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SHAKUHACHI HONKYOKU

JAPANESE FLUTE PLAYED BY RILEY KELLY LEE

Ajikan, Shirabe, Toori, Kadotsuke, Hachigaeshi, Shizen, Sanya Seiran, Tamuke



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FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4229

THE SHAKUHACHI HONKYOKU
THE NESASA-HA HONKYOKU
by RILEY KELLY LEE

SIDE ONE

- Band 1. Ajikan 9:00
- Band 2. Shirabe 3:00
- Band 3. Toori 4:00
- Band 4. Kadotsuke 3:00
- Band 5. Hachigaeshi 5:00

SIDE TWO

- Band 1. Shizen 10:00
- Band 2. Sanya Seiran 10:00
- Band 3. Tamuke 5:00

RILEY KELLY LEE and his music are in a word, unique. Lee plays the shakuhachi, described as the most melodic flute in the world.

This classical Japanese bamboo flute, used for centuries by Zen monks in meditation, is immediately appreciated by people of all cultures. The shakuhachi is as difficult to play as it is enjoyable to listen to. In fact, only a small number of people in Japan depend solely on their shakuhachi playing for their livelihood. Lee is possibly the only non-Japanese professional shakuhachi player outside of Japan, and is the only one, Japanese or otherwise in Hawaii.

He lived in Japan for seven years, becoming the first non-Japanese to attain the rank of Dai Shihan (grand master). He became one of the lead performers in the internationally acclaimed, all Japanese group, ONDEKOZA, playing shakuhachi, yokobue and taiko (Japanese drums) throughout Europe, the USA, Canada and Japan. He has appeared on such varied television shows as "11 pm" in Japan and the Magpie show in England. He has played with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, The Nippon Philharmonic in Tokyo and the Pilobolus Dance Group at the American Dance Festival in Newport. He has recorded for Victor Records, Japan; Folkways, New York; and Plumeria Productions, Hawaii.

Lee is presently the shakuhachi lecturer at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. He already has a large following in Hawaii-his first three recitals here, in spring 1980, were all near sell-outs.

Recorded by *Kean Sakata*, at the Music Department of the University of Hawaii, Manoa Campus, August, 1980.

Photograph by *Nathan Chun*.

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Japanese Flute played by
Riley Kelly Lee



Classical shakuhachi honkyoku are pieces used by the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism. These shakuhachi pieces were originally played as a form of prayer or meditation. Honkyoku were not for the entertainment of the listeners, but a performance of spiritual revelation. There is no melody or beat; each phrase is played in one breath. Technique is secondary.

Honkyoku are taught in the traditional method; the student imitating the teacher's performance as closely as possible. Once the teacher is satisfied with the student's playing he will teach the next piece. However, this does not mean that the student has mastered the piece. Until he has memorized the piece and has played it every day for a year, for example, he does not know the true essence of the piece. This fact is apparent even in the name "honkyoku". "Honkyoku" is written with two Chinese characters, 'hon' and 'kyoku'. The latter means piece or song. 'Hon' has numerous meanings, both alone and with combinations of other characters. It can mean book, original or main. The most obvious translation of "honkyoku" is "the original music", which in fact, it is. However, when "hon" is combined with the word "nin"(person), to form "honnin", it becomes "the person involved" or "the person in question". One interpretation of the word "honkyoku" is "honnin no kyoku" meaning "the music of the person involved", that is the performer's music.

The shakuhachi master, Chikuho Sakai, states that a honkyoku must become "your own piece of music", and for it to do so requires repeated playing from memory over a long period of time. After a while the

student may be playing a piece much differently from the way he so painstakingly memorized it. Or he may still be performing it exactly the same way as his teacher. Either way is fine, Sakai-sensei says, for the important thing is that the piece becomes truly the player's own.

THE NESASA-HA HONKYOKU

Sasa is a small, reed-like species of bamboo common throughout Japan. The name, like many Japanese words, is onomatopoeic, imitating the sound of this small bamboo rustling in the wind. "Ne" means "root". "Ha" means school or sub-sect, smaller than "ryu". So "Nesasa-ha" literally means the "Root of the Sasa Sect" of shakuhachi. This now defunct sect was centered in the Tsugaru district, of what is now Aomori-Prefecture, the northernmost part of the main island of Honshuu. Like all classical honkyoku, the pieces of the Nesasa-ha were of a religious nature. The most characteristic technique of the Nesasa-ha honkyoku is called "komibuki", literally "crowding breath". This rhythmic breathing enables the player to focus his concentration as much as possible on his playing, thereby reaching deeper levels of meditation and eventually enlightenment. One legend states that the komibuki should be played with such concentration as to melt the snow around the performer, who is seated outside. This statement is especially appreciated if one remembers that the Tsugaru district is extremely cold and very snowy in winter.

The Chikuho-ryu is the only major sect that has preserved the Nesasa-ha honkyoku. The Nesasa-ha honkyoku are considered special among the Chikuho-ryu collection of honkyoku. It took Mr. Lee over one year to complete all the ten pieces of the Chikuho-ryu collection, even though almost half are less than five minutes in length. They are almost the last pieces to be learned by the Chikuho-ryu shakuhachi student. In

fact, the majority of the students are already licenced teachers before they are taught the Nesasa-ha pieces. Of the ten Nesasa-ha pieces five are presented on this album.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PIECES

AJIKAN

The first honkyoku is called "Ajikan". Like most of the classical honkyoku the composer is unknown. It was originally called "Sashi", but was renamed "Ajikan" in the Meijii era, about 100 years ago. The three Chinese characters are Buddhist terms, forming a mantra. The first syllable, "AH" is the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet. It is considered to be the first sound uttered by the human mouth. It symbolizes the unproduced, impermanent, and the immaterial. It also is the first syllable of "Amitabha", the Buddha. The second syllable, "JI", is a seed word possessing power through the thing which it is associated with. The third syllable, "KAN", means to look into, to study, to contemplate, to consider illusion. It has long been associated with yoga. "Ajikan" is also the name for the highest and most difficult of meditative practices of the Shingon Mikkyo sect of Buddhism, and is in three steps. The first step is a practice involving rhythmical breathing and chanting of the "AH". Step two is visualizing the Sanskrit letter "AH" inside one's heart, surrounded by the eight golden lotus plants, while in deep meditation. The third step is the chanting of the mantra "HUM".

It is said that a shakuhachi player performed "Ajikan" before the famous Indians, Tagore, and Gandhi. They were moved, according to witnesses,

*to tears, saying that what they had heard was
the voice of the dead.*

Of the fifty honkyoku pieces that Mr. Lee has learned in his ten years of playing the shakuhachi, perhaps "Ajikan" is the one most truly his own; "honnin no kyoku". It was the first piece he played alone before an audience, at the annual day-long honkyoku gathering at the Meianji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, in 1972. While touring Japan, U.S.A., Canada and Europe for three years with an all Japanese performing group, "Ondekoza", Lee played "Ajikan" at every major performance, in front of audiences from four to four thousand. Lee has said of "Ajikan", "So completely does the shakuhachi immerse me in the music, that each individual note becomes like a universe in complexity and relative length."

SHIRABE

The first Nesasa-ha honkyoku, "Shirabe", literally means to search. It is played as a warm-up or prelude, but goes beyond that in meaning. The Zen tradition of the shakuhachi holds that the shakuhachi plays you as much as you play the shakuhachi. The piece, "Shirabe", is a renewing of the relationship between the bamboo and the person, a searching for the balance between the two that is most conducive to meditation.

TOORI

The second Nesasa-ha selection is part of a three piece group played by the komuso, the famous wandering beggar priests of the shakuhachi. The name "Toori" means simply passing down the road. However, it is written with the same Chinese character as the "Tao" or the "Way".

The komuso, reed basket over his head, would play "Toori" as he walked slowly down the road in search of alms.

KADOTSUKE

Eventually the komuso would halt before a house or building and play the next piece of the set; "Kadotsuke". Translated as "On the corner", this appropriately named piece is the shortest of the Nesasa-ha collection. Upon the completion of "Kadotsuke", the komuso would receive whatever alms were offered to him by the occupants of the house, perhaps a bowl of rice. So "Kadotsuke" served as a call for alms, a knocking on the door, possibly explaining the many high-pitched and therefore easily heard phrases.

HACHIGAESHI

Upon receiving alms, the komuso would gratefully acknowledge his indebtedness by playing "Hachigaeshi", or "Returning of the Bowl". Chikuho Sakai emphasizes the feeling that should be behind this expression of thanks. In the case of the bowl of rice, the komuso would not be thanking his benefactor for just a mere bowl of rice. He would realize that without food, man cannot live. The bowl of rice enables him to live for one more day. Therefore, he must play "Hachigaeshi" with an intensity worthy of the gift of life itself. The melodic patterns in "Hachigaeshi" are described by the Japanese word "hageshi", meaning "intense" or "furious". To further emphasize the enormity of the task of thanking one for one's life, this piece consists of two parts, the second part being almost the exact repeat of the first. It allows the komuso to say thank you twice.

SHIZEN

"Shizen" is the only piece on this album that is not a classical honkyoku. Written by Riley Kelly Lee, this piece was adapted from por-

SANYA SEIRAN

"Sanya Seiran" is a full-length Nesasa-ha piece. "Sanya" is a widely played honkyoku steeped in Zen tradition. It helps the student attain "MU", the "not this nor that" Zen state of nothingness, where one's actions can be pure, spontaneous, and from the heart. The word "Sanya", literally means three valleys. It has been suggested that the name refers to three semi-mythical valleys deep in China, whose beauty are legendary and whose people are enlightened. "Seiran", somewhat like "Ajikan", is a word almost impossible to translate, so deep are its origins in the Buddhist esoteric past.

TAMUKE

The honkyoku "Tamuke" refers to making spiritual offerings to the Buddha. It also describes the prayers given for the safe return of loved ones about to embark upon a long and possibly dangerous journey. But most of all, "Tamuke" is the offering or prayer for those who have departed on the longest journey of all, death. In this sense, it is similar to the requiem of western tradition, but is of a broader nature. This honkyoku is attributed to Watatsumi Do, considered by many to be one of the last true shakuhachi playing Buddhist acetics alive today.

CHIKUHO-RYU

As with almost all of the traditional arts in Japan, the shakuhachi is usually played and taught within a rigid structure or organization. These organizations are called "ryu", and are centered primarily around the strong teacher-student relationship. There are many shakuhachi "ryu", the largest two being the Tozan-ryu, and the Kinko-ryu. The Chikuho-ryu, though less known, embodies as much and in some instances, more of the entire shakuhachi tradition. The

most obvious difference between the various shakuhachi ryu in Japan is the written notation system. Most ryu use the "ro-tsu-re" system, while the Chikuha-ryu uses the older "fu-ho-u" system, dating to the Fuke-sect of Zen Buddhism. Chikuho-ryu also has more of the classical honkyoku than either of the other two major ryu. (Over fifty, vs. 36 in Kinko-ryu, and zero in Tozan.) Chikuho-ryu was founded by Mr. Chikuho Sakai I., (1892-) in Osaka, Japan, in February, Taisho 6, (1916), Mr. SAKAI studied under several teachers, but received most of his honkyaku pieces from Seizan Katsuura, one of the last of the licensed komuso in Japan. Seizan Katsuura was the heir-apparent of the Meianji temple, the head temple of the Fuke sect, to which all komuso belonged. However, he decided to forego the honor so as to be able to devote himself completely to the playing of the shakuhachi honkyoku. He considered Sakai to be his best disciple, and encouraged the founding of the new sect. Sakai's son, who began shakuhachi at the age of six, became Chikuho II, and leader of Chikuho-ryu in 1967.

BIOGRAPHY

Riley Kelly Lee has been playing the shakuhachi for 10 years. He studied under Chukuho Sakai II, in Osaka, Japan, from 1971 through 1977. He is the first non-Japanese to receive the rank of Dai Shihan (master teacher). Honolulu raised and of Chinese-caucasian background, he was the single non-Japanese member of the internationally acclaimed folkdrum group Ondekoza. He has performed extensively throughout Japan and on several tours in Europe, Canada, and the United States. An active performer in the Hawaiian islands, where he presently lives with his wife, Patricia, and twin daughters, he teaches shakuhachi at the University of Hawaii.

ABOUT THE SHAKUHACHI

Made from the root section of the bamboo (Madake) the Shakuhachi has four front holes and one back hole to produce five tones. By changing the placement of the fingers or the lips and controlling the breath, the tones can be varied. Movement of the head produces vibrato. Originally used for religious purposes, esoteric playing techniques have developed for this simple instrument. They have been given colorful

descriptive titles. "Mura iki" (thrashing breath) makes the windy sound of a gust sweeping through the bamboo. "Tame Ne" is the small purring sound like the chirping of insects. "Hon Ne" at full breath is a deep soulful sound. The range of sounds is being enlarged by contemporary musicians.

END

(Descriptive Notes by Riley Kelly Lee.)