

SAKURA

A MUSICAL CELEBRATION *of the* CHERRY BLOSSOMS



友々青々外



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

The harmony between humanity and nature constitutes an ideal state in Japanese music. In spring, the beautiful but short-lived *sakura* (flowering cherry tree) — Japan's most celebrated plant whose blossom is the national flower — powerfully symbolizes the transient splendor of human life. Each year, in Washington, D.C., thousands of

visitors savor the beauty of the cherry blossoms which have come to represent the Friendship between the people of the United States and Japan. Featuring traditional Japanese folk songs, classical instruments, and live ensemble performances, this recording honors the musical gifts that were brought to the United States from Japan.



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|---|--|
| 1. Sakura
3:09 | 6. The Song of Rice-Husking
..... 3:53 |
| 2. Yasugi Bushi (Song of Yasugi)
5:00 | 7. Songs of the Stonemason
..... 2:46 |
| 3. Asadoya Yunta of Okinawa
1:57 | 8. Soran Bushi (Soran Song)
..... 2:46 |
| 4. Hachigaeshi (Returning the Bowl)
5:44 | 9. Rokudan No Shirabe (Music of Six Steps)
..... 5:36 |
| 5. Akita Nitaka Bushi
4:56 | 10. Yuudachi (Evening Rainstorm)
..... 11:12 |



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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IN THE JAPANESE MUSIC AESTHETIC,

harmony between humanity and the natural environment is an ideal philosophical state. The yearning for the connection between nature and worldly affairs, and the need to sustain and celebrate that connection, in part explains why this music is so intimately tied to the year's seasons. Japan's celebrated *sakura*, the beautiful but short-lived plant and national flower that graces the earth in spring, is a powerful symbol of the transient splendor of human life. To the Japanese, spring thus conjures up a mixture of festivity and melancholy, as is reflected in the season's music.

It has been a challenging task to preserve Japanese traditional music, but today,

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just as thousands of visitors delight in the beauty of the cherry blossoms at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., each year, folk and traditional music remains a vital part of Japanese culture in America. Transplanting and reinterpreting non-Western culture within a Western setting can be both a rewarding and complex experience. Through various cultural channels, Japanese traditional music survives, takes new root here, and never ceases to bring beauty and meaning to listeners.

The music on this compact disc, selected with the purpose of introducing this art form to people of all backgrounds, features classical instrumental repertoire, folk songs, and live recordings from Smithsonian Folklife events.



1. Sakura

Kyoko Okamoto, *koto*

The folk tune "Sakura" is so popular that almost every Japanese person can sing or hum it. This particular *koto* version was arranged by Kozaburo Y. Hirai in 1947. The *koto* is a long zither with movable bridges and thirteen strings that are plucked with finger plectrums. Traditionally, the *koto* has been played by blind musicians and upper-class females as part of their cultural education. Ever since "Sakura" was included in a music textbook for elementary schools in 1888 and sung with the *koto*, it has become greatly popular and been widely performed. In its vocal version, the song text is as follows:

*Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms / All around / So bright in the March sky
/ Like a mist of floating cloud / Filling the air with fragrance / Oh come,
oh come / Let us come to see the cherry blossoms.*

2. Yasugi Bushi (Song of Yasugi)

Unknown artists (from Folkways 4534)

Minyo, a term adopted in the 1890s, loosely refers to the general category of Japanese traditional folk songs. Despite rapid modernization, *minyo* still plays a significant role in the emotional and musical experience of the Japanese people. The saying "Folk song is the heart's home town" reflects the way *minyo* expresses nostalgia, especially among the elderly, for a rural and pre-industrialized Japan. In modern times, the performance of folk songs has become largely professional and

institutional. With increasing urbanization and the expansion of modern transport, folk songs began to migrate; thus, many songs written after the late 19th century retained their geographical origin in the song titles, as this number illustrates.

"Yasugi Bushi" are the songs sung in the region surrounding Yasugi Port in Izumo (Shimane Prefecture). They were originally performed in an entertainment setting for boatmen from the seaports on the Japan Sea during the latter part of the Edo Era, from about 1830 to 1844. Although Yasugi Port declined in importance after the inauguration of the railway, it enjoyed great wealth for many years; situated along the main highway of the Sanin District, it bustled with activity as merchants and sailors crowded the streets of the town. The words "a thousand houses in a row" are a testimony to this seaport's glorious past.

*To take away what is famed in Izumo will never make a load / Before you
leave, just listen to the songs of Yasugi.*

*In that dear province of mine / How proud they are of the shrine of Izumo
/ And the songs of Yasugi.*

*Yasugi is known over the country for a thousand houses in a row /
Shanichi cherry blossoms bloom / And the Mount of Tokami afar.*

3. Asadoya Yunta of Okinawa

Unknown artists (from Folkways 4534)

"Asadoya Yunta" is a popular folk song that originated on the Taketomi Island of Okinawa, where folk music is entirely vocal and deeply rooted in the ancient traditions of oral literature. This song tells the story of a beautiful lady, Asadoya nu Kuyama, who courageously rejected a wedding proposal from a government official. In the language of the natives, the word *yunta* means "ballad."

*You are the wild rose / Blooming in the field. /
You take hold of me / Going home at sundown.*

*Partly glad and partly ashamed am I /
For an ill fame you give rise to. / You are the white lily /
Far above my reach.*

*If you do weeding / Do it on the full-moon night /
For there'll be you and I / And nobody else there'll be.*

*I will dye for you / The blue wedding garment /
To tuck your sleeves / Put on cords of compassion for me.*

Hachigaeshi (Returning the Bowl)

Riley Kelly Lee, *shakuhachi* (from Folkways 4229)

Shakuhachi, the popular end-blown five-hole bamboo flute, was introduced to Japan from China in the 8th century. Made from the bottom part of a bamboo tree, the *shakuhachi* takes its name from the standard length of its basic form: one foot (*shaku*) and eight-tenths (*hachi*) of a foot, i.e., 1.8 *shaku*, approximately 54.5 cm. This piece is the last of three Nezasa-ha (Bamboo Grass Sect) compositions that were played by the Komuso, itinerant Buddhist priests of the Fuke sect who used the *shakuhachi* for meditation and in begging for alms during the Middle Ages (13th-16th centuries). Usually the alms would be a bowl of uncooked rice, and instead of bowing in gratitude, the priest would play "Hachigaeshi" to acknowledge both the food and the donor's willingness to give.

Akita Nitaka Bushi (Akita Nitaka Song)

Sanae Yabumuki, vocal; Umewaka Asano, *shamisen*

"Akita Nitaka Bushi" is a festivity song originating from the Niigata Prefecture that eventually reached Akita, where Umewaka Asano, the featured artist on this track, combined this free-rhythm song with fast-paced, virtuosic *shamisen* accompaniment. The *shamisen* is a three-stringed lute played with a hand-held plectrum. Brought to Japan from China and Okinawa during the mid-16th century, it quickly became a popular musical instrument heard in a vast variety of musical genres, including singing (*utamono*), narrative (*katarimono*), and

folk (minyo) styles. This is a live performance from the Japan program at the 1986 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

*In Niigata's Yamamachi / The old granny flower seller doesn't sell flowers /
She sells oil. The cherry tree at the manor on the high mountains /
Its seven branches bloom eight-fold.*

6. The Song of Rice-Husking

Unknown artists (from Folkways 4534)

This folk song is from the Yamagata Prefecture, a northeastern province.

*Run, run, run the mortar /
As it runs, the bags of rice are piled up higher /
In the shape of a chrysanthemum.*

*Not even a single grain of rice should be wasted /
For it takes eighty-eight processes to make it good to eat.*

*This is a bumper year / The rice ears are well developed /
In the storehouse behind the house / There is a mountain of rice.*

*One thousand bags of rice / For Daikoku the god of fortune /
And a big festival for us all.*

Songs of the Stonemason 7.

Unknown artists (from Folkways 4534)

Work songs involving different kinds of labor represent the most widespread and diverse category of Japanese folk music. On this track, the constant stone pounding is to help coordinate the rhythm of the stonemason's work. Kitaki Isle in the Okayama Prefecture is a large stone field commanding a beautiful view of Seto Naikai (the Inland Sea).

*What is famed at Kitaki Isle / The well-known stone field /
Is the song of the stonemason / Which I'll sing for your sake.*

*Morning stars in the morning / Night stars in the evening /
And always the beating sound of the hammer /
Comes from the stonemason's shed.*

*A big ship in the distance / May be moored by its anchor /
Try as you can / You can't stop the loving heart.*

*From here to Shiraishi the isle / A distance may be spanned by an oar /
But why does not my thought reach you?*

8. Soran Bushi (Soran Song)

Unknown artists (from Folkways 4534)

This is a popular folk song from Hokkaido, an island north of the Japanese archipelago. *Soran* was originally a style of time-marking shouting used while pulling up herring nets from the sea, and the title reflects these rhythms in the song.

*Yaren soran, soran, soran, soran / Hear the songs of sea gulls /
Over the ocean waves / And you can't give up / Life upon the sea.*

*Yoichi is a goodly town / You've got to visit once at least /
For the golden waves / Are seen upon the sea.*

*If the sea gulls in the distance / Were to speak as we do / Your message
I would hear from them / Or the message I would send to you.*

9. Rokudan No Shirabe (Music of Six Steps)

Shinichi Yuize, *koto* (from Cook 1132)

This is a classic *koto* piece composed in the 17th century by Kengyo Yatsuhashi, an epic figure in *koto* music history who created a popular new style for the instrument. The piece forms part of the early solo *koto* tradition, a departure from its previous role as an accompanying instrument for voice. Various adaptations of the original melody for different instruments by later composers reflect the popularity of the original composition. This piece is often played on the *shamisen* and as a *koto* duet.

Yuudachi (Evening Rainstorm)

10.

Taiko ensemble: Soh Daiko

Taiko is the Japanese word for drum. The history of *taiko* music can be traced back to ancient times, when it was used to perform ritual functions such as driving away evil spirits or expressing gratitude for a rich harvest. Today, there are several *taiko* ensembles in North America, and *taiko* is primarily played at festivals and concerts. The group featured on this track is Soh Daiko, a New York-based ensemble formed in 1979 under the guidance of the New York Buddhist Church. Composed by Sandy Ikeda in 1984, "Yuudachi" vividly portrays the passing of a sudden summer evening storm; in ancient times, it was believed that simulating the sound of thunder would invoke the spirit of rain. This is a live recording from the Smithsonian's 150th birthday party on the National Mall, Washington, D.C., in 1996.

CREDITS

Compiled and annotated by Shu-Ni Tsou | Compilation mastered and track 1 recorded by Pete Reiniger | Production supervised by Daniel Sheehy and D. A. Sonneborn | Production coordinated by Pete Reiniger | Editorial assistance by Carla Borden | Design and layout by Caroline Brownell

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