

**Composing for shakuhachi:
Thoughts about metrics, fingering, muraiki and glissando.**

Ramon Humet

Abstract

This article presents some thoughts on composing for shakuhachi, giving special attention to the problem of creating a convincing notation for metrics, fingering, the diversity of possible articulations with particular mention to *muraiki*, and glissando technique as an example of idiomatic writing for the instrument. These thoughts are the result of the composition of the work *West Wind (Nishi No Kaze)* for solo shakuhachi, a work dedicated to Horacio Curti that was premiered December 18th, 2007 in Barcelona, Spain.

1. Introduction

The moment when the composer sits at his desk, about to write a new work, requires a special effort to distill all the content he wants to put into his creation, eliminating all superfluous knowledge coming from the cultural baggage that every sensitive person has from his surrounding environment. Through total purification, creativity occurs more authentically and close to the state of the soul of the artist, free from disturbing influences.

Usually, the process of selecting materials is difficult due to the huge amount of information we receive through easy access to information sources, especially bibliography and discography. But the problem of creative distillation becomes harder when the composer claims to write music for shakuhachi, an instrument with a deep musical tradition in Japan (*honkyoku*¹ among others) but with little repertoire written by classical composers of the Western tradition. Regarding the shakuhachi's aesthetic heritage, *honkyoku* is a genre with a very solid historical consistency. Thus, *honkyoku* concentrates all its purity into the shakuhachi, and the composer must make a titanic effort in order to feel free of the influence of the complex form, the refined melody, the characteristic kumoi² scale, the rich color, and the delicate nuances of this ancestral genre.

When analyzing the musical characteristics of the shakuhachi, the differences from the traverse flute become obvious. The shakuhachi allows a great diversity of color changes within only one note, due to the rich variety of fingerings and mouth positions, and also has a characteristic glissando ability of up to four semitones, and a rapidity in a full span of articulations.

In contrast to this characteristic “mouth virtuosity”, the shakuhachi is not especially suited to quick changes of fingerings because of the absence of keys and mechanisms. The partial hole closing, although precise and expressive, is not fast. So, it is necessary to design the composition of

¹ Honkyoku: literally, original pieces; set of pieces played from XIIIth century by Japanese komusô monks as a means of reaching spiritual enlightenment.

² Kumoi: Japanese traditional scale (E-F-A-B-C).

shakuhachi music in terms of color, pitch modulation, and articulation more than in terms of melodic agility. But first, it is necessary to evaluate the criteria for metric and rhythmic notation

2. Metrics and rhythm

One of the most outstanding characteristics of much traditional Japanese traditional music is the absence of metrics. Note values are not measured either absolutely or relatively! The main condition to get a good interpretation of a traditional piece within this repertoire is awareness of *ma*³. This musical thought has no parallel in Western classical music, where note values are objectively defined in a measured frame of metrics. The most similar Western notation to the notion of *ma* is *space notation*, a contemporary system based on the absolute value of the notes.

Toru Takemitsu writes the scores for shakuhachi and biwa for his masterwork *November Steps* with *space notation*, while the symphony orchestra is written in conventional metrics. It is evident that the great Japanese composer knew the *honkyoku* tradition very well, through his relationship with *Katsuya Yokoyama*, and he eliminates the metrics in the soloists' parts. In fact, it is possible to describe *November Steps* as an enormous cultural syncretism between the Western symphony orchestra and Eastern traditional soloists.

The differences between metric notation and *space notation* are mainly in the field of performance. The concentration required for the performance of a measured score is higher than for a non-measured score due mainly to the fact that the focus of awareness has to include two more elements: metrics and rhythm. The performance of the excerpts of *example 1* will be different, with much more loading of - in some sense - expressiveness in the measured notation.



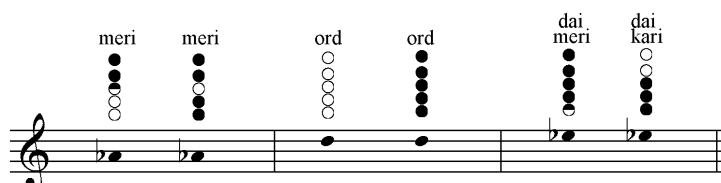
Example 1: comparison between space notation and measured notation

3. Fingering

Traditional music for shakuhachi includes different names for the same pitch, depending on fingering, thus creating a big palette of possible tone colors.

³ Ma: space, time; relation between the sounds, silence and breathing of the piece.

The differences in fingering imply a change of the mouth angle (*meri* or *kari*)⁴ which affects the different parameters of the sound. Intensity is the most affected parameter: the more the *meri* the less the dynamic intensity. The dynamic variation between *meri* and *kari* notes is an idiomatic characteristic of the instrument. Another important change is found in the sound spectrum: *meri* notes are dark (with less partials) and *kari* notes are bright (with more partials). Besides the spectrum of partial sounds, there is also a variable proportion of air noise proportion, depending on mouth position and fingering. *Example 2* illustrates some of these different fingerings.



Example 2: different fingerings give different colors and dynamics with the same pitch (1.8 shakuhachi)

The E β of *example 2* illustrates the contrast between the soft dynamics associated with *dai meri* fingering, and the strong dynamic associated with *dai kari* fingering. Due to the extreme position of the mouth embouchure, it is difficult to play a *bisbigliando*⁵ between *dai kari* and *dai meri* without affecting pitch stability. But the rich nurturing of the color with the combination of different fingerings aids the expressive expansion of the melodic line.

4. Muraiki

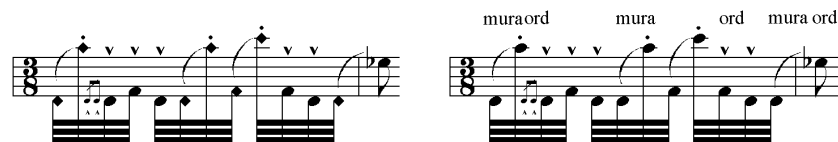
*Muraiki*⁶ is a traditional technique fully integrated in the morphology of the instrument with especially appealing results for the general listener. It is curious to note that *muraiki* has been incorporated in the catalog of new extended techniques of the Western traverse flute during the second part of 20th century, but its use in traditional Japanese music is very ancient. Regarding contemporary notation, it is usually indicated as “muraiki” or “mura” above or on the side of the corresponding passage, and notated “ord” when ordinary sound is required. This kind of articulation can create problems in passages of high density of types of articulation, or in works where the articulation is not a simple decorative effect but a thematic element. The *muraiki* indication can be more easily

⁴ The ordinary position of the mouth is called *kari*. The *meri* position is held by partially closing the angle of the air, lowering the head and/or raising the instrument. Some shakuhachi performers call the *kari* position the *ordinary* position.

⁵ Bisbigliando: color change in the same pitch with change of fingering.

⁶ Muraiki: literally, irregular breathing technique consisting in a strong blowing in order to get an indefinite percentage of Aeolian sound [wind] and instability of the sound.

written with the use of customized head notes, i.e. squares, and thus avoiding the excessive proliferation of indications “mura” and “ord” as in example 3. All the information that can be contained in the notes makes the score clearer to read.



Example 3: passage with multiples articulations. The notation with different head notes of the left example is clearer than the right example.

Muraiki can be defined as “the wind blowing into the bamboo grooves”⁷, and is a very expressive sound, capable of the whole dynamic range, from piano to forte.

5. Glissando

Generically, if the composer composes using the idiomatic style of the instrument, the music will be improved by a more natural expression in performance. Thus, for example, when writing for piano it is advisable to think in polyphonic terms, trumpet requires fine work in articulation, and percussion requires a good rhythmic feeling. In the same way, shakuhachi gives the possibility of working with the glissando up to a point only surpassed in wind instruments by the trombone. The *honkyoku* repertoire uses rich and particular gestures based on pitch oscillations that resemble the soft oscillation of the bamboo dancing with the wind through the leaves. Outside of *honkyoku*, a mouth glissando can reach up to four semitones, and in the case of using complementary fingerings glissando can reach up to one octave! Also, there is a full span of *shadings* that empower mouth glissando without fingering changes, avoiding dangerous discontinuities of pitch oscillation.

Example 4: first bars of the work “Vent de l’Ouest” for shakuhachi solo by Ramon Humet

⁷ Sanchez-Gutierrez: *Some Thoughts on the Music of Toru Takemitsu*. Princeton University. Spring, 1993.

It is necessary to use all idiomatic resources of the shakuhachi in order to improve the expressivity of the player and encourage a more natural and efficient performance.

6. Conclusions

“To love is to know,” said Stravinsky⁸. It is compulsory to promote a deep study of the idiomatic possibilities of the shakuhachi, as an instrument able to contribute to contemporary creation with very rich and suggestive sounds, as well as an exhaustive catalogue of all traditional and non-traditional techniques, including research into their acoustic characteristics.

Apart from all the interesting studies and articles that have been published, the field of technical research into this instrument is almost virgin, offering enormous potential of creative possibilities for composers and performers of new music.

On the other hand, rigorous study of the *honkyoku* tradition is the best guarantee for the understanding and idiosyncrasy of the instrument and its enormous expressive possibilities, and also an impressive source of knowledge in the field of the organic construction of a melody. It could not have been said better than by the great composer Arnold Schonberg: “I don’t give great importance to a musical brain, but much more to being a natural developer of an ancient and well-understood tradition!”⁹

7. Thanks

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8. Bibliography

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⁸ Igor Stravinsky: *Poètica musical*. Taurus. Madrid, 1986.

⁹ Letter from Arnold Schonberg to Werner Reinhart, Traunkirchen, 9-VII-1923.

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Ramon Humet (Barcelona, 1968). Composer, pianist and shakuhachi student. He has written symphonic music, chamber music and electroacoustic music. He has received commissions from Montreal Symphony Orchestra, ACDA, Foundation Calouste Gulbenkian, CDMC, Phonos Foundation, SGAE, Pocket Opera Festival, Foundation Caixa Catalunya, and Tarragona Council. He studies shakuhachi with Horacio Curti and has received classes from Kakizakai Kaoru-Sensei.

Website: www.ramonhumet.com

E-mail: rhumet@yahoo.es