

KOTO

Folkways Records FW 8746

Music of the One-String Ichigenkin

Ichigenkin and Vocals by Isshi Yamada / Shakuhachi by Fuzan Sato



M
1812
Y19
K87
1967

MUSIC LP

FOLKWAYS FW 8746

Side A

SUGA NO KYOKU (Music of Suga) (4:49)
ISARIBI (Fishing Fire) (6:51)
OSHI (Mandarin Ducks) (4:54)

Side B

BOTAN (Peony) (5:40)
HARU NO SHIRABE (Spring Song) (8:34)

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KOTO: The Music of The Ichigenkin



PROGRAM NOTES
by
JAMES YAMADA

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The Ichigenkin is a rare one-stringed Japanese instrument related to the Koto--so rare that many Japanese, even scholars, have never heard of it. The early history of the instrument is obscure. But it is believed that the Ichigenkin came to Japan from China since there was a similar instrument in ancient China. Chinese history records the name of a musician who played the instrument 3,000 years ago. The Ichigenkin, according to the best modern estimates, arrived in Japan early in the Tokugawa period (1615-1868). Toward the end of the Tokugawa period it enjoyed considerable popularity among scholars, warriors, and Zen priests. But its popularity waned, and at present the Ichigenkin is relatively unknown. Among those who play it now, the majority are women deeply interested in music and poetry.

Though generally played now as a hobby, the Ichigenkin originally had a function similar to the seven-stringed Chinese Ch'in: -- to help perfect the Self. With only a single string it pleased the ear with the purity of its sound, brought enjoyment to the player, and in some cases opened the way to enlightenment. "What is the sound of one string...?"

The instrument used in this performance bears the name "Seiran" (Mountain Mist). It was bequeathed to Isshi Yamada by her teacher Issui Yamashiro. Issui, who was designated an "intangible cultural asset" by the Japanese Government, composed for the Ichigenkin and taught it to a dozen students until her death, at 76, in May of 1963. She had handed down an art learned from her father, also an Ichigenkin composer and teacher. Her father, Taimu Tokuhiko, had studied the Ichigenkin in the Zen caves of Mt. Shirakawa in Kyoto.

The instrument itself is simply constructed. The Ichigenkin is about 3 feet 7 inches long--of solid wood and tapered. It is widest near the head (4 1/2 inches), tapering down to 3 1/4 inches. The wood for the modern Ichigenkin is usually kiri (Paulownia), although in the past sugi (Japan cedar) was sometimes used.

The single string of the Ichigenkin is tightened by a peg at the slimmer end. Twelve tone indicators, usually of ivory or mother-of-pearl, are inlaid on the surface of the instrument. They tell the player where to press with the ivory-tipped middle finger of the left hand while plucking the string with the index finger of the right hand, similarly extended by a hollow ivory cylinder.

The Ichigenkin tones indicated by the inlays parallel those of the Japanese Sho (13-stringed lyre). The Ichigenkin, therefore, lends itself to accompaniment by the Sho and Shakuhachi (bamboo flute). But usually it is played and enjoyed with nothing accompanying it except the sung lyrics.

In Isaribi Isshi Yamada is accompanied by Fuzan Sato on the Shakuhachi. Mr. Sato, who studied with Heizan Mikami of the Tozan school, is teaching the Shakuhachi in Honolulu and frequently appears on local radio and TV programs. A native of Hiigata prefecture in Japan, he was born in 1892 and went to Hawaii in 1909.

Isshi Yamada is a relative newcomer to the United States, having arrived in Honolulu from Tokyo in December of 1965. Born in central Tokyo, she began her study of Japanese music at the age of six, with nagauta, known to many as the "heart of Kabuki music." Her interest in the Ichigenkin developed rather recently, in 1958, and she received the professional name of Isshi in 1963. She played the Ichigenkin when Botan, a modern composition, was choreographed and presented by dancer Kimiko Azuma at the Shimbashi Embujo and the Kabukiza. Isshi has also appeared frequently at these celebrated Tokyo theaters in two better known forms of Japanese music--katobushi and ogiebushi--under her other professional names of Chieko Yamahiko and Chie Ogie. In 1962 she contributed to one of the major Kabuki events of the century, helping to teach and performing with the katobushi players who provided the musical accompaniment to Sukeroku on the occasion of Ebizo's succeeding to the name Danjuro XI. Katobushi music has traditionally been associated with Sukeroku, one of the 18 Grand Kabuki Plays, and with the illustrious name Danjuro, which until 1962 had been absent from the Kabuki stage for 60 years.

As for the Ichigenkin pieces in this album, not much is authoritatively known about their background. Most of the numbers were composed between the middle of the Tokugawa period and its end.

The first number, Suga no Kyoku, is typical of Ichigenkin music. It is a short piece with a rhythmical introduction--usually played by several Ichigenkin. Oshi features the unaccompanied voice after the introduction, recalling the singing style associated with the Biwa, an instrument similar to the Western lute. Haru no Shirabe stems from the music of the 13-stringed Sho; it expresses, with detached serenity, the recurring freshness of spring.

Isaribi is one of the masterpieces of Ichigenkin music. Meaning "Fishing Fire," it derives from an ancient Japanese poem by Kakinomoto Hitomaro in the Manyoshu, an anthology reflecting Japanese life in the 7th and 8th centuries. Isaribi elaborates on the original verse and emphasizes the experience of sudden enlightenment. Botan, was composed by Issui Yamashiro in 1962, around Saien Hanazaki's translation of a Sung poem.

Side A - Band 1

SUGA NO KYOKU (MUSIC OF SUGA)

What lasting pleasure--
To play music of Suga.

Band 2

ISARIBI (FISHING FIRE)

The waves lingering about the fish-weir stakes
In the River Uji
Can be heard so clearly.

The murky fires on fishing boats
Draw nearer to shore
With the approach of dawn.

From the Byodo temple
The bell tolls--
Awakening us from a delusive dream.

Band 2

HARU NO SHIRABE (SPRING SONG)

The song of birds and flowers blooming
Betoken spring.

The nightingale in the plum tree--
I first heard its cry a day or two ago.

How beautiful the cherry blossoms
As the spring mist fades!

Though growing longer,
The days of spring never pall.

The dusk, too, is wondrous soft
With the hazy moon arising.

As I doze, who plays the koto
So near my pillow?

The waves coming and going on the Suma
shore:
What joys the springtime brings!

BAND 3

OSHI (MANDARIN DUCKS)

Awakening in the chill of night,
I hear the cries of mandarin ducks.

How can they shake the frost from their wings--
In this cold?

Side B - Band 1

BOTAN (PEONY)

The robe with the phoenix- gold brocade is
hanging still
And in the garden the peony blooms,
Still wet with last night's rain.

Sitting before her mirror,
She sees again her fresh loveliness--
With her hair rising gently over her
fragile face.

Now, going out to the bridge
And leaning over the rail,
She finds herself overcome with longing.

Green are the willows under the bridge,
But will her yearning bring him back again?
While above the banks the swallows fly.