

Shakuhachi, Then and Now

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This article provides an introduction to the Japanese *shakuhachi*, a vertical bamboo flute. Methods for making the instrument, a summary of its history, traditional playing style, and connection with Japanese aesthetics and Zen Buddhism will be presented. Some references to the instrument's contemporary literature, as well as its influence on contemporary silver flute literature, are included. Japanese names are indicated with the surname, first per common usage.

Physical Characteristics of the Shakuhachi

Traditionally, the shakuhachi is made from the root-end of a bamboo stalk of an acceptable thickness and, preferably, with a slight curve toward the root-end of the piece (Fig. 1).

Figure 1



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An impression of age, natural roughness, and simplicity - concepts exemplified by the Japanese aesthetics of *shibui* denoting austerity or plainness, and *sabi* meaning appearing aged and faded - are desirable qualities in an instrument (Weisgarber 1968: 318). The term *sabi*, in addition to connoting rustic unpretentiousness and antiquity, also refers to the artistic quality of aloneness that is found in Japanese art forms. This is expressed in the following poem by Fujiwara Sadaiye (1162-1241):

As I come out
To this fishing village
Late in the autumn day
No flower in bloom I see,
Nor any tinted maple leaves.

(Suzuki 1959: 25)

Standard Shakuhachi

Since the quality of the bamboo, including its hardness, density, and place of origin, is often cited as the predominant factor contributing to an exceptional-sounding instrument, much care is taken by makers to obtain the finest material. The particularity of the type of bamboo needed is quite rare, as even a large grove of *madake* may only provide a limited number of usable pieces (Levenson: 1995: 3-10).

The most common type of bamboo used in shakuhachi making is called *madake* (*Phyllostachys bambusoides*), a giant timber variety of bamboo found most abundantly in fertile lowland valleys. All of the trees in a *madake* grove are connected beneath the ground through an intricate system of roots and capillaries, which together constitute a single organism (Blasdel 1988: 1).

After the individual bamboo has been selected and taken out of the ground, the wood is cleaned and heated over a low fire to bring the natural oils to the surface, and it is straightened. The bamboo is dried in direct sunlight and then stored for three to six years. When deemed the appropriate time, the root-end of the bamboo is cut to the proper length and shape, and heat is applied to create the desired curve (Kudo 1977: 47-8, Malm 1959: 158, Blasdel 1988: 3). The bamboo is then carefully measured and halved. The interior nodes inside the bore are removed and the bore is filed. Four finger-holes and a thumb-hole - determined by a traditional system of measurement - are drilled after the halving, to ensure the correct length. The bores of the two halves are widened and the *bozo*, the connecting joint between the halves, is cut and glued into the top of the bottom section (Fig. 2). The mid-joint is bound with string and sealed with *urushi* (lacquer) to prevent breakage from the pressure of the tightly-fitted ends (Kudo 1977: 68, 70).

Figure 2

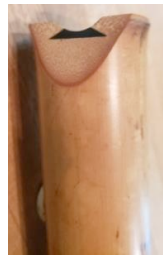


Thumbhole and hozo

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The blowing edge (*utaguchi*) is formed by an oblique cut on the outer edge of the tube. A small, shaped piece of bone, water buffalo horn, or plastic is inserted in the center of the cut, which improves durability and provides a finely-honed blowing edge. The shape of the insert indicates either the *Kinko* (triangular) or *Tozan* (round) *ryu*, or guild tradition (Kudo 1977: 75, 77, Blasdel 1988: 3) (Fig. 3).

Figure 3



Utaguchi, Kinko ryu

Author, 2021

After a further tuning process of the bore, *seshime urushi*, a viscous, high quality lacquer is brushed on the inside of the bore (Wheeler 1997: personal communication) (Fig. 4).

Figure 4



Root-end, urushi lacquer

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Several more coats of *urushi* are applied in the fine-tuning process, and decorative rattan bindings around the cut-ends of the bamboo provide the finishing touch to the new flute (Weisgarber 1968: 316). The *ji nasbi* shakuhachi has no filler or lacquer added to the bore, and is preferred for playing meditational pieces (Tukitani 1992: 144-15).

The word “shakuhachi” is derived from the term *issbaku bassun*, or the Japanese pronunciation of an ancient Chinese term, literally meaning 1.8 shaku, or approximately 54.5 cm. This describes the length of the standard, classical flute (Blasdel 1988: 7, Wheeler 1997: personal communication). Although this is the standard size instrument with a fundamental tone of *D*₄, flutes vary in exact length due to the size of the

particular bamboo joint. A wide range of sizes are utilized today, from the highest in *G* (1.3 shaku) to the lower sizes from *A* (2.4) even down to 3.0 shaku. Solitary Buddhist monks and players of the *Myoan*-style and *Watazumi*-style, in particular, prefer the lower-ranged instruments (Signell 1981: 92).

Pentatonic Scales and Playing Technique

The five holes of the standard shakuhachi produce the tones *D*₄, *F*₄, *G*₄, *A*₄, *C*₄ and *D*₅ (the Min'yo, or folk scale), which are played with a system of half-holing and head movement, known as the *meri-kari* system, to produce half-tones and microtones (Malm 1959: 159). The standard pitch range is approximately two and one-half octaves. A fine coordination of the fingers, lip, and jaw movements are requisite to produce accurate pitches on the instrument (Figs. 5 and 6).

Figure 5



Finger Placement

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Figure 6



Posture while standing

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Other scales besides the Min'yo are played on the shakuhachi, including the *Miyako bushi*, most characteristic of all Japanese music; *Ritsu*, derived from Chinese and Korean music, and used in *Gagaku*; and *Ryukyū*, a type of scale found in the Okinawan islands and Indonesia (Blasdel 1988: 43). *Tako shakuhachi*, seven- and nine-holed instruments, were developed in the twentieth century for playing diatonic and chromatic scales in Western-influenced literature, and they are used today for performing contemporary compositions (Tukitani 1994: 108). Various combinations of shakuhachi mouthpiece and flute body have been created and experimented with in the recent past.

Historical Development

Believed to have come from China to Japan as part of the *Gagaku* court orchestra in 756 A.D., the *t'ung hsiao* is the ancestor of the modern shakuhachi (*Harvard Dictionary of Music* 1986: 331). Not long after its arrival, this ancestor faded from historical view. The next resurfacing of the vertical flute was in 14th century Japan (*Muromachi* period) as the *hityogiri*, or “single section cut” flute, which is made from one piece of bamboo. This instrument was popular amongst the lower classes, and it was played by itinerant Buddhist monks called *komoso*, literally “rice-straw priests,” who wandered, begging for alms with their straw mat on their back (Weisgarber 1968: 313).

Buddhism itself was initially introduced to Japan from India, via China and Korea, as early as 538 A.D., and it had a profound impact on Japanese culture and aesthetics over the next nine centuries. The official adoption of Zen Buddhism by the Japanese government took place during the *Kamakura* period (1192-1338). The *Zen komusō*, or “priests of emptiness and nothingness,” were active during the *Edo* period (1615-1868) and made significant changes to the instrument, including retaining the large root-end of the bamboo stalk. The newer instrument

was able to play the popular *Miyako-bushi* scale (*D, E-flat, G, A-flat, C*) and began to be used in classical chamber music (*sankyoku*) (Blasdel 1988: 92). The early komusō were comprised largely of masterless *samurai* or *ronin*, survivors of the fierce clan conflict of the late 16th century. Being divested of their rank and privileges, they banded together in the *Fuke Shu* sect of Buddhism. Granted a charter by the government to establish a temple in 1642, the original home of the komusō (*Meian-ji*) can be visited today within the larger temple compound of *Tofuku-ji* in Kyoto. In return for the charter, these komusō became wandering spies and information gatherers for the government, using their shakuhachi playing in their travels to beg for alms (Blasdel 1989: 97) (Fig. 7).

Figure 7



Modern *komusō*

Kita Kamakura

A special relationship between music and spirit developed in the *Fuke* sect, using the shakuhachi as a tool. Fuyo Hisamatsu (ca. 1790-1845) - a pupil of the grandson of Kinko Kurosawa, founder of the shakuhachi *ryu*, or guild that still bears his name - relates that the instrument was played in the spirit of *sbugyo*, or as a spiritual exercise (Gutzwiller 1984: 57). The practice of *Suizen*, “blowing Zen,” was used in addition to *Zazen*, which is “seated meditation.” The solo, meditational pieces or *honkyoku*, played by the komusō, originated in various temples scattered across Japan, and they were learned by mendicant monks as they traveled from one site to the next. Each temple developed its own *honkyoku*, or “secret piece,” which was used by the resident monks in their daily rituals (Tann 1989: 54). *Honkyoku*, begging pieces, as well as entertainment pieces, were played as part of the practice of *Suizen* (Blasdel 1989: 111).

In order to provide income for the temples, the *Fuke* monks began teaching the public for a fee and issuing playing licenses as early as 1690. As the exclusive rights to play the instrument became more compromised, public studios appeared in urban areas. Due to this decline and misuse of their original charter, the *Fuke* sect was eventually stripped of its privileges by the government in 1847, and officially banned in 1871 (Tann 1989: 54). After this, the shakuhachi traditions were passed on to several new schools that arose, each named after their founders.

A student of the shakuhachi today faces neither the need to enter a monastery or become a monk to engage in the traditional *honkyoku*. Finding a good teacher is the first priority, for they can advise on instrument purchases, and will have a set of repertoire for the student to learn. For example, in the *Kinko-ryu*, a student learns the collection of thirty-six pieces, including both *honkyoku* and *sankyoku* (ensemble) pieces (Blasdel 1989: 116). In the *Mujuan-ryu*, the set of music ranges from all parts of Japan and is centered around the notations of Jin Nyodo, a scholar-practitioner who made it his life’s work to learn various and less well-known styles and pieces, notating them for posterity (Figs. 8 and 9).

Figure 8

Jin Nyodo



Figure 9

Kurahashi, Yodo II, Head of Mujuan Ryu



Notation

Honkyoku script varies from school to school, though typically it is written in columns, read from top to bottom and from right to left. Notation for ensemble pieces is much more standardized between schools than it is for honkyoku; in some cases, players from different schools would have trouble even reading another school's honkyoku notation. The original Kinko-ryu notation was significantly improved by Kodo Araki, who used a system of phonetic script written vertically (*katakana*), which indicates the fingering positions for individual pitches combined with a system of dots and lines indicating rhythmic patterns (Tukitani 1994:115-6; Blasdel 1989: 128). This type of notation serves as a detailed sketch of a piece, which is learned in its entirety by rote from a good teacher. Some of the best-known schools today are the *Myoan* and *Tozan*, as well as an example of a lesser-known style is the *Kimpu* (northern Japan) which reflects the dialect of *Tsugaru* (Tukitani 1994: 119-20). The various shakuhachi styles of modern Japan vary significantly in style and repertory (Fig. 10).

Figure 10

Honkyoku Notation, Choshi, Kurahashi Yodo



Into the 20th Century

The demise of honkyoku music was predicted by Kyodo Uehara in 1895 when he wrote:

“There has of late been such an extraordinary decline in the number of those learning this music that the tradition is only just kept from extinction. In the long run, given the extraordinary difficulties presented by the music, interest in it will only be maintained when it is adapted to the taste of the masses” (Gutzwiller 1984: 63, Uehara 1927: 76).

Though the performance of honkyoku did decline during the opening of Japan to the West, fortunately it never entirely disappeared.

The dominion held over Japan by the shogunate dynasties for centuries broke down during the *Meiji* era (1868-1912) and the constitutional monarchy was reinstated (Ishii 1989: 84). As Japan opened its doors for the first time in more than 200 years, all things Western, especially music, were avidly consumed. The first Japanese Western-style composition was written by Koda Nobuko in 1897 (Herd 1989: 119), beginning the musical cross fertilization from West to East and vice versa, which has continued to this day. The traditional shakuhachi was altered to accommodate modern influences; however, many performers and composers did not approve of this. Yokoyama Katsuya, world-renowned Kinko shakuhachist, was against the so-called improvements (Tokumaru 1994: 61). Likewise, composer Takemitsu Toru was opposed to these alterations. Although, composer Miyagi Michio and others espoused these changes (Takemitsu 1992a: 41).

By the 1960s, Japanese composers were formulating the compositional concept that the traditional aesthetic principles of Japanese music and art must unite with modern, Western classical music (Herd 1989: 138). The shakuhachi became a central figure in this new goal, particularly revolutionary in the composition “November Steps” by Takemitsu in which the shakuhachi and the *biwa*, a five-stringed lute, are juxtaposed with a classical orchestra (Takemitsu 1989: 210). Also, by the 1960s, the distinctive sound and style of the shakuhachi was influencing new compositions for the Western flute. Some examples of composers writing contemporary silver flute works that encompass aesthetic elements from traditional Japanese music include Yuasa Joji, Fukushima Kazuo, Taira Yoshihisa, Takahashi Yuji, and, of course, Takemitsu. Shortly following, American and European composers began writing pieces for flute that incorporated elements of the shakuhachi. Representative composers include Elizabeth Brown, Carolyn Steinberg, Hilary Tann, John Cage, and Shirish Korde.

Ideals of Sound and Technique of the Kinko School

In the words of the late Takemitsu, “Now we can see how the master shakuhachi player, striving in performance to re-create the sound of wind in a decaying bamboo grove, reveals the Japanese sound ideal: sound, in its ultimate expressiveness, being constantly refined, approaches the nothingness of that wind in the bamboo grove” (Takemitsu 1995: 51). This eloquent statement describes an ideal metaphysical quality of sound

that the shakuhachi can encompass. A larger ratio of air to the sounded pitch is central to creating a “wind in the bamboo” type of effect, which contrasts with the quintessential flute tone of purity and brilliance. The identification with nature that the Japanese have traditionally held is foremost in the making and playing of the shakuhachi and other musical instruments. Extremely subtle differences in pitch and playing technique distinguish the greatest performers (Burnett 1989: 80).

From a soft, hollow non-presence to a sound fully saturated with all available overtones, the shakuhachi metamorphoses from ethereal air to a roaring lion. Hilary Tann refers to this wide timbral quality as a “three-dimensional or hologrammatic view of the pitch universe” (1989: 69). The richness and variety of sounds possible on the bamboo flute can be incorporated into a silver flutist’s repertoire as well, through the practice of adding and subtracting harmonic partials in the sound.

Another characteristic of all shakuhachi schools of playing is the use of more than one fingering per pitch, with accompanying blowing techniques, to achieve particular colors and shadings in a microtonal universe. Again, a parallel is found in contemporary silver flute literature in which new fingerings and microtonal pitches, head angles, vibrato, and special effects are called for. The vibrato or *yuri* is created through head movement, primarily in shakuhachi music. Less regularity of speed and amplitude of vibrato are expected, compared to flute vibrato. The vibrato is not produced by the diaphragm unless specifically indicated in a composition. The most common type of *yuri* is called *marwashiyuri* in which the head is moved in a circular shape to create a scintillating sound (Blasdel 1988: 51). Most of these movements can also be transferred to the silver flute with practice.

The *meri-kari* technique refers to the process of half-holing, head movement, and jaw movement necessary to produce tones on the shakuhachi other than the pentatonic scale. These are the most difficult fingerings and pitches to master. Articulation on the instrument is not produced via the tongue, but through the technique of “finger-tonguing.” The fingers tap or close off the holes to create articulation, in combination with approaching and leaving main notes with set patterns of grace notes (Wheeler 1997: personal communication). Special techniques include *muraiki*, a highly explosive burst of air, and other gradations of this, including the gentler, breathy *sorane* (Blasdel 1989: 48). These characteristic techniques and styles of the shakuhachi that developed in the original honkyoku and classical Japanese sankyoku music have been both maintained and extended to popular music, like jazz and soundtracks, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contemporary shakuhachi literature has incorporated avant-garde Western classical approaches, as well.

From the Zen path of practicing shakuhachi in long, continuous tones to develop a still mind and concentration, to the performance of very advanced contemporary literature and popular styles, the shakuhachi has found and kept its place in the modern world. Its distinctive, bamboo voice will continue to be heard and played all over the world by players of all backgrounds.

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