



Title	日本音楽史といふものは可能であるか：兼常清佐の音楽史（学）観を中心に
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Citation	文芸学研究. 2012, 16, p. 57-71
Version Type	
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/51647
rights	
Note	

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Kiyosuke Kanetsune's View on a Historiography of Japanese Music

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How did musicologists in the prewar era endeavor to document Japanese music history? This paper aims to shed light on this question by focusing on one of Japan's most controversial musicologists, Kiyosuke Kanetsune (1885–1957).

Kanetsune insisted that Japanese music history is impossible to chronicle because it lacks an autonomous and reliable system of musical notation. Nevertheless, he produced many writings about Japanese music history and notated several musical scores. This seems to be a double standard, but when we consider the historical position of Kanetsune himself, the reasons for this paradoxical behavior become clear.

Unlike today, most musicologists of the prewar era, including Kanetsune, were music historians, ethnomusicologists, music critics, and composers. This complex situation gives them and their output—both writings and musical works—a unique position in the Japanese music history. Kanetsune's argument, in which he appears to employ a double standard, arises from this.

In this paper, I also show how Kanetsune attempted to commit to the future of Japanese music. This type of activity is now considered to be part of the discipline called applied musicology; therefore, the future of music will no longer be a problem of historiography. In the conclusion, I revisit Kanetsune's ideas in the light of the segmentation among the musicological discipline, which has advanced since Kanetsune's time.