

Act 2

#7

The palace and gardens of the Tang imperial court, in Chang'an; peonies are in full bloom. Empress Koki's birthday celebration banquet is being held.

Chorus: Flower of the world is our famed Chang'an, capital of Tang.
A glorious, auspicious day has arrived,
For today, Empress Koki, our spring goddess,
Celebrates her birthday. Let us all to the lively banquet.

In front of the palace are set Emperor Gensho's throne and Empress Koki's stool.*
Guests in full dress, ministers, public officials, poets and notables press themselves around the area. The gorgeous looks and rich attire of the court and noble women can be seen everywhere. Some, already tipsy, contribute to the general cheerfulness. (to be done with dance, if possible)

Here and there acrobats exhibit their skills while jesters run through the crowd causing general laughter. Gay, lively music from beginning to end.

Suddenly a gong is heard, followed by the voice of a herald.

Herald: Choukei has returned!

All: Ah!

All turn towards the entrance way at once. Choukei (Nakamaro), in formal dress, appears at the entrance with Kiyoto, also in formal clothes, changed beyond recognition.

Choukei, arising from the crowd, proceeds in the direction of the throne. The poet Wang Wei advances towards him, whereupon Choukei welcomes him with a generous embrace.†

Choukei (faces the throne and kneels down)

I have just now, sire, made my return to this court.

Being able to arrive in just time

To attend the celebratory banquet causes in me great happiness.

Gensho: A long way have you gone; I have put you to much trouble.

Who is that young man beside you? I have never seen him.

Choukei: This is the fortunate survivor – the only one – from when

* TN: The character Gensho is the historical Emperor Xuanzong (685-762) who reigned over Tang China between 712 and 756. While the country prospered economically and in the arts and letters during the first half of his reign, the second half was marked by corruption and internal instability caused by power escaping into the hands of court officials, many of whom were the family and cronies of Yang Guifei, a court lady with whom the emperor had become infatuated.

† TN: Wang Wei (in Japanese also pronounced Oui; 699? – 761) was a multi-talented artist from Tang China. Mostly famous as a historical poet and a landscape painter, he also excelled in music and calligraphy. Considered first among court poets during Emperor Gensho's reign (712-756), he devoted himself to Zen Buddhism in his later years, becoming known as the 'Poet Buddha'.

Three years ago, the envoy ship from Japan was lost at sea.
The storm threw him toward our southern shores.
His name is Ono Kiyoto; a courtier from Nara.

Koki: Indeed, he is fortunate. I shall be very glad if one such as he can
join our celebration banquet today.

Kiyoto: I shall be very honoured to do so.

Koki: What instruments do you play?

Kiyoto: I am afraid only the *biwa*, madam, and the transversal flute.

Koki: (looking satisfied) Let us then celebrate your fortune
With the sound of our most brilliant *biwa* performer.
Ryurei, if you please.

The maid Ryurei picks up a *biwa* and crouches down at the bottom of the steps,
bowing in reverence.

Kiyoto: (forgetting himself, lets off a cry)
Sakurako!

Choukei: (holding Kiyoto by the shoulder)
Compose yourself, Kiyoto!
That is Ryurei,
The Empress' most beloved maid.

Kiyoto: Yet, she resembles her far too much,
Almost as if they were twin sisters...

Ryurei begins playing on the *biwa*.*

Kiyoto: (once again speechless with astonishment.)
That piece... Sakurako played it.
On the night when we were united, she played it for me.
Her late father taught her how to play it, she said.
Yes, just like that night...

Pulling out his flute, Kiyoto joins in with the *biwa* at the bottom of the stage.

Ryurei: (to herself)
Why does he know this piece?
Would it be possible that my father...?
No, it should have been from my sister.
And yet, happy men cannot possibly understand its true meaning.
This music is of such kind,
That can be grasped only by one
Who has known long years of suffering.

* CN: In order to divert the public's attention from the singer's faked instrumental performance a dance symbolizing the idea of 'meeting', and which should be restricted in movement", may be staged at this point.

Choukei, while still enthralled by the performance, approaches the throne and whispers something to the Emperor. When the performance ends, the Emperor's voice makes itself heard over the storm of applause.

Gensho: Bravo! Bravo!
You know this piece well, indeed;
Ryurei and you of one breath did play.
By the way, according to Choukei,
Our Kiyoto here is a master *go* player.
I have never myself been defeated at *go*, not once.

Jester I: If he would dare
To be so careless as to beat the Emperor...

Jester II: ...then surely heads would roll.

Jester I: Every one here is skilled at losing;

Jester II: Be it at noon or evening, we lose zealously.

Gensho: (laughing) Knock it off!

The Jesters imitate their being beheaded. There is a whirlpool of explosive laughter.

Gensho: (to Empress Koki)

We shall proceed to another room, then, and play a match.

Koki: So please you my lord.

Beware; he is not skilful at losing.

Kiyoto and Choukei follow the Emperor into another room.

Koki: Now, since we have the poet Wang Wei with us today,
Please, let me sing 'One-hearted'. It is one of my favourite songs.

The maids start humming along with the orchestra.

Koki: When the crimson berries come in spring,
Flushing on your southland branches,
Pray you take home an armful, for my sake,
As a symbol of our love.

The attendants applaud generously. Having made Wang Wei stand up, the Empress turns to Ryurei.

Koki: Now, Ryurei, if you please, let us hear last year's song once again.
Unable to forget it, I have waited the whole year to hear it again.

After bowing to the Empress, Ryurei begins to sing.

Aria ‘My Heart’

Ryurei: Early in life was I separated from father and sister;
In despair and anguish did my mother depart from this world;
In my lonesome heart it is always winter.

With drifting eyes and a desolate soul,
I eked out a living by playing the *biwa*
In my incessantly painful heart, it s always winter.

All hope lost, left to nothing but wandering
And cursing the destiny that tears parents apart from their children;
In my deep, frozen heart it is always winter.

Empress Koki, and her alone, looked upon this wretched,
And brought me to work in the splendour of the imperial palace.
To her, on the day of her birthday,
More than anyone else, I wish to express my gratitude.

To the peaceful reign of the imperial couple
I now devote myself in all sincerity.

Without notice, Emperor Gensho returns to his throne from the room where he retreated to play *go*. Kiyoto, who entered on time to listen to the last section of the song, is left petrified at the sound of the *biwa*.

Gensho: That was beautiful... Ryurei’s song is of the most exquisite;
Her achievement must be rewarded.

Ryurei advances towards the steps and bows in reverence. The Emperor has the attendants hand her a box containing precious stones.

Gensho: We shall also bestow a reward on Ono Kiyoto, from Japan.
Just a while ago I challenged him at *go*;
of three matches we played, he won all three.
His skill is like that of a god.
(after a long applause)
Kiyoto, come forward.

Kiyoto advances towards the steps and bows. Ryurei takes a very fine garment from Empress Koki and hands it to him. There is thunderous applause. Mouken glares at Kiyoto, his face red with envy and anger.

Mouken: Damn! Is he the Devil or what?
Don’t be so proud of yourself;
I’ll show you!

Suddenly, a loud fanfare is sounded.

Emperor Gensho's Aria

Gensho: Great Tang, the flower of the world,
Is the strongest country under the Heavens.
Kings from all over the world
Have humbly grovelled at my feet.
To the Tang Emperor,
Who has become the symbol of fortune and authority,
Quite hopelessly, the Heavens all concede.

Now, mark ye well my words,
For here I make a new announcement.
Come my next birthday, and
The customary *go* tournament shall be held.
For this year's final winner, the prize
I do now solemnly declare:
The prize shall be Ryurei. (bis)

Chorus: The prize shall be Ryurei.

The crowd cheers loudly.

Mouken: Hurray! (in a joyful mood, he jumps and waves both hands.)

Ryurei pales at the words and seems to faint. Kiyoto, who was standing by her side, sustains her.

Koki: (to Emperor Gensho)

Sire! My dear Lord! Ryurei is my chamber maid,
Without my permission do you give her away as a prize?
It is unbearable, sire, and I shall not suffer it!

Gensho: Great Tang, the flower of the world,
Is the strongest country under the Heavens.
Kings from all over the world
Have humbly grovelled at my feet.
To the Tang Emperor,
Who has become the symbol of fortune and authority,
Quite hopelessly, the heavens all concede.

Gensho rises from the throne and proceeds inside without waiting for a reply. (the band hastily performs exit music). Koki follows the Emperor inside. The middle curtain falls.

#8

In front of the closed middle curtain. A common passageway in the Imperial palace. Ryurei rushes in from the left, looking as having taken it seriously. Mouken, in pursuit, bars her way.

- Mouken:** My love of long years may finally now receive royal benison.
It was Heaven, my dear, who brought this great fortune upon us.
So, won't you share this happiness with me, Ryurei?
- Ryurei:** You say that far too often.
When was it that I gave in to your intentions?
Will you please let me by?
- Mouken:** Did you forget how I protected you; how I cared for you
When you were a mere wandering artist? Is that all gone?
- Ryurei:** It is my destiny to be alone.
How to love... how to believe someone... All have I forgotten.
No amount of kindness or love will ever thaw my frozen heart.
You were only a short-time work partner.
Did you think I would like to live with you? No way!
- Mouken:** I am tied and bound to you by my great love, Ryurei.
In the next *go* tournament, I shall venture my life for you.
The first among this country's *go* masters
Shall stake his reputation for the first among women.
You, Ryurei, are my most precious treasure.
- Ryurei:** Do, please yourself; but quit such exaggerated thoughts.
The crimson berries are foreign to me.
Besides, the Emperor will surely reverse his decree.
Now, let me by, please.
I have a request to present to the Empress.

Ryurei leaves from stage left, pursued by Mouken.

#9

The Emperor's antechamber; several maids assist the Emperor change. Having promptly helped him out of his ceremonial attire and into a more casual outfit, the maids disappear inside. Empress Koki, who had in her turn also changed into casual clothes, now enters.

- Koki:** I beg you, sire, rescind your decree on Ryurei.
- Gensho:** Impossible, my dear!
As a law engraved in stone,
Our word is definite and inflexible.
Now, let go of that stern look on your face; come over here.
(taps on his lap)
- Koki:** Don't you even try, sire!
- Gensho:** A beautiful woman's angry semblance

Is the most charming of all.
Koki: Sire, do you fully understand
The meaning of your decree?
Gensho: Now, what was it that I said?
All those seducing words addressed to as many women,
Those I fully remember one by one.
They have made me unable to govern.
Koki: My fortune is your fortune,
And my strength your strength;
I am the slave of your gracious love,
And wish to be trampled on by your lovely feet.
Perhaps I have become somewhat senile.
Gensho: Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh...
If one can forget all one's foolish deeds and words,
Then it is I who wants to become senile soon.
Koki: (quickly changing to a soft, sensual voice, she goes to rub on the
Emperor's knees.)
Now, will you tell me truth?
What are you plotting?
She hates him like a viper snake,
But Mouken is head over hells in love with Ryurei.
Were you not aware of that?
Gensho: I knew it not.
Mouken is the strongest *go* player in Tang,
With women, as at *go*, he is a shrewd character.
Koki: Maybe Mouken will win
The competition, as he usually does.
Then Ryurei will surely commit suicide.
Gensho: Don't dramatise!
Now, shall I let you know the truth...
I have come to desire, by any means,
To keep Kiyoto in our country.
This is all a trick I have devised
So that he will not return to his country.
If I can have him win the *go* tournament
And marry an attractive woman, such as Ryurei,
He is certain to remain with us.
Koki: That is so much like you, sire.
Gensho: You can achieve that yourself, I suppose.
Koki: You may leave the affair to me, sir.
Gensho: Come here, then.
Koki: You have me, sire.
Gensho: Beautiful women, after all,
Are the most beautiful when they laugh!

As they laugh the lighting becomes pink; then it gradually darkens. Soft music is heard – *The Emperor's Dream*.

#10

The same night as the previous scene, Kyoto's room in Choukei's residence; simply but tastefully decorated. Choukei and Kiyoto drink sake together.

- Kiyoto:** It seems to me then, sir,
That the Emperor has a liking for trickery and deception.
- Choukei:** The violence of his lust grows from his greatness.
The desire of a sovereign who has obtained
All the power and richness of the world,
Is to command the service of
The greatest men from all over the vast earth.
Exactly as he obtained my service in the past,
So he now wishes to obtain yours.
- Kiyoto:** Three years have gone by since I left my country.
My dear wife and child left behind... I want to meet them,
Hold them in my arms, as soon as possible.
- Choukei:** In that case, you must not enter the *go* competition.
Yet, except for Kiyoto the novice,
Who is there to beat Mouken?
A man will forget all his past
As long as he has money and beautiful women.
- Kiyoto:** My Sakurako!
It matters not how much Ryurei looks like you,
Sakurako she is not! Oh, Sakurako!
- A maid:** Two guests have arrived for you, sir.
- Choukei:** Please lead the gentleman into my chambers,
And the lady over this way. (leaves)

Ryurei, by mistake, enters the room.

- Kiyoto:** (confused for a moment)
Sakurako!
- Ryurei:** I am Ryurei;
Sakurako is my twin sister.
- Kiyoto:** What! Sakurako did not know she had a sister.
- Ryurei:** My father Harukawa, was an envoy to Tang,
And a researcher of its music.
Passionate as any handsome young man
He fell in love with lady Lixiang, a foreign woman in Chang'an.
As proof of their affection, my sister and I were born.
In this country my sister was named Ying'ling.

Then, when we were four years old,
 My father left me with my mother here
 And returned to his country with my sister.
 Mother soon became ill and died;
 Whereupon I was left to eke a life
 Playing the *biwa*, as my mother had taught me.
 Out of the bitter life it forced upon me
 I came to curse my fate.
 And you, can you tell me about my father?
Kiyoto: He twice attempted to return to Tang, through Bokkai*,
 Yet, before he could reach Tang,
 An accident took his life.
 You were ten years old or so, at the time.
 Empress Shomyo took pity on the orphaned Sakurako,
 And had her raised together with me and prince Wakakusa.
 It was there our strong bonds were formed.

Double soliloquy

Kiyoto: Days of my childhood, now long bygone,
 When the sun was always bright,
 And even the rain was sweet and gentle...

Ryurei: Happy was my sister.
 It comforts my heart
 To know that she did not have to know
 The bitter taste of misery and agony
 Which mother and I endured.
 (turning to Kiyoto)
 Sakurako, was it not,
 Chose you for a husband
 Over Prince Wakakusa.

Kiyoto: That choice made our happiness.
 Yet, it was from the prince's
 Noble sacrifice of his own love,
 That this happiness was born.

Double soliloquy (bis)

Ryurei: No one knows what destiny
 Has set for tomorrow.
 The reasons for our existence
 Are to love; to find happiness.
 Yet, no sooner has love entered our lives
 Than agony is born.
 Yet, even so, we seek love.

* TN: A state which existed between the eighth to tenth centuries in the Eastern area on present-day Northeast China.

Kiyoto: Even so, from the depths of the past
To the unknown future,
We cannot resist loving.
Even though plenty are the tears rolling from lost love
And few the smiles.

Ryurei: Love visits us unannounced,
Helpless are we in its presence.
Love is a mystery;
An unrewarding mystery.
Even so, from the depths of the past
To the unknown future,
We cannot resist loving.

Kiyoto: (turning to Ryurei)
Ryurei, why did you come by tonight?

Ryurei: (with determination, as if having awoken from a dream)
To play for you the secret piece *Ai-en*.

Kiyoto: What! Why would you?

Ryurei: I learned from Choukei that
You cannot return to your country
Without having learnt this piece.

Kiyoto: It is so, indeed.

Ryurei: My father Harukawa composed *Ai-en*
During his stay in Tang,
It was a gift of gratitude to this country,
And was dedicated to Empress Koki.
The Empress, taken very fond of the piece,
Has made it indefinitely secret.

Kiyoto: What you tell me is most incredible.

Ryurei: In order to preserve this piece for the future,
Empress Koki has chosen me, from among all
The *biwa* players, to learn it.
Yet, as this is a secret piece,
I cannot teach it to anyone,
Under pain of immediate death.

Kiyoto: Mysterious... Dreadful is what you tell me.
Ah, Ryurei! (moved by emotion Kiyoto holds Ryurei's hand)

Ryurei: I have brought with me the formal dress
Appropriate to teaching you the piece.
You to, please, compose your attire.

Kiyoto: As long as your precious life is waged on it,
I cannot have you teach me *Ai-en*.

Ryurei: Do not worry yourself, Kiyoto.
My life is my own up the Emperor's birthday celebrations.
Before that day I shall teach it to you.

Kiyoto: (surprised, he embraces Ryurei)
Have you lost you mind, Ryurei?

Look into my eyes:
Someone has designs on your life.

Ryurei: (escaping from Kiyoto's arms)
The winner of this year's *go* competition
Has been decided. That person is Mouken.
In this vast country
There is not one person who can beat him.
Mouken has been in illicit love with me for long.
If I have to become his wife,
I shall bite my tongue off and die.
I am the prize at stake.
The Emperor's order has supreme power.

A knock is heard; Choukei enters, followed by Ryushou.

Choukei: This gentleman you see here is Ryushou,
A merchant from Bokkai who often visits Yamato.
He brings news from there.

Ryushou bows respectfully.

Choukei: I employ Ryushou here
To learn news from our country.
Unfortunately, what he brings us today
Is so tragic, sir, so awful,
That I dare not relate it myself.

Ryushou: My lord,
Truly sad news do I carry:
Lady Sakurako has passed away.

Kiyoto and Ryurei let out a cry of shock.

Ryushou: When Prince Wakakusa brought her
The news of your shipwreck and drowning,
Lady Sakurako, her spirit distraught,
Ran towards Lake Sarusawa,
And sank herself to the bottom

Kiyoto: How awful!

Ryushou: Later, as rumours emerged of your survival
Prince Wakakusa was taken by severe sorrow.
Believing that his action had caused her death;
Unable to justify himself before you;
He has become a Buddhist priest.
Here, my lord,
Is a letter entrusted to me by the Prince.

Kiyoto opens the letter. On a corner of the stage, Prince Wakakusa's figure can be seen, as if floating.

Wakakusa: 'Due to my premature announcement,
Indeed to my gross error,
Sakurako and the fruit of your sweet love,
Which she carried in her womb, have now both been lost.
To atone for my sin, I wish to become a priest;
To dedicate myself to praying for the deceased
Is the very least I can now offer.'

Kiyoto: Ah! I must return immediately;
I wish to mourn Sakurako in his company.

Ryushou: Unfortunately, sir,
I am sorry to have to tell you...
Prince Wakakusa has also passed away.

Together: What! (almost screaming)

Ryushou: Last year a rebellion broke out in Yamato.

End of Act 2