



the universal flute
ralph samuelson
shakuhachi

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THE UNIVERSAL FLUTE:
DISCOVERY IN A SINGLE TONE
(MOSTLY) AMERICAN MUSIC FOR SHAKUHACHI



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The Shakuhachi Life

I first met and heard the shakuhachi in 1969, when I began graduate studies in music at Wesleyan University. Kodō Araki V was a visiting teacher there, and I was a flutist attracted to world flute traditions. I started to take shakuhachi lessons simply as a way to explore something new, but gradually was drawn into the special tone and reverberation of this unique instrument. In 1971 I traveled to Tokyo to begin studies with Goro Yamaguchi, and I was immediately lost in his sound. All other musical interests fell away.

The shakuhachi life can be a lonely life, a challenging life, not for the faint of heart. The instrument is so attuned to your body and mind, and to the natural atmosphere, that it responds differently every time you blow — each day, the bamboo and I start anew. The sound can be unpredictable, and for even the most accomplished players, moments of graceful ease are rare and precious. But the shakuhachi can tell us much about ourselves, our universe, and the eternal question of born-live-die. The shakuhachi is tricky, personal, free, and open, and offers a very special expression in any kind of musical setting. Players of old followed the path of *ichion-jōbutsu*, enlightenment in a single tone, and the great 20th century American composer Henry Cowell understood the shakuhachi as “The Universal Flute.” His appreciation of the instrument is the inspiration for this album.

In the mid-1990s I began to suffer from a repetitive strain hand injury that ultimately compelled me to stop playing the shakuhachi for a period of four years. During that time my life was out of balance and disturbed, but recovery began after I realized that I would be fine if I never played the shakuhachi again. Although I won't return to full hand capacity, I have learned to accept my limitations and am grateful for each tone, each resonance. This has been my shakuhachi journey.

Exploring the music of American composers engaging with the shakuhachi, I have found that the music they are creating adds a whole new dimension to the life of the instrument, and to my life. I am honored to offer some of their especially moving works in this recording.

— *Ralph Samuelson*

The Instrument

The shakuhachi, the vertical bamboo flute of Japan, has a notched mouthpiece and five finger holes. It takes its name from the standard length of the instrument in traditional Japanese measuring units, one *shaku* eight (*hachi*) *sun*. This deceptively simple bamboo flute is capable of profound expression, akin to the human voice.

The shakuhachi came to prominence in the 17th and 18th centuries when it was taken up by a sect of Zen Buddhist monks who used shakuhachi blowing as a core spiritual practice. Out of this practice, a rich body of solo music developed, focusing on breath as the central element in meditation and in life itself, and on the universe that exists within each individual tone. This music has been transmitted through the centuries in several lineages or schools, each with its own repertoire and playing style. From the 19th century shakuhachi players also perform secular chamber music in ensemble with the koto (zither), shamisen (lute), and voice.

As one of the most distinctive instruments in Japan, the shakuhachi has always adapted to new influences and has always caught the attention of musical innovators. In the early 20th century, much new music for the shakuhachi was created in Japan under the influence of European music, and following World War II Japanese composers steeped in an international idiom often saw the shakuhachi as a path into a more personal voice.

Something remarkable happened to the shakuhachi in the latter 20th century, as more composers and performers outside of Japan were attracted to its spiritual depth and beauty and to certain aspects of its music that reflect contemporary concerns — rich varieties of tone color, microtonal pitch inflections, subtleties of ornamentation and playing technique, and an expanded sense of rhythm and time. Today the shakuhachi can no longer be defined simply as an instrument associated with a particular place and time, but indeed has become an integral part of our globalized musical world.

The Pieces

The Universal Flute Henry Cowell, 1946

The pioneering American composer Henry Cowell (1897- 1965) was affected by Asian music as far back as his childhood years in San Francisco. In Los Angeles in the 1920s, he met the accomplished shakuhachi player Kitaro Tamada, an immigrant musician from Japan. Cowell began shakuhachi studies with Tamada and continued for a number of years. In 1946 he composed this beautiful short piece for his teacher, the first known work for the instrument by a non-Japanese composer.

Shikyoku Ichiban (Poème 1) Teizo Matsumura, 1969

This piece for shakuhachi and koto, Matsumura's first for traditional Japanese instruments, was composed for the Matsushita Pavilion — constructed of bamboo — at the 1970 Osaka World Exposition. It was premiered at the Expo by the virtuoso musicians Reibō Aoki and Keiko Nosaka and beautifully captures the essence of traditional music within a contemporary yet timeless framework.

This work, along with Tōru Takemitsu's *November Steps* and several others, is considered a seminal composition that set the stage for many works to follow — guide-stars for composers inside and out of Japan who have an interest in shakuhachi.

Hi Kaeshi Hachi Mi Fu Richard Teitelbaum, 1974

While studying the Kinko Ryū shakuhachi, the composer noted that a vocabulary of standard melodic phrases appears regularly throughout different pieces in the repertoire, yet each piece has its individual integrity and identity. This work was composed with the aid of the *I Ching*, taking the classic piece *Hi Fu Mi Hachi Kaeshi* and recombining the phrases using chance operations. The new title was derived similarly. The piece maintains some of the character of the original while taking on a new quality of its own.

Three Songs of Shide Bun-Ching Lam, 2014

Shide was a revered Tang Dynasty poet-monk who, along with his colleague Hanshan, traveled the countryside in 9th century China. The pair is also widely admired in Japan, where Shide is known as

Jittoku, and in modern times they were lauded by the American Beat poets of the 1950s and 60s. Early in 2014, Lam composed a piece for chorus and piano using a set of Shide's poems. Later that year she created this work for Ralph and Tomoko inspired by some of the same musical and textual materials, always trying to retain the poetry's conciseness and simplicity. The poems inspiring the piece's three movements are (translations by the composer):

Not going or coming, rooted and still
pay no heed to inside, outside or the center
a drop of crystal devoid of any flaws
whose brilliance shines through heaven and earth

Far far away the mountain path is steep
thousands of feet up, the pass is treacherous
and narrow
stone bridge is covered with green moss
and berries
once in a while a sliver of cloud flies by
cascade hangs like white silk
shadow of the moon reflects on the bright pool
climbing once more to the flowering peak
I still await the coming of the solitary crane

Mountains in the cloud, fold upon fold,
in thousands of layers
secluded valley, remote paths, no trace of humans
jade stream, clear flows, so many beautiful scenes
from time to time, the birds whisper to my
heart's delight

Afterimage
Elizabeth Brown, 2011

This work was composed for Ralph and Yoko. The composer writes: "I started writing it in the Grand Canyon, where I was April 2011 Artist in Residence. The title refers to a moment when I was walking along the south rim, and suddenly had a clear afterimage of the scene I had just passed; I immediately wrote it down in music so I wouldn't forget it.....The shakuhachi writing is expressive but calm, almost beyond emotion. The role of the shamisen is more complicated emotionally: the player is given the challenge of respecting and fitting inside tradition, while simultaneously bursting to have her individual voice heard. She represents all my anxieties, and her textless singing is an extension of the shakuhachi's sound. So the two players express what I aspire to, and what I am in spite of it."

Reprise: The Universal Flute
Duo for two bamboo flutes

This shakuhachi and bansuri duet of Henry Cowell's *The Universal Flute* (see track 1) was arranged by Ralph Samuelson.

The Composers

Elizabeth Brown combines a composing career with an extremely diverse performing life, playing flute, shakuhachi, and theremin in a wide variety of musical circles. Her award-winning chamber music, shaped by this unique group of instruments and experiences, has been called luminous, dream-like, and hallucinatory.

www.elizabethbrowncomposer.com

Henry Cowell (1897-1965) was one of the most important figures in 20th century American music. His groundbreaking compositional techniques such as the tone cluster, string piano, and complex pitch-rhythm system influenced much of contemporary music to follow. Of equal significance, his interest in and study of the musics of Asia anticipated and encouraged the direction of many composers of our own time.

www.henrycowell.org

Bun-Ching Lam, born in Macao, is a distinguished composer, conductor, and pianist active across the world. Based in Paris and upstate New York, her compositions have received numerous international awards, and she also serves as resident composer of the Macao Orchestra.

www.bunchinglam.com

Teizo Matsumura (1929-2007), one of Japan's most prominent composers, was the recipient of many accolades for his works, including a 1974 UNESCO prize and the 1978 Suntory Music Award. His 1993 opera *Chinmoku (Silence)*, based on the acclaimed novel of Shūsaku Endō, may well be his best-known work, and his large output of chamber music, orchestral pieces, and film scores is widely admired in Japan. Matsumura was also a prolific haiku poet and a distinguished professor of composition at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music.

Richard Teitelbaum is well known for his trailblazing work in live electronic music, his pioneering use of the Moog synthesizer in composition and performance, and his early and ongoing explorations of intercultural improvisation and composition. Following the era of Cowell, he was one of the first American composers to engage in serious study of the shakuhachi. He is Professor of Music at Bard College.

www.inside.bard.edu/teitelbaum

The Performers

Ralph Samuelson is among the first generation of non-Japanese musicians to achieve professional recognition in the world of *hōgaku*, traditional Japanese music. He was trained in the classical tradition of the Kinko School of shakuhachi by the late Living National Treasure Goro Yamaguchi as well as by Shūdō Yamato and Kodō Araki V in Japan and at Wesleyan University, where he pursued graduate studies in ethnomusicology. He performs traditional and contemporary music throughout the US, Asia, and Europe and has recorded for CBS Masterworks, Lyrichord, Tzadik, XI Records, and others. He was the shakuhachi soloist in the New York City Ballet production of Jerome Robbins' "Watermill" with music by Teiji Ito and has been an artist in residence at the Lou Harrison House in Joshua Tree, California. He is also senior advisor and former director of the Asian Cultural Council in New York and advisor at the Seoul Institute of the Arts in Korea.

Steve Gorn (track 6) is a virtuoso performer of the bansuri, the bamboo flute of North India. A Grammy winner and acclaimed performer of Hindustani classical music, he is also a leading artist in the arena of contemporary world music performing bamboo flute, soprano saxophone, and clarinet in concerts and festivals throughout the world. www.stevegorn.com

Yoko Hiraoka (tracks 2, 5) is a master performer of the koto (13-string zither), shamisen (3-string lute), biwa (4 or 5-string fretted lute), and voice. An authoritative exponent and teacher of the traditional music of Japan, she is also an active interpreter of the contemporary repertoire for her instruments. www.japanesestrings.com

Tomoko Sugawara (track 4) is a rare performer of the vertical angular harp known in Japan as kugo. The kugo originated in Mesopotamia as early as 1900 BC and eventually moved along the Silk Road as far east as Japan where, however, it disappeared by 1000 AD. She is leading efforts to revive the instrument in Asian and international contexts and is also an active performer of concert harp, Baroque triple harp, and others. www.kugoharp.com



Recording

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