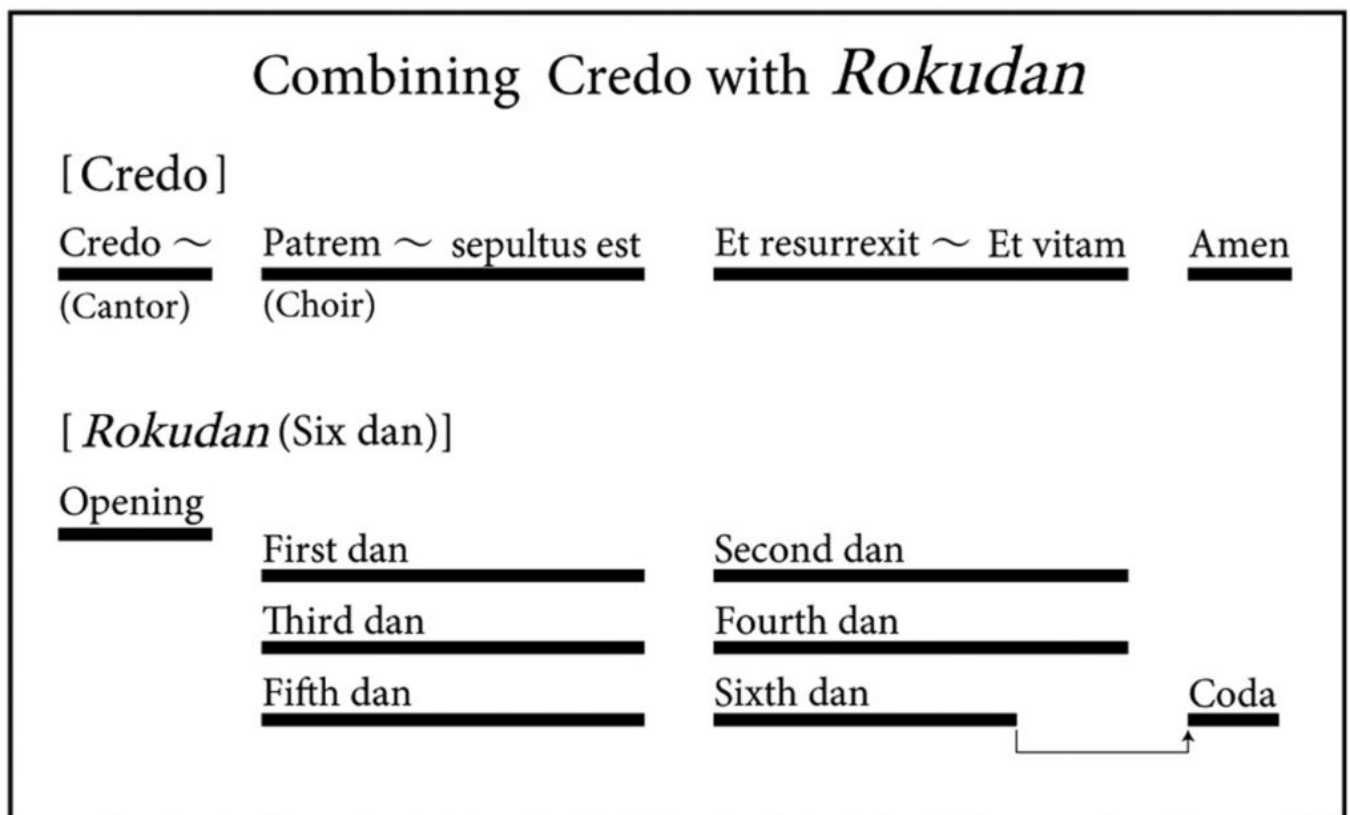
The Credo is the third item in the Ordinary of the Mass in the Catholic Church and constitutes a declaration of faith on the part of the believer. The Credo was performed constantly in Japan during the *Kirishitan* era, some four centuries ago. The doctrinal text *Orasho no hon-yaku* [Translation of the *Oratio*], printed in 1600, includes the following statement: “Of the various prayers, the *Paaterunausuteru* [Pater Noster, the Lord’s Prayer], *Abemaria* [Ave Maria], *Keredo* [Credo] and the *Madamento* [Ten Commandments] should be specially memorized”. This indicates that it was considered essential for Japanese Christians, at the time, to memorize and sing the Credo.

The Credo chant begins with the opening phrase of the cantor (*Credo in unum Deum*) and then a two-part structure in the performance by the choir (*Patrem omnipotentem* and *Et*

resurrexit tertia die), and comes to an end with a final *Amen*.

The *koto* piece *Rokudan* [Six Sections] is one of the most well-known and popular pieces of Japanese traditional music.

Combining the Credo, with its structure as indicated above, with *Rokudan*, the opening phrase declaimed by the cantor (*Credo in unum Deum*) can be seen to correspond to the opening phrase of *Rokudan*. The first and second halves of the following sections sung by the choir correspond to the first and second *dan* [section or variation] of *Rokudan*. The ensuing textual repetition corresponds to the third and fourth *dan*, and the further repetition to the fifth and sixth *dan*. Part of the concluding section of the chant (from *Et expecto* onward) is then omitted, and the final *Amen* corresponds to the coda of *Rokudan* (see the diagram).



In other words, repetition three times of the Credo results in the same structure as that of *Rokudan* and an exact correspondence between the two pieces. It is not merely the

overall structure of the pieces that coincides. Each of the breaks between the sections of the Credo corresponds to those of *Rokudan*. It seems highly unlikely that this correspondence is entirely fortuitous (see example 1).

Credo and Rokudan

(The rest is omitted)

(Click on the image to download the full score)

There is another interesting matter that should be noted in this connection. In *Rokudan*, the sections corresponding to words in the text of the Latin Credo that are particularly important from the standpoint of Christianity and the Catholic faith, such as the opening 'Credo', 'Jesum Christum', 'Descendit de caelis', 'Et resurrexit tertia die', 'Et in Spiritum' and 'Confiteor unum baptisma', are all accented or include semitonal changes, in other words are emphasized in the music. The composer of *Rokudan* thus clearly understood the meaning of the Latin text of the Credo.

The current collection of the Gregorian chants contains six melodies dating from the 11th and 17th centuries. Despite those melodies being based each in a different mode, they all employ the same texts and same melody lengths and sectional

divisions.

It is not certain which melody, in which mode, from among the six Latin Credo chants may have served as the basis for a new piece for the *koto*. I would myself regard the main contender to be the Credo No.1 in Hypophrygian mode, which is regarded as the most authentic melody.

The name of the composer of *Rokudan* is also not clear even now. The composer in question may have lived either before the suppression of Christianity, in the latter half of the 16th century, or around the middle of the 17th century, when the suppression of Christianity had begun in earnest. He may have been named *Kenjun* (1534? – 1623?) or possibly *Yatsushashi* (1614 – 1685), or the composer may have been another *kengyo* (the highest rank of performing musicians in the guild of the blind).

Whatever his name may have been, it seems likely that *Rokudan* came into being as a consequence of this master of the *koto* executing a fantasy-like paraphrase of the melody of the Latin Credo chant and attempting to create a set of variations, in the manner of the Spanish *diferencias*.

Had the music in question been vocal and employed a Christian text, it would most likely have been destroyed during the era of suppression of Christianity. Composing such a piece might well have been a life-threatening endeavor as well. However, since this was an instrumental piece, without any sung text, it managed to escape the persecution of Christianity and to find its way down to the present day. The *koto* piece *Rokudan* is one of the great legacies of Japanese culture, and it would provide evidence of a musical legacy shared between Europe and Japan.

(English translation: from my article of the CD ‘Rokudan and Gregorian Chant ‘Credo’’ [VZCG-743] published in 2011 by the Japan Traditional Cultures Foundation.)

Edited by Joel Hageman, USA