



(LYRCD 7176)

## **Japanese Masterpieces for the Shakuhachi**

**Played by the masters of Melan-ryu, Kimpu-ryu, Tozan-ryu, Ikuta-ryu, and Kikusue-ryu at Darumaden of Nanzenji and Melanji, Kyoto, Japan.**

### **The Shakuhachi**

Of all oriental instruments, the shakuhachi has the most fascinating background. The name itself means 1.8 Shaku (feet). The standard length, but others, from 1.4 to 3.3 ft., is also frequently used. It is as closely linked with Japanese history as the bagpipes are to Scotland's or the lute and guitar to the Iberian Peninsula. It is the only device that had served simultaneously as a musical instrument, as a weapon of defense, and a cover for spying. Simple in construction, it is extremely intricate to play. It is made of bamboo with 3 or 4 joints, and 4 holes on top and 1 on the back, and is played vertically, like a saxophone. It has no mouthpiece, and it's half and quartertones are produced by the control of fingers on the holes. It is presumed to have originated in ancient Egypt and to have migrated gradually through India and China. It was first used in Gagaku in the Sixth century, but was abandoned when the dynasty fell. The revival came in the 13th century with the rise of the Fuke sect, a branch of Zen Buddhism, in which sutra chanting was replaced by the shakuhachi; many Fuke monks went on pilgrimages with shakuhachis, and bamboo baskets to hide their identity.

Ronin, uprooted samurai who were disenfranchised by the death of their masters swelled the ranks of these itinerant begging and tootling preachers in the 17th Century. Many of these became Christians and were persecuted. The Kimpu-ryu (school) was founded

approximately 400 years ago by the Tsugura, a samurai family and is also called nezasaha (the roots of reed). The secret of its performance is inspired by budo, the skill of fencing, which employed a controlled technique of panting. (Warriors customarily played immediately after their rigorous training in budo.) Other styles of playing are the Meian, the most fundamental and undecorated, the Kikusui-ryu, a recent school originated by Seizan Shibata, and the Tozan-ryu, originated by Nakao Tozan.

Legend has it that members of a sect formed by the ronin forged a document giving them exclusive rights to play the shakuhachi and solicit aims with it. The reigning shogun during the Takgawa period went along with their hoax, but his price was that they spy on the activities of other ronin.

Forbidden the use of their old samurai swords, the ronin make their shakuhachis longer and stouter for use as clubs in self-defense, and became musical stool pigeons who took to wearing large straw baskets over their heads to achieve the anonymity essential to their under-cover eavesdropping while playing along the streets of ancient Kyoto. The present tradition regards the basket-hats as "symbols of other-worldliness".

During the Edo period in the 17th and 18th centuries the shakuhachi playing was strictly solo, as solitary as the players' lives. Not until the mid-19th Century. During the Meiji period, was the shakuhachi heard together with the koto, the Japanese horizontal harp with 13 strings, in the now distinctive Japanese sound combination.

The tone of the shakuhachi is as mysterious and veiled as its history: its color changes from a shrill, penetrating high through a breathy middle to a mellow low that would do credit to the finest wood or gold flute. Its melodies exploit the tension of shaded intervals, sliding away from the true scale pitches controlled by the partial covering of the five finger holes. By shifting the position of the open mouthpiece against the lips and changing his breath pressure, the player increases the instrument's basic pentatonic scale to wider ranged special modes. Sudden swells in the dynamics and a fast tremolo is part of the style, not unlike the quivering hand action of the "hot" trumpeter. According to Professor William Maim, author of *Japanese Music and Musical Instruments* (Charles E Tuttle Co.) the pieces tend to be structured like rondos, a recurrent melody alternating with new material.

## **The Music**

1) Koku. Two shakuhachis and a gong at Meianji, Kyoto, originally the headquarters of the Fuke sect, play this long piece. It was composed by a priest named Kyochiku in the 12th Century while meditating at a temple in Nara. In a dream he found himself floating in a boat. Suddenly thick mist rolled down the sky and blocked his view of the moon. On hearing the moving melody of a flute, he reached out for his favorite bamboo flute to accompany the ethereal melody. The music is long and simple, and the listener is expected to forget everything and "sleep in nothingness."

2) Sekihiki no fu. The name of a Chinese poem (The feeling of the Red Wall), which is sung at the beginning of music. Composed by Seizan Shibata for 3 sizes of shakuhachi, - the longest being 2 ft. 4 in., the piece is played by the same performer with a 3-hole

shakuhachi.

3) Matsukaze. (The Wind on the Pine Tree). The pine tree represents men, cherry and the plum trees, women. This piece is famous for its panting technique (komibuki), the symbol of the wild breath of the samurai. A member of the Tsugaru family in northern Japan composed it about 300 years ago.

4) Ajikan. The realization of Buddhism or the state of enlightenment. The first letter is an "A", the beginning of both Eastern and Western alphabets, derived from the Sanskrit "nothing". In Buddhism there is a code of "nothingness", and this music conveys, "all is nothing and nothing is all". Composed by Nyozan Miyagawa, one of the most beautiful Buddhist pieces.

5) Oshusanaya. Stylistically quite different from the others, it describes valleys in the Oshu (northern Japan), and is indicative of the folk music of that area. Played in the Kikusui style with a 3 ft. 3 in shakuhachi.

6) Sagariha (Drooping leaves) this is perhaps the oldest and most fundamental work of the ten pieces making up Kimpurvu music. The rhythm also suggests waves.

7) Kyushi Reibo for solo shakuhachi is one of the religious pieces of music composed in memory of Buddha's death. Kyushu is the southernmost island of Japan. Being closest to China, the most ancient cultures prospered there and many shakuhachi masters went on pilgrimages there. Conceived by one of the pilgrims who visited there and impressed by the reibo (spirit) of Buddha. The shakuhachi used here is 2 ft. 1 in. long.

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