In a recently-published study, Hugh de Ferranti has interpreted the history and documented the demise of a centuries-old tradition of oral performance in Japan.

His book – *The Last Biwa Singer* – is not only a valedictory analysis of that tradition as personified by Yamashika Yoshiyuki (1901-1996), but also a celebration of the process of composition-in-performance itself. Within the book is an implicit plea for a greater understanding of such oral performance traditions, and thus their preservation not as cultural relics but as living forms of artistic expression.

Allan Marett, Professor of Ethnomusicology at Charles Darwin University and Emeritus Professor (Musicology) at the University of Sydney, officially launched *The Last Biwa Singer* at the University of New England, where Dr de Ferranti is an Associate Professor in the School of Arts. Professor Marett spoke about the pride he had felt, as the supervisor of Dr de Ferranti’s PhD thesis on the blind musicians of Japan’s Kyushu province, on reading the book.

“It’s the culmination of a journey that Hugh and I started together,” he said.

“Yamashika was the last person to have earned his living in Japan as a blind musician performing a repertoire of tales, songs, and religious rites accompanying himself on the biwa (a four-stringed lute),” Dr de Ferranti said. “He became well known as ‘the last biwa hoshi’, and was the subject of books, television programs, and a feature-length documentary film. An apparent living relic of a long-vanished Japan, Yamashika also appeared in *The New York Times* in his last years.”

Professor Marett praised Dr de Ferranti’s insights, gained through conversations with Yamashika and analysis of his repertoire, into the true nature of the biwa singer’s performances – insights that help to correct the official “nationalistic” view of such performances as idealised “cultural relics” of a literary and musical canon.

On the contrary, the picture of the biwa singer’s art that emerges from the book is one of dynamic oral composition – traditional tales virtually recreated in the course of each telling, according (among other things) to the singer’s prior knowledge of his audience and his interaction with them during the performance.

“It is through comparison of multiple performances of a tale that the question of composition-in-performance can be addressed,” Dr de Ferranti explains in the book. “What are the common elements in each performance, what differences are there, how do they occur, and why? In examining this problem one is not trying to establish any ‘standard’ or definitive form of the piece, but to establish how different versions of the piece come about.”

“The unfolding of the tale anew in each performance gives it its power,” Professor Marett said, deploring the loss of that “power” with the demise of such performance traditions. “All extinctions – biological or cultural – impoverish us and threaten our survival as a species on this planet,” he concluded.

*The Last Biwa Singer: A Blind Musician in History, Imagination and Performance*, is published by Cornell University (Ithaca, New York) as No. 143 in the Cornell East Asia Series.

Clicking on the image (a section of the book’s cover) displayed here reveals a photograph, taken at the UNE book launch, of Associate Professor Hugh de Ferranti (left) and Professor Allan Marett.