

A summer of shakuhachi music: London and Prague 2011 by Joe Browning

Anyone who has attended a shakuhachi summer event in Europe will know that such events can feel like an unexpected and intense exposure to the instrument and its music. Of course today it's possible to immerse yourself in shakuhachi recordings, but these summer events are a feast of live music, learning and interaction with other players. For some of us this is in stark contrast to the more limited diet of individual practice, enlivened by occasional lessons with a teacher, which make up the majority of our time with the instrument.

This article presents a personal account of two events from the past summer – the ESS summer school in London and the Prague Shakuhachi Festival. By the end of both events this immersion, even overload, could be read on participants' faces – sleep-deprived, dizzy with the constant sound of shakuhachi, but somehow glad to be doing this all the same.

Both events drew shakuhachi players from different schools across Europe and beyond. They featured classes on music in an incredible range of styles and genres, some of which are described below. Both summer events had a more cerebral side, with stimulating lectures re-examining aspects of shakuhachi tradition and history (Gunnar Linder and Justin Williams), on reading notation (Sakai Shōdō), playing North Indian classical music on shakuhachi (Philip Horan), and the shakuhachi in electroacoustic composition (Mike McInerney). And both included valuable classes on awareness and relaxation (Christopher Blasdel in Prague and Daniel Liferman in London). The London summer school also had a practical side in the form of two shakuhachi making workshops taught by Chiku Za, with expert assistance from European makers José Vargas and Philip Horan. I could write a separate article on all that was enjoyable and informative in these workshops – an extremely rare opportunity in Europe.

All this was made possible by the high quality, energy and commitment of teachers and event organisers. Kiku Day and Michael Coxall lead the way in London; Marek Matvija, Vlastislav Matoušek and Christopher Blasdel were crucial in Prague; but of course large teams of people were essential in making both events a success. It would be impossible to describe all that went on in these summer events, so here I've focused on the many concerts. Rather than treating the concerts in Prague and London separately, I've tried to weave them together. What follows is a series of brief interlinked sketches, grouped around particular pieces or themes, which hopefully will convey at least a fraction of the diversity and richness that characterised both meetings.

Sōkyoku-jiuta

Both the London and Prague events included several pieces from the repertoire for koto, shamisen and shakuhachi. Shin Musume Dojoji, Aki no Kyoku and Chidori no Kyoku featured Michael Coxall, Christopher Blasdel and Gunnar Linder on shakuhachi respectively. While much could be said about the different performances, I was struck by the audible fact that these three players shared a teacher in

the late Living National Treasure, Yamaguchi Gorō. While each had their own distinct character, this brought a remarkable connectedness to the various performances. Perhaps it is my imagination but these three players seem to share much, even in their embouchure and way of holding the flute; certainly they share a refinement and purity of sound. This gracefulness belies the considerable powers of endurance and musicality needed for playing sankyoku. And of course in all this the shakuhachi plays only a supporting role - the koto, shamisen and voice are key. Kitamura Keiko and Onishi Masako in London and Kuroyanagi Minako in Prague brought an important dimension to these events, both through their teaching and many impressive performances in a variety of genres.

Tsuru no Sugomori

Prague

Gunnar Jinmei Linder's performance of Sōkaku Reibo was a masterful rendition of the 'crane piece' of the Kinko repertoire. Perhaps more so than in other versions of Tsuru no Sugomori, the tension in this piece is between formal design and the liveliness that any 'crane piece' demands. The refinement of Gunnar's playing provided both structural clarity and crystal-clear execution of the many dancing, bubbling ornaments.

London

For the second London concert, Véronique Piron and Horacio Curti devised an unusual two-part version of Tsuru no Sugomori. Horacio's powerful, metallic sound opened the performance with repetitions of *otsu no ro*; Véronique's intensely musical playing brought the piece to a close; and both dealt expertly with the piece's mix of melodic passages and unusual effects. In between, what made this performance particularly special was the moment when Véronique joined Horacio centre stage to play the freer middle-section of the piece. One performance would have been complex enough, what with the trills, *glissandi*, flutter-tonguing and various other extended techniques, but two simultaneous renditions made for an extremely exciting performance, full of very mobile sounds overlapping, diverging and re-connecting.

Prague

Given that Sakai Shōdō has released a CD titled "Five Metamorphoses of Nesting Cranes," his Prague performance of Tsuru no Sugomori was clearly not to be missed. His extremely dynamic playing style was well suited to this unusually extended version which seems to spend longer investigating each section of the piece. With wild shifts in volume, fluid pitch bends, extremely long passages of flutter-tonguing – not to mention a performance style which engages the whole body – Sakai Shōdō explored the huge range of possibilities that this piece allows. His performance reminds us how much this piece shares with and has influenced contemporary repertoire for the shakuhachi. Indeed, the dynamism of Sakai Shōdō's playing, and that of his assistants Nakamatsu Kaiho and Sano Yachiho, meant that all their performances, even of honkyoku, fitted well with the Prague festival's emphasis on new music.

New Music

Prague

The Prague Shakuhachi Festival showcased a variety of contemporary music by composers inside and outside Japan, from live electronics to audiovisual projects and avant-garde chamber works, as well as an unusual amount of improvised music. Such an abundance of new compositions and genres is marking this festival as a major gathering-point for composers, performers and students of contemporary shakuhachi music. Two concerts devoted almost entirely to contemporary music saw the shakuhachi in a range of contexts and joined by many different instruments. Steve Cohn's inventive improvisations on shakuhachi, piano, mouth organ and other instruments were matched with spontaneity and flair by George Cremaschi on bass and Liz Albee on trumpet. Vlastislav Matoušek's piece for shakuhachi and string quartet blended bowed string and woodwind sounds to luminous effect, and this ensemble was augmented by two female voices, bass, trumpet, piano and other instruments to give compellingly odd instrumental textures in John Cage's Variations No. 1. Among the more remarkable instruments to join the shakuhachi on-stage was the theremin, an early electronic instrument played by moving the hands in relation to – but without touching – two metal antennas. Jim Franklin's *Songs from the Lake #2*, for shakuhachi, theremin and live electronics is remarkable as a feat of performance because both shakuhachi and theremin are played simultaneously by a solo performer. The piece also proved deeply melodic and finely textured, with something of the musical flow that Jim Franklin also brought to his performance of the honkyoku Takiochi (“Waterfall falling”) in a later concert. Another outstanding example of a piece which bridged the divide between contemporary compositions and more traditional shakuhachi genres was Christopher Blasdel's performance of *Byoh*. Occupying a thoroughly modern sound-world, this shakuhachi solo, composed by Hirose Ryōhei in 1972, nonetheless shares something of the spirit of honkyoku. Moving to a different area of the stage for each section of the piece, Christopher Yohmei Blasdel combined extreme sensitivity with dramatic flourishes, integrating the piece's contrasting moods with a refined sense of timing and tone. Finally, it would be impossible not to mention *Attracted by Light*, a collaboration between Slavek Kwi and Vlastislav Matoušek, which brought improvisatory shakuhachi alongside a dizzying array of sound sources, from pre-recorded sounds of fish, bees, trains and termites, to live-processed underwater noises and the rushing sound of enormous sound-flags waved over the audience amid strobing lights. This last piece had to be heard to be believed.

London

Demachi Hazuki brought a very different kind of new music to the London summer school with classes and performances of enka, a genre of Japanese popular music which shares some characteristics and themes with traditional genres. The sweet tone and understated, highly musical style of her shakuhachi playing – often with pre-recorded accompaniments on strings and synthesizer – brought much valued lightness and emotion in what was the first, but hopefully not the last, appearance of enka in an ESS event.

New (Old) Music



London



A highlight of this summer school was the focus on min'yō, Japanese folk song. Like enka, min'yō shakuhachi has very rarely been taught or performed in Europe, despite the fact that in Japan, min'yō is the most popular genre of shakuhachi playing. So this music was new in that it had never before been represented at an ESS summer school. European players were introduced to this genre by a team including professional shakuhachi player Endō Yoshihiro, former professional min'yō singer Yoshie Asano-Campbell, scholar and

performer Dr David Hughes, singer Sylvia Woolridge and shakuhachi player Chris Mau. Expert and enthusiastic ambassadors for this music, they brought the first London concert to a wonderful close with a min'yō medley. The performances were a pleasure to see and hear: Yoshie Asano-Campbell's powerful and captivating voice filled the room, the ornamented lines of Endō Yoshihiro's shakuhachi curling around the sung melody, all with lively accompaniments and interjections on drum, shamisen and voice. David Hughes' explanations and translations gave further life to these sometimes nostalgic, sometimes erotic songs. What better contrast and compliment to the often formal and austere sounds and styles of other genres.

Prague

The Prague meeting also brought music to Europe for the first time when Justin Senryu Williams played Myoan Shimpo-ryū Sou Mukaiji, a piece which he explained had probably never been performed in Europe before. Sou Mukaiji is a fascinating and subtle piece, strange to some listeners because of the unusually high pitch of certain *meri* notes. This was an exquisite performance, largely delicate but with a strength of tone emerging where necessary. The word 'peaceful' is possibly overused in describing shakuhachi music, but deserved in this case.

Koku

Prague

The performance of Koku by Vlastislav Matoušek, director of the Prague Shakuhachi Festival, could have turned out quite differently. Before playing, he explained that he had chosen to use a particularly old flute (I forget precisely how old, but an Edo-period shakuhachi), one which he greatly valued for its character and history, but which was challenging and unstable when played. In different hands, a performance on this flute might have sounded like a struggle, but instead this was a distinctive interpretation, full of rough, wind-like sounds and long tones rich with harmonics. As the piece progressed, Vlastislav Matoušek shaped a concentrated performance from these unpredictable sounds,

bringing it to a close with a few strikes to a hand-bell which hung from his wrist throughout the performance.

London

The performance of Koku by Chiku Za (aka Kodama Hiroyuki) counts among the highlights of my year in terms of listening to shakuhachi music. Although teaching shakuhachi making, not performance, at the London summer school, Chiku Za did play two honkyoku – Shingetsu and Koku – in the evening concerts, using an extremely long flute on both occasions. While clearly indebted to his teacher, Okuda Atsuya, Chiku Za has developed a very personal way of interpreting honkyoku. One compelling aspect was the physicality and intense concentration needed to uncover the potential of such a large instrument: this alone had me on the edge of my seat throughout the performance. But beyond this was the sound: an always purposeful tone at turns deep and ethereal; moments, perhaps in moving between the high and low registers, when it seemed a sound could be heard to physically travel along the body of the instrument; an extraordinary bell-like vibrato between the reiterations of the *tsu-re* figure which opens and reoccurs throughout the piece. But this hardly begins to describe what made this a most remarkable performance, in a summer of remarkable shakuhachi-related events.

