

The Last Breath of a Shakuhachi Great

Obituary for Gorō Yamaguchi, from The Japan Times, Jan. 8, 1999

by Christopher Yohmei Blasdel

On January 4th, 1999, the major newspapers of Japan announced the early morning death, on the previous day, of Living National Treasure shakuhachi master Gorō Yamaguchi.

The second of Japan's Living National Treasures to pass away since the New Year's beginning (Kiyomoto style singer Shizudayu Kiyomoto passed away the day before at age 100), Yamaguchi's death at the relatively young age of 65 was a shock for Japanese music lovers both in Japan and abroad. His artistry and teaching has inspired several generations of shakuhachi players and helped place the instrument on the world stage.

Yamaguchi was born in 1933 as the youngest son of a family of traditional musicians. His father was a leading shakuhachi player of the time, and his mother was highly accomplished on the koto and *shamisen*. In the strict patrilineal nature of the traditional Japanese music world, it was expected that the oldest Yamaguchi son would continue the tradition, and therefore Gorō (whose name simply means "fifth male child"), was not encouraged to learn the shakuhachi.

One day at age 11, however, he picked up a shakuhachi from his father's collection and made a sound. His mother tried to persuade her husband to teach Gorō the basics, but his father refused. His mother, persistent as Japanese mothers can be, got one of her husband's students to begin teaching her son. After a few months, his father realized Gorō's abilities and took over teaching, and then the real training began.

In the spirit of the pre-war Samurai tradition, his father's shakuhachi lessons were strict. But not, as Yamaguchi recalled, because he was made to attend to the technical details of the shakuhachi, but because the senior Yamaguchi would never stop or wait if his son floundered or fell behind during a piece. He would teach a piece only once, and Gorō had only one chance to learn it. In love with his father's sound, Gorō would try, often in vain, to imitate and keep up the same pace.

Even though the shakuhachi is a technically demanding instrument, his father did not dwell on that aspect and would explain his ideas in terms easy for a child to understand. "Always use your ears." "Attitude is important when you want to learn something." "Cleverness with your fingers is meaningless. Don't become like a *bonsai*!" And, perhaps more to the point, he would admonish his son never to lose sight of the spiritual aspects of shakuhachi training and to keep in mind the famous dictum of the 18th century Fuke Zen monks who developed the present-day shakuhachi and its repertory of solo meditation pieces: "Enlightenment through one tone" (*ichi'on joubutsu*).

After the war, Yamaguchi developed into Japan's foremost shakuhachi performer and teacher, and his illustrious career speaks for itself. His accomplishments include many prestigious awards, including the First Mobile Music Award (1971), Ministry of Culture Grand Award (1972, 1978, 1982), Living National Treasure (1992), National Academy of Arts and Letters (1994), frequent performances in Japan and overseas, including dispatch by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to foreign countries as cultural ambassador, and numerous recordings of LPs, CDs, and video teaching tapes. He taught for a year at Wesleyan University in 1967 and until his death was professor in the shakuhachi department at Tokyo University for the Arts, the only public university in Japan where traditional Japanese music is taught. He was constantly in demand as an accompanist for traditional music and appeared regularly on NHK radio and television. He most recently conducted seminars,

workshops and performances as a special invited guest at the World Shakuhachi Festival '98 held last summer in Boulder, Colorado.

Yamaguchi remained—with dignified mien, absolute mastery of the metier and rich, powerful tones—a musician who is increasingly rare in this age of instant stardom and gross commercialism of music. With a gentle, intensely private personality, few ambitions and no desire for publicity, the influence his music wrought around the world was profound. He never demanded anything from his listeners and played entirely at his own pace, allowing the music to speak for itself. Yamaguchi once summed up his attitude toward his musical career in a poem written by an early 20th century Japanese poet, Saneatsu Mushakoji, comparing the artist to a flower. "People may look at me, or they may not. I will still bloom."

True to the "Middle Way" of Buddhism, the secret of Yamaguchi's musical success was one of balance. Whether in performing, teaching or in the relationships he formed with his colleagues and students, he always played exactly the right sounds, always gave the most pertinent comments and always made the right suggestions. In ensemble playing, his shakuhachi provided support to the other members but never overwhelmed. His renditions of the Zen Buddhist-inspired solo *honkyoku* pieces contained just the right balance of transparency and material, tonal force. In his teachings he reaffirmed and highlighted his student's musicality while remaining at an inspiring height. And, above all, he continually stressed that art cannot be divorced from everyday life and that one must develop the personality along with the music. Otherwise the music becomes soulless.

Indeed, the clear presence of Yamaguchi's refined personality permeated the tones of each breath of his shakuhachi. In his playing one heard both the venerated tradition of the shakuhachi flute, urging awareness of subtle beauty and spiritual enlightenment along with the presence of an artist as a well-balanced human being, quietly making his way through the modern cacophony of the late 20 Century. Yamaguchi taught that, above all, that one must make one's life musical and one's music their life. Yamaguchi, like his father, often admonished his students: "During performance your whole self comes through. Work on improving it."

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