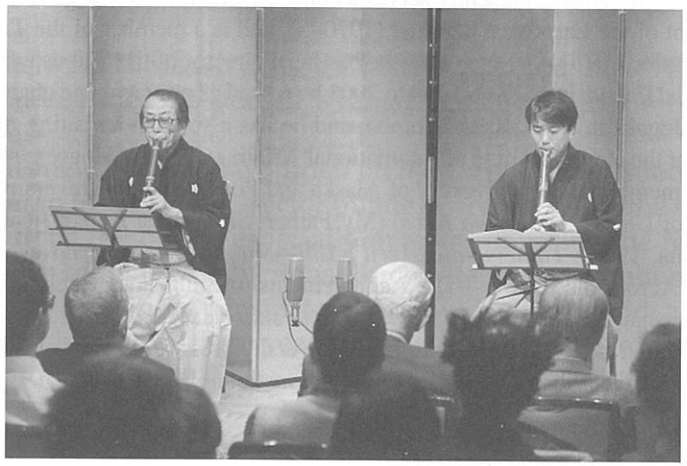
Recent IHJ Activities

IHJ Japanese Music Series Vol.VI / IHJ Artists' Forum

The Shakuhachi and the World of the Single Tone

The sixth concert in the IHJ Japanese Music Series was held on February 24, 2009, presenting the shakuhachi traditional bamboo flute. The shakuhachi is the best known of all Japanese instruments. Its construction is simple, but the music is complex, ranging from austere Zen meditation music or evocative programmatic pieces depicting nature to cross-genre, avant garde contemporary music played around the world. Living National Treasure Yamamoto Hōzan and his son Shinzan were featured along with the Japan-US Creative Arts fellow Elizabeth Brown, and Zenyōji Keisuke, a specialist in Zen shakuhachi. IHJ Artistic Director Christopher Yohmei Blasdel, who himself is a professional shakuhachi player, explains the shakuhachi in this short article.



Shakuhachi Notes

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel
IHJ Artistic Director

The shakuhachi is Japan's end-blown bamboo flute, yet neither the concept nor name (which refers to the instrument's length) is Japanese in origin. Like most Japanese musical instruments, the shakuhachi entered Japan through China. The Chinese vertical flutes developed from flutes of the musically advanced cultures, such as Persia, that lay along the extensive routes of war, commerce and migration known as the Silk Road. Geographically, these routes extended across Asia from the Mediterranean countries to Japan. Chronologically, they reach back into the centuries before Christ on to the present. In spite of the non-Japanese origins of the instrument, the shakuhachi developed within the framework of Japanese culture to contain an unparalleled profundity of spiritual and artistic expression.

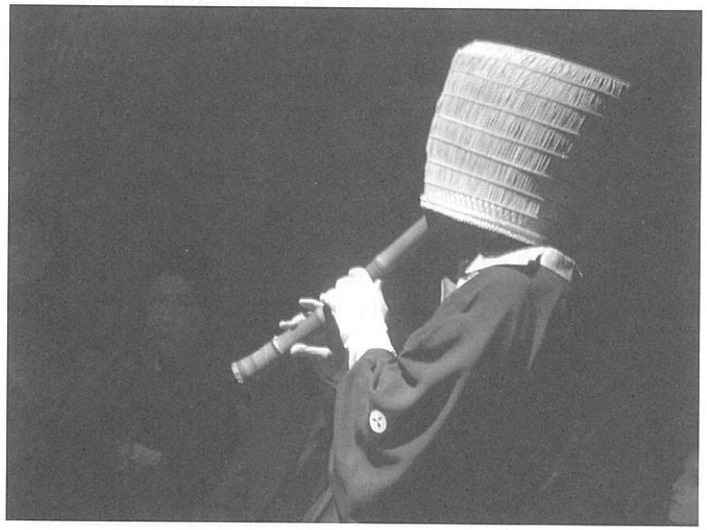
Simplicity best describes the physical appearance of the shakuhachi. It is fashioned from the root end of the bamboo. The inner nodes are removed, and the inside bore is delicately filed and coated with several layers of *urushi* lacquer (some types of shakuhachi, called *ji-nashi*, dispense with this lacquer and allow the bore to remain in its natural state). A slanted blowing edge is cut across the top. The perfected instrument maintains the shape, color and ambience of the natural bamboo—the capillaried root end of the bamboo forms the instrument's bell, and the outer nodes encircle the flute at varying intervals. Traditional shakuhachi have only five holes. Compared with the numerous holes of the Western Boehm flute, five holes may seem limiting, but it is precisely this limited simplicity which gives the shakuhachi an almost unlimited freedom.

The shakuhachi mouthpiece consists of a reinforced blowing edge, called the *utaguchi*, set at a slanted angle into the upper end of the bamboo. The player blows across the *utaguchi* (termed in English as the fipple), creating an air reed similar to the recorder or pipe organ. A major difference between these instruments and

the shakuhachi is that the shakuhachi player must control the air flow direction, intensity and pressure all with the lips. This demands precise technique, but it also provides endless possibilities for extreme control of the sound.

What are some of the characteristics of the shakuhachi's musical flexibility? Control of tone color and minute pitch changes are the most important and obvious aspects. Techniques of half-holing and changing the blowing angle by moving the head and neck alter the pitch in delicate portamento or sliding sounds. Adjusting the embouchure brings about changes in the tone color, sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle. Perhaps the most intriguing sounds of the shakuhachi, however, are those which reflect nature: the sound of the wind, cries of birds and insects, waves, and soaring cranes.

The shakuhachi has a deep connection with nature. Its natural simplicity inspires reverence for the bamboo and all of nature, but more importantly, in order to play the instrument one must revere one's own, inner nature. Mastery of the breath—our vital connection to nature—is necessary to play the shakuhachi. Mastery of body movement and mind is also prerequisite for creating music. One must know oneself in order to know the instrument.



With this in mind, it is not surprising that the shakuhachi was used historically in Japan as a tool for meditation and self-awareness. During the Edo period (1603–1868), a Zen sect formed around the instrument. This sect, called Fukeshū, is best known for the eccentric, basket-hatted mendicant monks, *komusō*, who made up its "ministry." These monks were ubiquitous in the Edo period landscape. In the later years of the Edo period the sect was plagued by power struggles and general decadency. However the original intent of its members was to create, through meditative shakuhachi playing, the yogic state of *Samadhi* or perfect realization of the mind. *Komusō* monks made pilgrimages to the nearly 120 Fuke temples scattered around the Japanese countryside while blowing the shakuhachi. This version of Zen meditation they termed *suizen*. The pieces they played—solos that reflected nature or their daily rituals—were called *honkyoku*, and each temple transmitted its own versions of the *honkyoku*. These meditative pieces were not played for entertainment (nor were they considered "music") but were part of a ritualistic and meditative discipline based on sound. The *komusō* shakuhachi was religious music in the strictest sense of the word.

As with most religious music, however, the dividing line between *honkyoku* and secular art or folk music gradually grew less distinct. From the late Edo to the early Meiji periods, appreciation of the shakuhachi as a musical instrument increased, and by the mid-twentieth century much of the plaintive, meditative *honkyoku* had evolved into highly refined art music.

The two main styles of shakuhachi art music in Japan today are the Tozan and Kinko styles. The Kinko style maintains the traditional *honkyoku* as the base of its repertory, though it is much stylized and considered art, rather than religious, music. The Tozan *honkyoku* are for the most part newly composed or arranged by the school's founder, Nakao Tozan, in the early twentieth century.

A number of minor styles, grouped under the generic name of Myōan style (from the Myōan temple of the Tōji temple complex in Kyoto), maintain the old style of *honkyoku* performance, known as *koten honkyoku*. These pieces, although originally played as religious music, are presently enjoyed as art music as well.