

The Shakuhachi--Some Views

(Excerpts from an essay on the shakuhachi)

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A Brief Description

The shakuhachi is the Japanese vertical bamboo flute with five finger holes. Related to similar flutes found in China, India and the Middle East, the shakuhachi was introduced into Japan around the end of the 7th century AD and evolved through a series of modifications, reaching its present form during the 17th century.

The shakuhachi, though simply constructed, has an extremely wide range of musical expression; it can dramatically alter tone color through delicate use of microtonal pitch changes, unique fingering and blowing techniques.

During the 16th--19th centuries, Zen monks who practiced a form of religious discipline and musical meditation played the shakuhachi; thus, the instrument has been used for centuries as a means for spiritual development and self-mastery. Presently, it has become an important instrument in contemporary music worldwide, and is perhaps the best known Japanese instrument in the world. Whether in the lofty traditional repertory or the wide range of contemporary world music, the timeless sounds of the shakuhachi provide a rich musical experience for all.

Last summer, the shakuhachi took a major step into the world music stage at the World Shakuhachi Festival held in Boulder, Colorado, July 5th ~ 10th, 1998. Over 150 participants from Japan joined with 150 from the US and the rest of the world for a week of concerts, workshops,

lessons and intensive shakuhachi blowing. Special invited guests included Japan's top 6 shakuhachi players (including the recently deceased "Living National Treasure," Goro Yamaguchi) and master koto and shamisen accompanists from Japan. Funding for this project came from the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Japan), the Japan Foundation, United Airlines and many private sponsors.

Some Historical Views

The shakuhachi is an end blown flute, which can trace its roots far back into ancient China and further West into Persia. It first arrived in Japan during the T'ang period as Japan extensively borrowed and assimilated culture from Mainland China. One of the musical forms which was imported into Japan at that time was the Confucian court and banquet music, Gagaku, played in the Imperial court and at religious ceremonies. The shakuhachi (quite different from its present form) was one of the instruments in the gagaku ensemble. The music was considered celestial, and carvings and paintings from this period often depict Bodhisattvas flying through the clouds playing the shakuhachi and other gagaku instruments. The shakuhachi was used in gagaku until around the 9th century, when it and a few other Chinese instruments were apparently dropped from the ensemble. Mention of the shakuhachi could be found in the 11th century Tale of the Genji and a few other documents, but by the 12th century, the shakuhachi seemed to have disappeared from the Imperial court altogether.

There was an early connection between the shakuhachi and Buddhism, although it is doubtful the Fuke had much if anything to do with it. A Middle Ages treatise on Gagaku, the Taigen Shou (1512), states that Ennin, a priest who studied Buddhism in China during the T'ang Period, played the shakuhachi in accompaniment to sutra chanting. Later, during the flourishing of Zen (around the time of Gakushin was said to have lived), the famous Zen master, Ikkyuu Zenji

(1394-1482) used the shakuhachi in his practice and wrote poetry about its meditative qualities and, echoing Fuke, used sounds to awaken listeners to enlightenment.

From around the of the 16th century, the sect of loosely-knit beggar monks, known as komosou, appeared. In a collection of poetry which appeared at that time (Sanjuuniban Shokunin Uta Awase), they were described an entry entitled simply, komosou:

Amidst spring flowers who should care that the wind blows?

It is not the wind, but the shakuhachi of the komo.

Unlike the officially recognized komusou of the 18th century Fuke Sect, the komosou were not organized and were bohemian-like wanderers, traveling around with their hair long and straw mats tied to their backs. Nonetheless, it is not hard to see the connection between the earlier komusou and the later, dandified komusou.

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The shakuhachi has always been an instrument of introspection and self-knowledge, whether used to accompany the solemn ritual of sutra chanting, as a companion for mendicant monks in their lonely pilgrimages, as a religious tool for Zen masters like Ikkyuu, or in an officially organized religion like the Fuke Sect. Although the shakuhachi lent itself to solo playing, it was also used extensively in ensemble music, for example the early gagaku ensemble, the vocal/koto/shamisen sankyoku chamber music of the Edo Period and modern compositions of the 20th century.

The shakuhachi's appeal is not limited to Japan. Its tones are frequently heard on Western television and in cinema music, and most large music stores in the United States carry at least

one shakuhachi recording. There are a number of non-Japanese specialists, active both in and out of Japan, performing, teaching, researching and composing for the shakuhachi and several shakuhachi-related web sites have appeared on the Internet. Of all the Japanese traditional instruments, the shakuhachi is perhaps the easiest to understand (its music, being purely instrumental, precludes the formidable task of having to study difficult lyrics) and the simplest to export. What could be easier to carry than a 54 cm piece of bamboo which breaks down into two, portable pieces?

The history of the shakuhachi is one of peregrination, and the instrument has wandered through different ages, cultures and musical genres just like Kichiku wandered around different parts of medieval Japan. The ancestors of the shakuhachi began in the musically advanced cultures of the Middle East, made its way into China along the Silk Road, then into Japan. In Japan it was used to accompany court music, Zen meditation, beggars, rogues, chamber musicians and contemporary musicians. Now the shakuhachi is finding its way into Western universities, colleges, concert halls, jazz clubs and cyber space.

The Structure

In construction and design, the shakuhachi relies upon simplicity. It is a vertical flute made from a bamboo root. Drilled with five finger holes, the inside is coated with urushi lacquer. As an instrument, the shakuhachi is classified as an end-blown aerophone. Sound is produced as in any other flute; one blows across a sharp blowing edge which sets up vibrations in the air and turns into tone. More scientifically: "All flutes are characterized by an air column confined in a hollow body and energized by the vibration or 'fluttering' of a thin jet or sheet of air from the player's lips impinging on the sharp edge of the opening."

The shakuhachi's "sharp edge" is called utaguchi, and the breath is directed down into the flute, across this edge. In this respect, it is similar to the recorder or even the individual pipes of a pipe organ. The correct angle, focus and intensity of the breath as it hits the mouthpiece are vital, however, if a sound is to be produced. The recorder and pipe organ have an air passage-way built into the mouthpiece, which automatically directs the air into the appropriate attitude for striking the blowing edge. With the shakuhachi, the lips must fashion the breath to make a sound as it passes over the utaguchi. Herein lies the most difficult aspect of learning the instrument; the initial production of sound. The strings of the shamisen and koto, or the taut skin of the taiko responds immediately to the touch, and even though it takes years to master these instruments, at least there is an immediate satisfaction of instantly producing sound. Even obtaining a noise remotely resembling a musical tone on the shakuhachi can take days or even weeks of frustration and hyperventilation. It is no wonder that among the Japanese, the shakuhachi is considered an especially difficult and time-consuming instrument. This is reflected in a popular proverb about the shakuhachi, Kubifuri san nen, "Three years just for the basics."

As in most of the Japanese fine arts, that which seems the simplest tends to be in actuality the most difficult yet provides the ultimate artistic freedom. One only need to consider sumie ink painting or calligraphy, where the monochromatic simplicity of a few strokes can reveal a rich world of imagination and suggestion, or haiku poetry where entire worlds of emotion and association are revealed in a few sparse, distilled lines written under the strictest icononical rules.

This is certainly true with the shakuhachi. Its austere limitations are the very things which contribute to its freedom. Unlike the Western orchestral flute, the shakuhachi contains no valves, keys, moveable joint sections, or mechanized gadgetry. It is basically a hollow pipe with

large finger holes and a wide mouthpiece. Yet from this paucity of material can be produced some of the most enchanting sounds of any flute. In other words, maximum effect is produced with a minimum amount of material--and, one should add, with a maximum amount of effort.

The shakuhachi is essentially a minimalist instrument. In this sense, it is very close to the human voice--the archetypal, minimalist instrument used daily. In fact, the shakuhachi utaguchi can be thought of as vocal chords externalized and set on top of a bamboo pipe instead of the flesh windpipe of the throat. The tones of the shakuhachi "sing" in a manner similar to song.

Perhaps it is for this reason that many shakuhachi performance techniques resemble vocal techniques. The foremost example is the ease and freedom of altering pitch. The piano, which has become the basis of music understanding and teaching throughout the modern world, is quite limited: it has only one "correct" pitch for each key. As with the voice, the shakuhachi has the ability to intone a myriad of pitches--semitones--that occur between the set 12 chromatic pitches of 19th century Western music.

Pitch on the shakuhachi can be altered in two ways: by a change in fingering or a change in the blowing angle of the air against the utaguchi. Since the finger holes tend to be large, altering the amount of hole covered by the finger (by a half, quarter, or even less) is a common technique. In fact, so sensitive is the instrument that even holding the finger a few millimeters above the hole without actually touching it will affect both pitch and tone color. Likewise, by gradually opening or closing the fingerhole, a wonderful portamento sliding effect can be accomplished.

The blowing angle can also alter the pitch. By blowing deeply into the instrument and lessening the angle between the mouth and the instrument, one flattens the pitch with a technique called meri. Holding the instrument in a more vertical position and increasing the

angle produces a technique--kari --which raises the pitch. Both techniques are indispensable for mastering the instrument. The change in the blowing angle through these techniques can alter the pitch by an astonishing major third. One can judge a good shakuhachi player largely by how well these meri and kari techniques are executed.

The basic pitch of the shakuhachi is determined by its length. In this, it is like the varying lengths of the flute or the recorder. The name shakuhachi refers to its length. Shaku is the traditional linear measurement used in Japan before the introduction of the metric system: one shaku is almost equivalent to the American foot. A further division of shaku is sun, which is one tenth of a shaku. The length of the shakuhachi measures one (in Japanese, *ichi*) shaku and eight (*hachi*) sun, or *ichi shaku hachi sun*. The nature of the Japanese language is to abbreviate long phrases into the most concise form, so the cumbersome *ichi shaku hachi sun* is shortened to *shaku-hachi*.

Shaku-hachi refers, then, to a literal length of 1.8 shaku, or 54 centimeters, whose base tone is D above middle C. Longer instruments have a lower base tone, and generally with the addition of one sun in length, the pitch lowers by one half tone. Therefore, a 1.9 shaku length instrument is pitched in C#, 2.0 shaku in C, and so on down the scale. Likewise, a shortening of length raises the pitch. A 1.7 shaku is pitched in D#, 1.6 in E, etc. Professional shakuhachi players distinguish between the varying pitches and lengths of shakuhachi are referring to its measurement; 1.6 shaku, 2.3 shaku, etc., but the term shakuhachi is generic and generally refers to all lengths.

Shakuhachi players determine which length of instrument to use depending upon the register and nature of the piece they are to perform. Much traditional shakuhachi music is played in accompaniment to song, shamisen and koto, and since the singer must set the pitch, the other instruments have to follow. It is easy to change tunings for the shamisen and koto, but the shakuhachi requires a change in length. In general, however, for classical Japanese music

(hougaku), most of the jiuta or soukyoku repertory is played on a 1.8 shaku instrument, with some notable exceptions.

Many of the pieces written by the 20th century koto performer and composer Miyagi Michio (1894-1956) utilize a 1.4 or 1.6 shaku length. Shakuhachi players who accompany minyou folk singers, however, have to accommodate a wide range of singers, both men and women, young and old, so they usually carry a suitcase full of varying lengths of shakuhachi.

Pitch is not the only aspect which alters with length--tone color and response also differ according to the shakuhachi length. Pieces played on longer shakuhachi tend to be dark, soft and mellow. For this reason, many of the traditional solo honkyoku meditation pieces--the hallmark of the shakuhachi tradition--are played on longer instruments, with tones which seem to well up from the earth itself.

The Discipline of Learning

In general, education in Japan, whether in public schools, private lessons, or adult community centers, is highly formalized and institutionalized. The process of learning a traditional art involves much more than just finding a teacher, going to lessons and asking questions about the music and instrument. One must follow a complicated system of formal behavior and rules, be party to numerous ceremonies and ever aware of the hierarchical relationships between the teacher and the students and between the students themselves. The Japanese word for learning, keiko, infers the totality of the form involved in learning. It also suggests a commitment to the art and the teacher similar to the commitment of a monk who embarks on a program of austere religious discipline.

The process of learning a traditional art is predicated on the idea that knowledge is passed

down from a master (sensei) to a disciple (seito). Total reverence and respect for the sensei who possesses the desired knowledge is an important aspect of the learning experience. The idea behind this is that only by humble veneration for the art and the master who transmits that art will create in the student the proper attitude for receiving the knowledge.

This attitude is also similar to one found in religious adulation where one humbles oneself before the object of veneration: the Buddha, a deity, or even the sacredness of a natural object in order to partake of its the power. The sensei , being the guardian of the treasure, is all powerful and unquestionable, and the seito as recipient of the knowledge, must prove worthy of the tradition by following and imitating the teacher.

The roots of the sensei /seito relationship is influenced not only by Medieval Buddhist religious practices, but by Edo Period Confucianism as well. Confucianism places a great emphasis on hierarchical relationships (father/son, elder/younger, teacher/pupil) and also on the importance and elaboration of form. In the strictest sense, there is usually one way to do things, and regardless of the outcome, the form must be adhered to and respected. Any deviation from the set form becomes perversion or sacrilege, regardless of the quality of content. The traditional music world in Japan is filled with stories of very talented disciples who, surpassing their teacher, had to either suppress themselves or risk being expelled from his circle.

This, of course, is the dilemma of the Japanese iemoto guild system, which permeates all the traditional arts. The iemoto system is triangular. The sensei occupies the top post and the various disciples fan out below, according to rank. This system has both its good and bad sides; it can smother artistic creativity and be fiercely consanguineous--like Japanese political parties--or it can be a positive force keeping alive rich traditions in a largely apathetic cultural climate. What ultimately keeps the music alive and growing, however, are the individual performers and

their artistry. In every aspect of Japanese music there are many dedicated, superb artists who have attained such mastery that they transcend cultural barriers and create a universal gesture with their music. These artists inspire new students and gain public support and enthusiasm.

Yet anyone--Japanese or foreigner--who begins a Japanese instrument faces a daunting situation where a considerable amount of money and time must be invested in order to rise up through the ranks. Anyone who thinks to become professional must learn (unless desiring to be an outsider to the system) to skillfully balance: the institution to the music, the form to the content.

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