

The Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan

An informal, introductory essay and personal appraisal

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In this essay I wish to provide a brief introduction to the Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan (or KSK, International Shakuhachi Training Centre or Research Centre) and its music.

Information about the KSK may be found on its own website¹, but to the best of my knowledge a definitive study of the organisation has yet to be written. I base my comments here primarily on “insider knowledge” as a KSK teacher, on my own observations concerning the music, and on discussions with colleagues and fellow KSK teachers.

The KSK is a recent entrant into the list of shakuhachi schools and groupings. It was the brainchild of Yokoyama Katsuya, one of the most outstanding players of the 20th century, and reflects his thinking and the range of influences he absorbed during his career.

Born in 1934, Yokoyama’s first shakuhachi lessons as a youth were with his father, Yokoyama Ranpo, an accomplished performer who had trained in the Kinko school as well as studying with composer-performer Fukuda Rando (1906-76). These two musical influences became the formative basis of Yokoyama’s playing, and their legacy is reflected in the current musical orientation of the KSK. The musical area for which Yokoyama is best known, however, at least outside of Japan, is the specific repertoire and style of *honkyoku* now associated with the KSK. This manifested itself slightly later in Yokoyama’s development through an encounter with Zen-master and shakuhachi-player Watazumi Doso (also known as Watazumi Shuso, 1911-92), following which Yokoyama learned Watazumi Doso’s *honkyoku* repertoire and assimilated his concern with the spirituality of the shakuhachi.

It is a somewhat open question as to where Watazumi Doso obtained his repertoire. It is generally asserted that he lived as a monk in Itchoken temple, a Myoan temple on Kyūshū, and internalised the repertoire found there, as well as absorbing other pieces on journeys within Japan.² Eventually, he broke with Itchoken and went on to establish his own style, school and highly individual manner of playing. Yokoyama in turn absorbed this repertoire,

¹ [http:// www.shaku8.com/kenshukan](http://www.shaku8.com/kenshukan)

² Various entries on the website <http://komuso.com> (International Shakuhachi Society) with reference to Watazumi’s life and recordings mention his association with Itchoken temple.

and focussed on the musicality of performance as an integral aspect of the spirituality of the music, developing away from the brilliant idiosyncrasy of Watazumi's playing into a musically refined form which requires a high level of technique as well as a commitment to the spiritual dimensions of the music. This repertoire of *honkyoku* as 'filtered' or transmitted by Yokoyama has formed one of the mainstays of the KSK up to the present.

As a player in his thirties, Yokoyama became engaged with the performance of newly-composed music. He came to prominence in international as well as Japanese new music circles through the world premiere performance in New York in 1967 of *November Steps* by Takemitsu Tōru (1930-96), in which he played shakuhachi alongside biwa player Kinshi Tsuruta (1911-1995).³ This milestone is exemplary for Yokoyama's concern not only with music of the past (*honkyoku* and *sankyoku*) but also with the further development of the shakuhachi and its music through new composition.

As a player who travelled frequently outside of Japan, Yokoyama was responsible for exposing many non-Japanese to the instrument, some of whom wished not only to hear the shakuhachi, but also to play it. In the course of time, Yokoyama realized that there was an urgent need for a training process for non-Japanese as well as Japanese performers, with all players on an equal footing – something which he perceived as difficult to achieve under the strongly hierarchical, traditional Japanese *iemoto* guild system. This was partly in response to the observation that would-be players outside of Japan tended to be left to their own devices, resulting in a standard of playing below the potential either of the players or of the instrument in itself – a situation which he wished to rectify. As fate would have it, the availability of a teaching space with associated accommodation in the old school hall in the town of Bisei, situated in the mountains not too far from Yokoyama's home city of Okayama, enabled the commencement in 1988 of regular large-group training periods, frequently attended by non-Japanese players. Bisei thus became the home of the fledgling International Shakuhachi Training Centre, the KSK. This developed in the course of time to (in effect) a small but strong school grouped around Yokoyama, which has continued beyond his death in 2010. A major turning point, effectively marking the "arrival" of the KSK on the shakuhachi scene, was the first International Shakuhachi Festival in 1994 in Bisei, organized by the KSK. This was followed in 2002 by a further International Summit in Tokyo, organized by Yokoyama's

³ A modern recording, but nevertheless featuring Yokoyama and Kinshi together with the original conductor Seiji Ozawa, can be found on the CD *Takemitsu: November Steps; Eclipse; Viola Concerto (A String around Autumn)* (Philips 432 176-2, released in 1991).

senior students, among them Kakizakai Kaoru, Matama Kazushi and Furuya Teruo; at that event, following a series of strokes in the years before, Yokoyama was unable to play, but was guest of honour. Between these two events and in the years following the Tokyo summit, World Shakuhachi Festivals were held (Boulder, Colorado, 1998; New York, 2004; Sydney 2008; Kyoto 2012). An International Shakuhachi Forum was held again in Bisei in 2007. In particular in Boulder and Sydney, the KSK had a central role, and in Kyoto, a special KSK concert was held, commemorating the life and work of Yokoyama-*sensei*.

Yokoyama's musical interests and background led to a confluence of diverse areas in the repertoire of the KSK. Its core is found in the body of *honkyoku* which he learned and transmitted, sometimes referred to as *Chikushinkyoku* ("bamboo-heart pieces"; the name derives from one of the designations sometimes used for the KSK, *Chikushinkai*, "bamboo-heart association"). Amongst these *honkyoku* are also pieces derived from the Kinko repertoire, such as *Shika no Tōne*. A second major strand of the repertoire is the body of *sankyoku*, also borrowed from Kinko. In contrast to the usual Kinko training programme, however, in the KSK the *honkyoku* and *sankyoku* pieces are learned in parallel – at least in my experience.⁴

Apart from these 'traditional' repertoire elements, the pieces of Fukuda Rando represent a third strand within the KSK. I recall Yokoyama-*sensei*, in one of my first lessons with him, presenting me with an envelope containing the then current versions of the Rando scores and admonishing me to learn them – which, of course, I did. One of the most complex of these pieces, *Wadatsumi no irokono miya*⁵ for shakuhachi trio, has become more or less a standard work, making an appearance at most festivals or shakuhachi gatherings involving the KSK. Its technical fireworks, outside of a *honkyoku* context, makes clear the standard towards which KSK students are expected to strive – technical proficiency which should be applied to the *honkyoku* repertoire as well.

A fourth layer of repertoire is open-ended, in contrast to the fundamentally closed body of *honkyoku* and *sankyoku* pieces. During Yokoyama's formative years, Japanese composers

⁴ As part of my training in Japan, it was required that I work with *sankyoku*, but not as a precursor to working with *honkyoku*.

⁵ "Paradise in the Ocean", a reference to a painting of the same title by Rando's father, Aoki Shigeru (1882-1911). Rando was very moved by this painting, which his father painted in 1907, the year following Rando's birth. (Private e-mail from Kakizakai Kaoru, 30th July 2012; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shigeru_Aoki)

were seeking a voice and an identity in the space between Western concepts of new music and Japanese concepts of tradition and instrumentation. The works of Takemitsu Tōru are just one example of this compositional development. Yokoyama matured into this milieu, and furthered it. Not only did he himself compose for shakuhachi; he also encouraged students with a gift for composition to do so.⁶ The KSK has commissioned shakuhachi performer-composers in and outside of Japan such as Seki Ichiro and myself to write for the instrument, and has provided at various festivals, such as the International Shakuhachi Summit in 2002 and Forum in 2007, a platform for our efforts to be heard publicly.

The importance of composition in the conception of the KSK was underscored in discussions I had with senior KSK teachers Kakizakai Kaoru, Matama Kazushi and Furuya Teruo in Kyoto on June 4, 2012, during the 2012 World Shakuhachi Festival. They emphasised the fact that the tradition of the shakuhachi is not an immutable body of music. Instead, they embody Yokoyama's progressive attitude, that the tradition is a living entity and must rejuvenate itself perpetually through the development of new material which respects the old, without supplanting it or negating its significance.⁷ They also expressed a clear recognition of the fact that only a small proportion of newly-composed music for shakuhachi will survive the test of time to become part of the standard repertoire. This is nevertheless not a reason to reduce the amount of compositional activity for the shakuhachi; on the contrary, there must be much material composed, to ensure that a (probably small) number of repertoire-worthy pieces are created.⁸ In contrast with a Japan-centred attitude, these senior teachers see no principal difference in terms of quality between the work of composers (with an understanding of the instrument) in Japan and outside it. As a corollary, the KSK actively encourages non-Japanese composers to create new material for the shakuhachi as an important means to its further development.

One of Yokoyama's main concerns was the musicality of the pieces, particularly of the *honkyoku*, and this concern has become a prime directive within the KSK. While an intuitive

⁶ Yokoyama was overjoyed when, in my first lesson with him, I presented him with a CD containing a recording of my work *Heart* for shakuhachi and live electronics (*Anthology of Australian Music on Disc: CSM26: Electroacoustic Music*, Canberra School of Music, 1996). He said that for him, it represented a meeting-point of composition and spirituality, a confluence which he considered to be of central importance.

⁷ Concerning concepts of "tradition" and "transmission" of the music of the shakuhachi, cf. the doctoral dissertations by Gunnar Jinmei Linder (2012) and Riley Kelly Lee (1993).

⁸ This is, of course, true in all compositional musical cultures; of the collective compositional output of an era in any culture, only a small proportion becomes part of the established canon of works.

feeling for the pieces, a connection of the heart as it were, is a necessary prerequisite, this rapport must be learned and deepened, and cannot be divorced from technical proficiency. The latter in turn must be nurtured and practiced, and perpetually refined; simply playing from the heart is not enough. In discussions with me during the Kyoto World Festival in 2012, Kakizakai Kaoru recounted his experience with students who thought they had learned a piece adequately and wanted to change it deliberately to suit their perceptions, playing it in accordance with their own whims or “heart”. It is necessary, as a teacher, to encourage students to seek the depths of the pieces not in one’s own perceptions, but in accordance with what the (certified and experienced) teacher can transmit, letting the pieces come to fruition in their own way and time.

A chief element of technique, to which particular attention is paid within the KSK, is pitch. Firstly, the *kari* tones (in this case, the open-hole tones played in normal position) must be accurate, and this assumes a flute which is within itself accurately tuned.⁹ Secondly, Yokoyama always emphasised the importance of correct pitch of *meri* notes (notes played with the pitch shifted downwards), and in particular of what he called the “double *meri*”: for instance, that *tsu no dai meri* (*tsu* with two *meri* steps) must accurately reach the pitch of *ro*.¹⁰ Only with attention to such detail is it possible for the pieces to blossom fully at all levels – going beyond individual sounds to create phrases in which the cycle of timbres between *meri* and *kari* and the correspondences between tones of identical pitches but different timbre are clear, and from there, to delineate the overarching forms of the pieces. These forms are often highly refined structures, whose unfolding within the playing time of a piece is just as important to the meditative or spiritual depth of the pieces as the blowing of single note from the heart. Technical skill, learned over the course of years and perpetually deepened, is necessary to facilitate this detailed shaping of phrases and forms, and is thus integral to the spirituality of the pieces. So, students as well as teachers must continually strive to deepen their technical abilities with the instrument in parallel with and as a means towards the deepening of their spiritual connectedness with the music. Even at the height of his performing prowess, Yokoyama emphasised his own quest for improvement of his technique.

⁹ The tuning of a flute is a matter of the skill of the flute-maker, and within the KSK one notes a tendency away from self-made instruments, in which tuning is often questionable, and towards flutes from practiced, skilled makers. This is not to say that a performer cannot also be a skilled maker, but there is no a priori assumption that players will necessarily be able to make flutes of acceptable quality.

¹⁰ On a standard 1.8-*shaku* instrument, *tsu* has the pitch F, *tsu no meri* with one *meri* step has the pitch Eb, and *tsu no dai meri* and *ro* both sound as D.

Within the KSK, the *honkyoku* tend to be viewed as the peak of the music of the shakuhachi. In Kyoto in 2012, Kakizakai Kaoru and Furuya Teruo both stated to me that the *honkyoku* are pieces that engage with the most essential questions of humanity – life and death, and how one relates to these. It is here, in the confrontation with these questions, that the meditative or spiritual depth of this music emerges.

The *honkyoku* repertoire, however, is a form of music which goes beyond a ‘spiritual’ label, and beyond being Japanese. During a panel discussion at the International Shakuhachi Forum in Bisei in 2007, I made the observation that the *honkyoku* are not simply a music form from Japan, but a cultural treasure which belongs to the whole of humanity. (To my surprise, this remark earned a spontaneous round of applause from the listening audience.) It is within this context that the KSK becomes “international”. If one transmits a music which is viewed as a cultural treasure of all humanity, then it follows that one must make it possible for all humanity to participate in this music, either by hearing it, or by learning to play it. Of course, it is clear that not every member of the human race will feel a connectedness with the *honkyoku*, just as not every member of the human race feels a connectedness, for instance, with the body of Western classical music or North Indian classical music, to name just a couple of other cultural treasures. It is equally clear that not every person who feels an affinity with the music of the shakuhachi will actually have the wish or the talent to play it.

Yokoyama saw it as his mission to take the shakuhachi abroad, and he frequently performed and recorded outside of Japan. But he also viewed it as necessary to provide a pathway for non-Japanese to be able to receive training in shakuhachi at a high standard. This takes place on a number of levels. Firstly, the senior KSK teachers from Japan also frequently travel overseas, teaching at workshops, summer schools and so on. Secondly, following Yokoyama’s example, the teachers are open to accepting foreign students in Japan and facilitating the way for them without any form of discrimination or assumption that they will be unable to reach the standards of Japanese players. (In Kyoto in 2012, Furuya told me that he perceives no difference between good non-Japanese and Japanese players.) Thirdly, the training camps at Bisei and in other places provide the opportunity for Japanese and non-Japanese students to rub shoulders and learn from one another – in recognition of the fact that

the cultural transfer works in both directions, that the non-Japanese players are now contributing significantly to the development of the shakuhachi.¹¹

Fourthly, and highly significantly, an openness to non-Japanese players has also required a change in the structure of the school. Traditional Japanese guilds tend to be strongly vertically hierarchical, comprising an *iemoto* (head of the guild) at the top of the pyramid, many levels between beginners and teachers, and with formal recognition (certificates) of the transition between these levels. Within the KSK, this structure has become more democratic. Yokoyama occupied a clear place at the peak of the structure, but since his death the organisation is run more or less by a committee of senior teachers, with decisions taken more on a consensual than on an autocratic basis. Even during his lifetime, Yokoyama flattened the system of levels, particularly for teachers. He issued *shihan* (“Master”) licences to students he considered worthy, but almost without exception he did not issue *dai shihan* (“Grand Master”) certifications. His attitude was that there is really only good playing and bad playing.¹² The licences, with associated title, were only important for Yokoyama as a sign that the title bearer is certified as capable of transmitting the music faithfully and at a high standard. He considered the *shihan* licence issued by him as being perfectly adequate to signify this. In this way, the “Master” title, which tends to be almost mystically charged in Western perceptions, returns to its primary meaning of “exemplary teacher”, and the distinction between “Master” and “Grand Master” becomes meaningless. Yokoyama was also not concerned with performing names; virtually no-one (Japanese and non-Japanese alike) in the KSK has received an additional Japanese name. The very rare exceptions would appear to be cases in which Yokoyama perceived that the student (Japanese or non-Japanese), for whatever reason, had a personal need for a performing name, and thus went against his usual practice. But the giving of a name in itself was irrelevant for Yokoyama.¹³

It is significant that the KSK is also gradually becoming a decentralised organisation. Not surprisingly, the core remains in Japan. But there are numerous certified KSK teachers outside of Japan, who have studied directly with Yokoyama or (since his death) with senior KSK teachers such as Kakizakai Kaoru and Furuya Teruo. Thriving offshoots of the KSK can

¹¹ For further discussion of the shakuhachi in a transcultural context, cf. my article “Shakuhachi in Transition: a Transcultural Perspective”, in *Živá hudba 2011 (Journal of the Institute of Music Theory)*, AMU (Academy of Performing Arts), Prague 2011.

¹² In a personal e-mail to me on 29th July 2012, Kakizakai explained that Yokoyama made the distinction between “good music” and “not good music”.

¹³ Personal e-mail from Kakizakai Kaoru, 29th July 2012.

be found, for example, in mainland Europe, the USA and Australia, and the current generation of non-Japanese students has received its training primarily outside of Japan. The KSK attitude to this development is extremely positive. During the 2007 European Shakuhachi Summer School in France, Furuya and Kakizaki indicated to Véronique Piron and myself (the two Europe-based KSK teachers who organised the Summer School), that they view the shakuhachi as a migratory instrument: firstly from China via Korea to Japan, then after a long period of enrichment in Japan, to Europe, the Americas and Australia. Far from lamenting the loss of a putative “Japanese” quality, they greet with interest the new development, and the further enrichment of the music that this can bring.¹⁴ In discussions in Kyoto in 2012, they also indicated that there is a definite sense of reverse cultural transfer, that the playing of non-Japanese performers at the World Festival 2012 was a surprise and an inspiration to many of the Japanese participants. They anticipate that this perception, of there being good players outside of Japan, will have a subtle but significant effect on the players in Japan. Additionally, they encourage, in typical KSK fashion, the efforts of composer-performers outside of Japan to extend the repertoire of the music through new composition, while at the same time expressing the hope that new compositions will respect and integrate the musical and spiritual bases of the music of the shakuhachi, particularly of the *honkyoku*. In other words, they anticipate and welcome a process of transculturation, in which the emergence of the shakuhachi outside of Japan changes in a subtle way the musical culture outside of Japan, but where these changes also feed back into the shakuhachi circles in Japan, changing them also in a subtle fashion.

Musical cultures and traditions develop through such processes; without them, the music tends to become a kind of museum exhibit. Such an attitude, of preserving unchanged a fixed repertoire, is the antithesis of the perception within the KSK, that particularly the *honkyoku* represent a living musical and spiritual depth. Through its openness and embrace of the shakuhachi as an inter- as well as transcultural phenomenon, the KSK stands as one of the organisations integrally concerned with transferring the shakuhachi into the future.

¹⁴ For further details on the migratory nature of the shakuhachi, cf. my paper "Warum kam die Shakuhachi in den Westen?", presented at the symposium *Japan im Westen: Literatur – Kultur – Spiritualität*, Weltkloster Radolfzell, Germany, 27th April 2012 (publication forthcoming).

Sources:

General information about Yokoyama Katsuya and the KSK can be found the website of the KSK itself (<http://www.shaku8.com/kenshukan/>) and on the site of the (largely inactive) International Shakuhachi Society (<http://komuso.com/people/people.pl?person=700>)

The discussion between Jim Franklin, Kakizakai Kaoru, Furuya Teruo and Matama Kazushi on 4th June 2012 in Kyoto was recorded with permission. At the time of writing, a transcribed and translated text is in preparation for later publication.

Discussions in France, 2007, between Jim Franklin, Véronique Piron, Kakizakai Kaoru and Furuya Teruo were not recorded, and are cited here from personal recollection.

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Dr Jim Franklin is a master performer of the shakuhachi. He initially studied composition and musicology in Australia, Germany and Holland. During his studies he encountered the shakuhachi, and was fascinated by it. After learning the instrument in Australia with Dr Riley Lee and in Japan with Furuya Teruo and Yokoyama Katsuya, he received his *shihan* licence in 1996 from Yokoyama-sensei. As a composer, Franklin is active in the areas of contemporary and electroacoustic music. He composes for shakuhachi solo and in combination with other instruments, and frequently performs projects with shakuhachi and live electronics. The interface between shakuhachi and electronics, and shakuhachi and other acoustic instruments, is a key field of interest. In the area of solo shakuhachi, Franklin has specialized in the honkyoku of the school of Yokoyama Katsuya (Kokusai Shakuhachi

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