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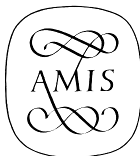

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The Mystique of the *Shakuhachi*

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THE Japanese bamboo flute called the *shakuhachi* has become an increasingly familiar instrument in America during the last fifteen years. A critic for the magazine *Rolling Stone* chose a record of severely classical shakuhachi music as one of the ten best albums in a decade of "rock music."[1] Jean-Pierre Rampal and James Galway have filled entire records with shakuhachi music played on the Western flute.[2] Shakuhachi techniques are called for with greater and greater frequency in contemporary Western compositions for flute. Americans also play the shakuhachi itself professionally, and American craftsmen compete with the Japanese in the difficult art of constructing the instrument.

Despite this growing interest in the shakuhachi, the amount of published information on the subject in the English language is still scant.[3] The purpose of this article is to introduce the cultural symbolism of the instrument to a Western audience.[4] On a larger scale, a

This article is a revision of a paper originally read at the Southeast Region Japan Studies Seminar, University of Maryland, in October, 1974.

1. Jonathan Cott, "The Songs That Still Remain," *Rolling Stone* 254 (December 15, 1977): 150.

2. *Japanese Melodies for the Flute and Harp*, Columbia M3458. *Song of the Seashore*, RCA3534, for example.

3. See William P. Malm, *Japanese Music and Musical Instruments* (Tokyo: Charles P. Tuttle, 1959), chapter 6; John Kaizan Neptune, *Shakuhachi* (published privately by the author [2-10-12 Kayayama, Niiza-shi, Saitama-ken, Japan 352], n.d.); Elliot Weisgarber, "The Honkyoku of the Kinko-ryû: Some Principles of Its Organization," *Ethnomusicology* 12, no. 3 (September, 1968): 313–44; David P. Berger, "The Shakuhachi and the Kinko-ryû Notation," *Asian Music* 1, no. 2 (1969): 32–72; and *Take-no-Michi* (a newsletter of shakuhachi and related arts published by Barry Weiss, 419 Fourth Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215).

4. I studied with shakuhachi master Gorô Yamaguchi at Wesleyan University for

similar kind of introduction was made by Robert Hans van Gulik in *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*,[5] his classic study of deeply rooted Asian attitudes towards musical instruments, especially the Chinese *ch'in*.

Construction

The standard shakuhachi of today is a vertical, rim-blown flute of about 22 inches (55.9 cm.) in length, made of thick bamboo. Its appearance is purposely natural, more so than any other Japanese instrument. Made of a simple stalk of bamboo, it looks as if the pristine beauty of that plant has been preserved intact, the bamboo's original state being marred only by five fingerholes (for one thumb and four fingers) and a single oblique cut for the blowing edge. In fact, shakuhachi players among themselves seldom refer to the instrument as *shakuhachi*, but rather as *take* ("bamboo"). Shakuhachi societies use the character for bamboo in their names, as in *Chiku-meisha*, "Society for the Bamboo Alliance" (*chiku* equals *take*).

The bell of the shakuhachi should show stubs of the bamboo roots, and a graceful curve of the bamboo towards the bell is a desirable feature. Great art is required for the construction of a good shakuhachi. Each step is critical, from the selection and cutting of the wild bamboo, the aging process, the boring and lacquering of the inside of the barrel, to the placement and fine tuning of the fingerholes. If necessary, artistic bending of the bell end with steam completes the beauty that Nature may have omitted. The favorite instrument of master teacher Gorô Yamaguchi is admired in Japan for its long, elegant, sweeping curve and its lustrous earth-colored patina. As with a carefully chosen stone for a Japanese rock garden, the visual appearance is important in a musical instrument.

Because the materials of the bamboo flute are organic, one can expect considerable variations in overall length for instruments of the

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two semesters in 1967–68 and at his Tokyo home for six months in 1970, and I have continued to perform since. Yamaguchi is considered a leading performer of the Kinko school and has many concerts, broadcasts, and recordings to his credit. The performances on Nonesuch and Japanese Victor records cited here are his.

5. Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in Ch'in Ideology* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1940).

same pitch, as well as variations in the placement of the fingerholes. Instrument sizes probably became standardized during the Meiji Reformation (1868–1912), when ensemble playing for shakuhachi was emphasized. These sizes are measured by *shaku* ("foot") and *sun*, a tenth of a *shaku* (the Japanese *shaku* equals 0.994 American feet today). The word *shakuhachi* means literally "[one] foot, eight [*sun*]," the length of the most common size. It varies, of course, with the diameter of the bamboo. Thus, the word is both a generic name for the Japanese vertical, rim-blown flute in general and also the term for a specific size of that flute. A size sounding approximately a minor third higher than the standard size is called *shakuroku* ("[one] foot, six [*sun*]"); this is the instrument called for in Michio Miyagi's duet for shakuhachi and *koto* (zither) entitled "Spring Sea," played by Jean-Pierre Rampal in the recording cited above.[6]

My own *shakuroku* ("1.6 feet") measures 19 1/8 inches (48.6 cm.) in length. Other sizes range from *isshaku yonsun* ("1.4 feet") to the giant *sanjaku sanzun* ("3.3 feet"). The deep, mysterious sounds of the larger instruments are preferred by ascetics who live in remote mountain regions of Japan.[7]

Measurements of shakuhachi fingerholes also vary, according to the irregularities of the bamboo and the preferences of the artist. The placement of the holes on one of my standard-size "1.8 feet" flutes, measured cumulatively from the edge of the bell to the center of each hole, is: (1) 5 in. (12.7 cm.); (2) 7 1/4 in. (18.4 cm.); (3) 9 3/8 in. (23.8 cm.); (4) 11 5/8 in. (29.5 cm.); and the thumbhole, (5) 13 1/4 in. (33.7 cm.).

The deceptively simple construction of the shakuhachi demands correspondingly difficult techniques from the player. Many a beginner is discouraged when hours, days, and even weeks of trying to produce a flute tone result only in an imitation of the wind in the pines.

The five fingerholes of the standard-size shakuhachi produce the approximate pitches *d'*, *f'*, *g'*, *a'*, and *c''*, when played naturally. This pentatonic scale is typical of Japanese folk music and is termed the *yô*

6. See n. 2, above.

7. These large shakuhachis can be heard on a record entitled *Japanese Masterpieces for the Shakuhachi*, Lyrichord LLST7176.

(Chinese: *yang*) scale by Fumio Koizumi[8] and most other Japanese musicologists. As its name suggests, the scale is considered to have the qualities of *yang*: sunshine, openness, daytime, and masculinity.

Playing Techniques

The repertoire of the shakuhachi calls for a variety of half-steps, microtones, shadings, and sliding ornaments. These are accomplished by using different angles of attack with the windstream, by partially covering the holes, by cross-fingerings, and by combinations of these techniques.

The most common shading, called *meri*, lowers the pitch—sometimes as much as a whole-tone or more—through the player's covering three-quarters of the next fingerhole and dropping his chin to direct the air-stream into the instrument.

A scooping technique, *nayashi*, uses the air-stream angle alone to attack a note about a half-tone below its nominal pitch, then gradually letting the pitch float up to its normal place.

Another technique characteristic of the shakuhachi, *suri*, is a sort of ornamented portamento. Gliding from a note to the next higher degree of the scale, the player slides his finger off the hole smoothly. Just as the second note is reached, the upper neighbor of the second note is inserted as an *acciaccatura*, e.g., *f'*—(*a'*) *g'*.

The calling of cranes is said to be suggested by a technique called *korokoro*, which uses only the fingers. The two holes nearest the top of the instrument are one-third covered, the next is completely covered, and the two holes nearest the bell are rapidly covered and uncovered, alternately. When executed properly, the sound of cranes can indeed be imagined.

The "same" pitch can have two different note names when different timbres are called for. Western violinists are sensitive to the difference in tone quality between the open E string and the same pitch played stopped on the A string; yet both notes are called "E." On the shakuhachi, however, the overblown octave with all holes closed

8. Fumio Koizumi, mimeographed lecture notes for a course in Japanese music, Wesleyan University, 1967–68.

(d'') is called *ro*, but that "same" pitch produced with all the holes open is called *ha*, for example.

These techniques, considered exotic in Western classical music until recently, originate in the general context of Asian attitudes towards music and, more specifically, in the historical circumstances of the development of the shakuhachi.

Origins

A piece of shakuhachi lore familiar to almost every student of the instrument relates the origin of an important composition:

> During the Kamakura era (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, A.D.), a Zen priest named Kyochiku Zenshi had been taught the secrets of playing the flute as ritual music from his master. One day, as he was wandering about the countryside playing his instrument, he stopped at dusk in a mountain temple. Dozing, he had an unusual dream. He was in a small boat on the open sea, and the moon was shining brilliantly. As he began to return to shore, a heavy mist suddenly surrounded him, and the moon disappeared, leaving the sea darkened. From somewhere out of the mist then came the sound of a sonorously ringing shakuhachi. Then it stopped, and the mist formed into a ball and dispersed.
>
> When Kyochiku awoke, he tried to recreate the sound of that miraculous flute with his own instrument. The music of that dream became the composition "Mukaiji" ("Mist-Sea-Flute"), one of the most sacred pieces in the repertoire.[9]

This story, apocryphal or not, illustrates the cultural significance of the shakuhachi in Japan: a blend of Buddhist origins, sudden inspiration, and nature.

Reverence for nature and preference for natural materials is common to many of the traditional Japanese arts: literature, painting, and architecture. Another theme is the creation of an effortless surface effect which conceals a severe discipline and attention to details. Also permeating many of the arts of Japan is the theme of Zen Buddhism and its nonrational mode of thought. Spiritually and artistically, the shakuhachi embodies these themes to such a degree that a cultural

9. Another version of the legend is given by the noted Japanese music scholar Eishi Kikkawa in his liner notes for the recording *Zen Music (Shakuhachi no Shinzui)*, vol. 3, Japanese Victor SJL-2063.

mystique attaches to the instrument, as it does to the Chinese *ch'in*, mentioned above.

The spiritual origins of the shakuhachi can be traced back to the wandering mendicant priests of Japan, called *komosô* ("rice-mat priests"). Prior to the Edo period (seventeenth through nineteenth centuries), these priests were little more than religious beggars with only a rice mat on which to sleep as they traveled about the countryside. Instead of chanting a sutra in response to a gift of rice or alms, the komosô would play a religious piece on his shakuhachi, such as "Hachigaeshi," ("Returning of the Bowl"). These pieces have a meditative mood appropriate to Zen Buddhism. Kyochiku Zenshi, the priest mentioned above in the dream story, was such a komosô.

In the seventeenth century, the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism inherited the musical traditions of the shakuhachi-playing komosô. Founded by *rônin*, or masterless samurai, the Fuke sect named their headquarters the Meian Temple. Eventually, the educated, class-conscious samurai transformed the lowly appellation *komosô* into the more mystical term *komusô* ("priests of nothingness").

During the Edo period, many of these komusô were still legitimate priests, performing the sacred shakuhachi repertoire in a plain and rustic manner for alms. The central government, however, gave permission for the Fuke sect to continue only on condition that the rônin gather useful information for the government in the course of their wanderings. These komusô were given special privileges, such as free passage through government highway checkpoints. The traditional costume with a large basket covering the entire head became a useful disguise for intrigue.

The komusô in Edo (Tokyo) itself came into close contact with the pleasure quarters, and thus with the *samisen* (unfretted lute) music of the geisha. Consequently, the rough, spiritual shakuhachi music of the wandering priests was transformed into a secular art style. The *in* scale (the "ying" scale of the urban geisha: approximately D, E flat, G, A, B flat, C) replaced the *yô* scale of rural folk music. Compositions from the koto and samisen repertoires were borrowed. More significantly, ornamentation became more refined, compositions became longer, and the tone quality of the shakuhachi became more centered. The komusô's outfit also changed; Honzo, a samurai char-

acter in the kabuki play *Chûshingura* (*The Forty-seven Rônin*), wears a brocade costume that is gaudy and expensive indeed for a simple priest.

The traditions of the Fuke sect have continued in Japan up to the present time as the Meian, or Myôan, school of shakuhachi playing. In the eighteenth century, Kurosawa Kinko, a samurai-turned-monk, traveled throughout Japan collecting, arranging, and composing shakuhachi pieces. His "Thirty-six Classics" (*honkyoku*) have been handed down to the present and form the repertoire of the school named after him, Kinko-ryû.

Among the compositions of the Kinko school are many with the suffix *reibo* ("yearning for the bell") in their titles; these were inherited from the Zen Buddhist repertoire. "Mukaiji," the piece in the dream story related above, is a reibo piece. Another venerated composition is "Kokû Reibo" ("Emptiness Reibo").[10] Other titles recall the Japanese feeling for nature, an affinity dating back to pre-Buddhist religious thought: "Takiochi" ("Waterfall"), "Igusa" ("Rushes"), and "Shika no Tône" ("Deer Cries in the Distance").[11] Still other titles indicate borrowings from koto, samisen, kabuki, and nô genres. But regardless of these borrowings, the basic style and techniques of shakuhachi music today still recreates the calm, pure air of Zen meditation.

The Music

The Zen ideals of nonreflection and nonrationality of thought prevail in shakuhachi music. The tempo is slow and the mood calm—qualities suitable for meditation. No musical meter is apparent, as rational formulae of repeating, predictable strong and weak pulses are avoided. The compositional structure is based on asymmetry and

10. Heard on the phonodisc *A Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky*, Nonesuch H-72025, the record referred to in the review cited in n. 1, above.

11. Most shakuhachi students today learn from notation copied or bought from their teachers, as I did. This traditional link between master and disciple is loosened ever so slightly by the rare recordings and even rarer notation available to the general public. One must play detective to find such things in Tokyo. Readers wishing to acquire notated music should contact Barry Weiss (see n. 3), Tom Deaver (11151 Kuma-shiro, Toyooka-mura, Shimo-ina-gun, Nagano-ken, Japan 399-23), or Monty H. Levenson (P.O. Box 294, Willits, Cal. 95490).

subtle motivic variation, not the symmetry and contrast of Western forms.

Shakuhachi music should be listened to as the combination of single notes and phrases, and the organic nature of each tone should be appreciated in an existential way. This attitude parallels the esthetics of the uniquely transitory Japanese poetic form known as *haiku*, for example:

> In a quiet corner
> Alone by the window
> Sound of snow[12]

This is the art of minimum effort/maximum effect. In the spirit of Zen, one can say that this concept itself needs further contemplation and listening, but not explanation.

Other parallels with Japanese esthetics can be suggested. The shakuhachi technique of using sudden, violent explosions of breath is reminiscent of the sudden, violent movements of Japanese swordsmanship and judo. These shakuhachi techniques are typical of the style of playing of the Fuke sect, but they are still preserved, although in a more diluted, refined way, in the style of the Kinko school.

Delicate embellishments in shakuhachi music parallel the movement of the brush in the Zen art of calligraphy. The decisive, first attack of the brush to paper; the smooth, gliding path of the brush; and the final, graceful lifting-off from the paper all find echoes in each phrase of shakuhachi music.

* * *

In sum, the art of performing the Zen classics on a simple stalk of bamboo reflects typically Japanese modes of thought and artistic preferences. The bamboo flute, in its history, construction, techniques, and music, symbolizes in Japanese culture a total mystique far beyond a mere tool for making music. In spite of massive Westernization of Japan in recent times, or perhaps because of it, this distinctly

12. *Shizukasa ya / Hitori shôji ni / Yuki no oto* (poem and English translation by Karl Signell). See also R. H. Blythe, *Haiku*, 4 vols. (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1952), an English-language study of the poetic form.

Japanese art form has survived and preserved the mystique enveloping it. Despite plastic shakuhachis, television, and even jazz shakuhachi, it seems likely to continue to survive. Japan's intangible cultural assets have a way of refusing to die out, and international musical culture is the richer for that.

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