

April-June, 1984
Published By
ASAHI-SHIMBUN
TOKYO

The Shakuhachi: Aesthetics of a Single Tone

Christopher Blasdel

THE *shakuhachi*, Japan's traditional vertical bamboo flute, is finding increasingly wide application these days in nontraditional genres of music—pop, jazz, rock, avant-garde improvisation—both within Japan and abroad. One reason, certainly, for the *shakuhachi*'s wide appeal is its unique ability to enliven a single tone with all the colors of the spectrum. A skillful musician can enchant listeners with the depth of the instrument's tonal possibilities. Yet this experience can be enhanced with a cultural and historical perspective. Awareness of the importance attributed to sound and music in Buddhism and the Buddhist-related arts that influenced the *shakuhachi* provides the key to an aesthetic appreciation of the *shakuhachi*.

Mention of the *shakuhachi* immediately brings to mind the image of the basket-hatted mendicant priests, called *komusō*, who roamed the country during the Edo period (1600–1868). Members of a government-authorized Zen sect, Fukeshū, they regularly lodged at temples in the sect's extensive network. Each temple had certain pieces associated with it, and the monks would customarily

Christopher Blasdel, a graduate of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, has studied *shakuhachi* for the past 11 years. He regularly performs in and around Tokyo.

learn the pieces before moving on. The music, plaintive and meditative, was not played for entertainment but as a form of meditation, called *suizen*, "blowing Zen." The *shakuhachi*, therefore, was a religious tool, a *hōki*, whose purpose was to awaken the mind to a higher state of consciousness.

For various reasons, the Fukeshū became decadent toward the end of the Edo period and was finally outlawed by the Meiji government in 1871. Nonetheless, its use of the *shakuhachi* as a *hōki* was the institutionalization of an attitude toward tone as a medium for entering the realm of enlightenment. Similar beliefs can be found in the ancient Buddhist and Chinese classics, both of which exerted a profound influence on Japanese music.

For example, in the Sūrangama Sutra, the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (revered in Japan as Kannon, whose Japanese rendering of the original Sanskrit means literally "seeing/hearing") gives a lengthy discourse on entry into the supersensible realm of Samādhi by means of the sense of hearing. By concentrating on an external sound, a distinction between the listener and the source of sound is created. However, one must transcend this stage to a state of awareness in which all distinction is merged into a void. From this

void is manifest nirvana, out of which is born an enlightened mind and compassion.

Here we have a blueprint for sound as a Way. In the writings of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (6th c. B.C.), there is a story that offers a more concrete illustration. A man visits the famed composer Kōtei and explains the effect the composer's piece "Kanchi" had on his soul: "Kōtei! You played the Kanchi piece in the wide expanse of the fields, and the first time I heard it, I don't know why, but I felt fear, then sloth and at last I was thrown into a state of uncertainty." In this story, reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus' lyre, Kōtei's music strikes the heart of the aspirant, bringing about a state of confusion and reversing the daily order of thinking. These conditions lead the man to search for a way to overcome suffering and delusion.

Other ancient Chinese classics, such as the *Yo Chi* music treatise (1st c. B.C.), influenced Japanese music throughout the formative years and the Middle Ages. As Professor Kikawa Eishi explains in his book *The Characteristics of Japanese Music*: "The study of music was not a vainglorious dissipation, but was undertaken in exactly the same spirit as austere spiritual disciplines." Rather than the technical or acoustical aspects of the music, it was the discipline and hardships involved in the learning process and training of the self that were stressed. The Japanese word for practice in one of the traditional arts is *keiko*, which has much in common with the Buddhist term referring to ascetic practices, *shugyō*.

Actually, there is a high degree of sensitivity toward the purity of sound within the Zen-related arts that developed in the Middle Ages. In the highly ritualized tea ceremony, for example, the susurrant rattle of the teapot's iron lid, caused by steam rushing out, and the gentle whisk of the bamboo stirring utensils are valued for the acoustic dimension they add to the visual and olfactory experience. Sound is incorporated into the design

of the Japanese garden in the form of the *shishiotoshi*—the bamboo ladle that sends its muffled report throughout the garden as it drops to its stone base after relieving its watery load.

In such an atmosphere where sound is revered for its transcendental qualities, it is not difficult to see how the *shakuhachi* lended itself as a tool of meditation.

The importance of sound, music and the *shakuhachi* to those seeking the realm of enlightenment is readily apparent in the poetry of the Zen priest Ikkyū (1394–1481). Throughout the collection of his Chinese-style poetry, known as the *Kyōunshū*, are many images related to sound and music. Like Dōgen, the founder of the Rinzai Zen sect, who attained enlightenment when he heard a nightingale's cry and the sound of bamboo splitting in the forest, Ikkyū was enlightened by the cry of a bird—a crow he heard while meditating on a small boat on Lake Biwa:

Now, as ten years ago,
A mind attached to arrogance and anger
But at the laugh of the crow
An adept from the dust arises
And an illumined face sings
In the morning sun.

Ikkyū's frequent mention of the *shakuhachi* in his poetry (the *shakuhachi* of the time, now referred to as the *hitoyogiri*, was shorter than the present-day instrument), the legends about him, plus the fact that there remains today a *hitoyogiri* said to have been used by Ikkyū all indicate how important the instrument was to him. If sound was the occasion for his own enlightenment experience, then Ikkyū, as he tries to convey to others the spiritual truths he has discovered, gives to the *shakuhachi* the primary role of an instrument that urges cognition. Judging from the vexation apparent in some of his poems, Ikkyū had difficulty making others understand. The last line of a poem written on the occasion of the rebuilding of Daitokuji

after it was destroyed by fire in the Ōnin wars reads: "No one understands the wondrous tone of the *shakuhachi*." In another poem, entitled "Shakuhachi," he likens himself to a barbarian, blowing fruitlessly on his flute.

Likewise, a poem written by Ikkyū for an earlier *shakuhachi*-playing priest, Tonami, hints at the power the instrument has in the hands of an enlightened master:

The incomparable Tonami, who roams the
heavens and the earth
Playing the *shakuhachi*; one feels the un-
seen worlds
In all the universe there is only this song
Our flute player pictured here.

For a sound or a single tone to enlighten, it must be a microcosmic existence unto itself; the "only song in the universe." Such is clearly how Ikkyū perceived the music of the *shakuhachi*. Similarly, *ichi on jōbutsu*—attainment of Buddhahood through a single note—became an important aspect of the Fuke sect's "blowing Zen" as it developed in the later periods.

Although the *shakuhachi* was increasingly used as a musical instrument from the Edo period, apparent from the publication then of a number of instruction books and some music, its popularity with the Fuke sect established it as a tool of meditation. That the Fuke sect, too, considered sound and music a means of reaching a higher consciousness is clear from the sect's official history, *Kyotaku Denki*, which it published in 1795 in an effort to gain legitimacy with the Tokugawa shogunate and to bolster its authority and prestige.

Kyotaku Denki states that the founder of the Fuke sect was the T'ang dynasty monk Fuke. It begins: "Fuke was always going about the streets ringing a bell and saying, 'If a bright head comes, strike it! If a dark head comes, strike it! Whatever quarter it comes from, hit it like a whirlwind! And if it comes from emptiness, cut it down with a scythe!'"

An acolyte named Chōhaku is impressed by the sound of Fuke's bell and appeals to the priest to take him on as a disciple. When Fuke refuses, Chōhaku proceeds to fashion a *shakuhachi* and creates a piece called "Kyotaku" (empty or imitation bell), which imitates the sound of Fuke's bell. Eventually the *shakuhachi* is brought to Japan by a priest named Gakushin. The climax of *Kyotaku Denki* comes when Gakushin's disciple, Kichiku, who is wandering about Japan, has a revelatory dream while napping in a hut atop Mt. Asamagatake, in present-day Mie Prefecture:

Kichiku was poling a punt, alone on the sea, admiring the full moon. Suddenly a dense fog covered everything, and the moonlight, too, grew dim and dark. Through the fog, he heard the sound of a flute, desolate and sonorous. . . . Kichiku had never before heard such an exquisite sound.

Kichiku proceeds to put the contents of his dream to music in two pieces, "Mukaiji" and "Koku," which along with "Kyotaku" constitute the three most important works in the traditional *shakuhachi* repertory.

Though *Kyotaku Denki* is not historically accurate, it has validity as a myth affirming the *shakuhachi*'s connection with meditation and the seeking of enlightenment, as well as the role of sound and music. The ringing of Fuke's bell was to Chōhaku what the crow's call was to Ikkyū, while Kichiku's dream bespeaks the importance of higher intuitions in the creation of music.

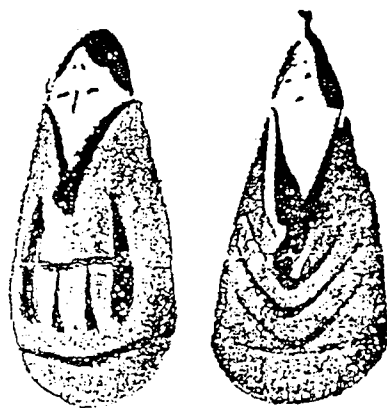
Belief in the supersensible powers of sound and music can of course be found in the West as well, for example in the myth of the aulos-playing Muses, who prepared souls for initiation into the ancient Greek mysteries with music. Even within this century, the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner stressed the importance of sound in attaining a satorilike cognition suitable for the present age:

The student has also to bestow a further care

on the world of sound. Through her resounding tones, the whole of nature begins to whisper her secrets to the student. What was merely incomprehensible noise to his soul becomes by this means a coherent language of nature. And whereas hitherto he had heard sound from the so-called inanimate objects, he is now aware of a new language of the soul. Should he advance further in this inner culture, he will soon learn that he can hear what hitherto he did not even surmise. He begins to hear with his soul.

The problem is how we today, surrounded as we are by a cacophony of daily auditory distractions, find our way back to the purity of sound, a purity in which the single note can hold the fascination of the macrocosm. Part of the answer lies in paying closer attention to our sound environments. Careful listening is essential to appreciate *shakuhachi* music, especially the traditional compositions,

where the depth of music is found in the single tone rather than in a highly developed melody line, complicated rhythms, harmony and counterpoint. Whereas in most Western music a sense of space is expressed through harmonic structure, and the sense of time by the passage of notes and melodic development, temporality and spatiality in traditional *shakuhachi* music depend heavily upon tone color, intensity of breath, duration and the use of "nontonal" breath sounds and finger trills. If we learn to search out the profundity that even one tone can hold, it means we have found within ourselves a richness that is reflected in the tone. Indeed, the development of this "inner culture" has been given great significance in traditional Japanese music. In the simple tones of the *shakuhachi*, the whole of nature can be heard whispering its secrets, if we but know how to listen.



CRS