

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL
MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Bronwyn Kirkpatrick, 2004 Churchill Fellow

**To receive *shakuhachi* tuition and to experience the *shakuhachi* and *taiko* traditions
in their cultural homeland – Japan**

*The dreamy sound of Bokushitsu's shakuhachi
Awakened me from deep sleep one moonlit night
A wonderful autumn night, fresh and bright;
Over the echo of music and drums from a distant village
The single clear tone of a shakuhachi brings a flood of tears –
Startling me from a deep, melancholy dream.*

From Ikkyu, Zen Master. *Wild Ways: Zen Poems of Ikkyu*
Translated by John Stevens. Publisher Shambala, 1995

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Signed: *Bronwyn Kirkpatrick*

Dated: 23rd February, 2005

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Introduction

September 27th 2003, midnight. I get a call from the police to say that my rented home has burnt down. The house is gutted. It was a random act of arson. This event changed my life. All that I owned after the fire was a *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute) and a set of clothes. Actually, that was all that I needed!! Since then I have performed in New York, I have become a Master of Shakuhachi and I have become a Churchill Fellow.

The Fellowship

I studied the *shakuhachi* for ten weeks in a small town called Chichibu, 1½ hours north-west of Tokyo. My programme was intense, 4-5 lessons a week, six hours of practise a day and the most rewarding experience of my life, the full benefits of which will slowly but surely become apparent over the ensuing months and years!

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Without your support, none of this would have been possible. Thank you to my teacher in Australia Riley Lee, for starting me on the path and for your continuing support and guidance and thank you to my teacher Kakizakai Kaoru and his family in Japan. I was constantly moved by your kindness, warmth and generosity.



Executive Summary

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Project

To receive *shakuhachi* tuition and to experience the *shakuhachi* and *taiko* traditions in their cultural homeland – Japan.

Highlights and interesting people

- Experiencing the expert tuition of Kakizakai Kaoru not once but four times a week!
- Receiving tuition from Yokoyama Katsuya, one of Japan's most highly regarded *shakuhachi* performer's and the tutor of my two teachers - Kakizakai Kaoru in Japan and Riley Lee in Australia.
- The excitement of a recording session with two of the best *shakuhachi* players in Japan, Kakizakai Kaoru and Matama Kazushi.
- Meeting an expert maker of *shakuhachi*, Miura Ryuho and having *shakuhachi* crafted for me.
- Experiencing the spectacular Chichibu Yo-matsuri (night festival) - intangible cultural property of Japan.
- Attending an International Shakuhachi Training Centre workshop at the 2000 year old Mitsumine Shrine, deep in the Chichibu forest.
- Attending performances of *kabuki* (traditional theatre) and *bunraku* (puppet theatre) at the National Theatre, Tokyo.
- Being the non-Japanese person playing the traditional Japanese instrument amongst a group of Japanese professional musicians playing Western instruments.
- Eating the delicious food!
- Meeting the English teacher with the ticket to my future study in Japan.

Major lessons and conclusions

Before I went to Japan, I was having niggling doubts about myself, as a non-Japanese person, playing a traditional Japanese instrument. How important was my cultural background in truly realising the music? I can now safely say that cultural background is irrelevant. It is what is in one's heart that matters. Not where you were born. I had to experience the tradition in Japan for myself to realise this. Being validated as a shakuhachi player by Japanese masters of the instrument was a huge confidence booster for me. I learnt about myself and my ability to handle more than I thought I could! I learnt that as intensive as my ten weeks were, they were not enough to deeply absorb Kakizakai's and Yokoyama's teachings. I will be returning to Japan for a further twelve months of study in 2005, teaching English at the local English school to support myself. I will return to Australia in February 2006 and I will begin to share what I have learnt by lecturing and performing at the Seventh Australian Shakuhachi Festival in Canberra. I will resume my other teaching and performing activities, notably teaching *shakuhachi* at the Sydney Zen Centre and performing in NSW schools with TaikOz and Shakoto, to promote Japanese music and culture. I will also be enrolling in a Masters program for shakuhachi run by Dr Riley Lee at the Australian Institute of Music. This course aims to attract international students. My vision extends to the Fifth World Shakuhachi Festival, to be hosted in Sydney in 2008 and beyond. It is wonderful to think that a simple bamboo flute with five holes can unite so many people from all over the world. Music really is a universal language!

Programme

As soon as I arrived in Japan I was swept into the stream of the International Shakuhachi Training Centre and its activities in Chichibu and Tokyo. This involved tuition with Kakizakai Kaoru, President of the International Shakuhachi Training Centre Chichibu Branch, tuition with Yokoyama Katsuya, Founder and Director of the International Shakuhachi Training Centre and a mentorship with Matama Kazushi, a colleague of Kakizakai and one of Yokoyama's chief students. My programme was intense, 4-5 lessons a week and six hours of practise a day. I was also exposed to a large number of peers on lesson days and I learnt much from observing their lessons.

The *taiko* side of my fellowship included meeting Toshio Takahashi, President of the drummer's organisation for preserving the Chichibu Yataibayashi. I witnessed the spectacular Chichibu Yo-matsuri (night festival) and I attended and participated in rehearsals of the Chichibu Yataibayashi in the lead up to the night festival. My understanding of the Chichibu Yataibayashi before I went to Japan was the concert version that I have performed on *yokobue* (festival flute) with TaikOz. I was delighted to experience the original Chichibu Yataibayashi as community music, with children as young as four learning the rhythms!

I immersed myself in as much traditional Japanese culture as possible. I visited temples, shrines and gardens in Chichibu, Asakusa, Yokohama and Kamakura. I attended calligraphy classes in Chichibu with Toshio Takahashi. I attended performances of traditional Japanese music and I went to performances of *kabuki* and *bunraku* at the National Theatre in Tokyo.

Main Body

My fellowship was primarily about receiving as many lessons as possible, practising as much as possible and absorbing as much of Japanese culture as possible in the ten week period that I was in Japan. I feel that I achieved this. I received tuition in the traditional solo repertoire for *shakuhachi* called *honkyoku* (original pieces) and a variety of other repertoire including works for *shakuhachi* and *koto* (Japanese zither), works for *shakuhachi* duet and trio, and contemporary works for solo *shakuhachi*. I was also given much listening to do.

Each lesson followed a similar structure. We would begin with *ro-buki*. This involved blowing one note repeatedly with a smooth and soft beginning, fortissimo and focussed middle and a pianissimo ending that stretches to eternity. Very difficult! I was constantly reminded that each note had to satisfy God! The performance of this one note relates to a philosophical aesthetic, *jo-ha-kyu*, that is found in many Japanese art forms. These three terms translate as introduction, development and conclusion. *Jo-ha-kyu* can be used to describe the structure of an entire piece, each section, each musical phrase and each note. The concept of *jo-ha-kyu* is used to regulate the dynamic and aesthetic flow of events through time.

At the conclusion of *ro-buki*, we would move on to the *honkyoku* that I was working on at the time. I would play solo, my teacher would comment and we would play together. Each *honkyoku* had to be performed from memory and to my teacher's satisfaction before progressing to the next one. I am proud to say that I studied eight *honkyoku* in the ten weeks that I was there. I was encouraged to go beyond the techniques, to see the techniques as just a tool for a deeper expression. I had to think deeply about what I wanted to express in each *honkyoku* and to spend all of my energy in this expression, from the heart. At the conclusion of this part of the lesson we would move on to some lighter repertoire, a duet, a trio, a piece with *koto*. This repertoire is more closely related to Western ensemble music and marks the distinction between the *shakuhachi* as a spiritual tool (*hoki*) and the *shakuhachi* as a musical instrument.

We would have tea after the lesson and this was a good opportunity to talk about the *shakuhachi* world. I was very fortunate that Kakizakai spoke good English. One big lesson that I learnt (yes, it seems obvious) is the importance of having Japanese language skills. Without Japanese language, certain things are simply closed to you. This is a skill that I am determined to develop during my twelve month stay in 2005.

The Shakuhachi: History and Philosophy



The *shakuhachi* is a Japanese bamboo flute, imported from China in the eighth century. The flute is extremely simple in construction, a bamboo tube with five finger holes and a blowing edge at the top. This simplicity allows the player a high degree of control over subtle inflections in pitch and timbre. The fundamental pitches of the shakuhachi are of the pentatonic scale named *Yo* (D, F, G, A, C). This scale is the equivalent of the major scale in Western music. The name *shakuhachi* refers to the length of the standard size instrument, the 1.8 *shakuhachi*. There are, however, many different length flutes which all go by the name of *shakuhachi*.

After the Sengoku period (1467-1568), *samurai* who had lost their masters became wandering Buddhist monks called *komuso* “monks of emptiness”. These *komuso* formed the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism and composed the *honkyoku* (original pieces) to play on the *shakuhachi* as a form of meditation. The *shakuhachi* was not considered to be a musical instrument at that time but rather a *hoki*, an instrument of spiritual practice. The *honkyoku* of the *komuso* expressed their true feelings, from the heart, as they wandered over the countryside begging for alms and wishing to be delivered from earthly desires. They were in search of the elusive *ichion jobutsu* – “one sound become Buddha”. The *honkyoku* contains elements of the *komuso*’s *samurai* training in Bujutsu (military arts) and Zen Buddhism. In Bujutsu, the distance between the two blades decides which one will survive. In Zen Buddhism, reality lies in the distance between man and nature. In *honkyoku*, good expression is achieved by finding the right distance or *ma* (space) between two notes and two phrases. How deeply the *shakuhachi* player considers the meaning of *ma*, decides the quality of his or her performance.

The difficulty in realising good *ma* is that *honkyoku* have free rhythm and no beat. This poses a difficulty for many Western trained musicians (myself included), who rely on a clearly defined rhythm and beat to give a basic flow to the piece. When learning *honkyoku*, the student must first copy the teacher to get a feeling for suitable *ma*. The student must then find his or her own expression for the piece, which in Yokoyama’s words is a desperate matter taking on life or death dimensions, where the soul of the player is laid bare for all to see! I was encouraged to play as if these were the last notes that I would ever play. Or to play for someone as if these were the last notes that they would ever hear. Straight from the heart and directly in the moment. I was also conscious of *ma* at the performances of *kabuki* and *bunraku*, where timing and space are used to great dramatic effect. *Ma* is an important aesthetic in all Japanese arts.



The notation for *honkyoku* functions in a similar way to tablature. Each Japanese character denotes a different fingering, while the vertical lines indicate approximately how long to hold the note and frequently, how to shape the sound. Read down the columns, from right to left, the notation is used primarily as a memory aid, with embellishments and nuances learnt orally from a teacher. The *honkyoku* phrasing is directly related to the breathing of the performer i.e. the length of the phrase is determined by the inhalation just as much as the inhalation is determined by the length of the phrase. Austere melodic lines and subtle changes in timbre characterise the *honkyoku*, which are played in the pentatonic scale named *In* (D, Eb, G, A/Ab, C or D, Eb, G, A, B), the equivalent of the minor scale in Western music. The *honkyoku* is practised as religious music. It does not aim at melodic variation or development, as Western music does. It exists as an exercise in mindfulness, inviting the performer to be fully present in each unfolding moment, each tone, each breath. The *honkyoku* have been transmitted from teacher to student without gap, through various schools, from the time of the master-less *samurai* to the present day.

In 1871, the Tokugawa clan officially banned the Fuke sect. From this time on the *shakuhachi* became a secular musical instrument, used in ensemble with the *shamisen* and *koto* in what is called *sankyoku* and more recently in modern compositions for *shakuhachi* and *koto*. The contemporary *shakuhachi* player usually studies a combination of *honkyoku*, *sankyoku* and modern compositions for *shakuhachi* solo and ensemble. It is the sound of the single bamboo however, that still most captivates the listener, inspiring a sense of stillness and space.

Taiko

The Chichibu Yo-matsuri (night festival)



The Chichibu Yo-matsuri has a history of over three hundred years. Held on December 3rd every year, it is a traditional festival of the Chichibu Shrine to give thanks to the deities for the years' successful harvest and to pray for a successful harvest the following year. Offerings from the years' harvest are made at the Shrine to appease the Gods and huge *yatai* (floats) are pulled through the streets in celebration. The *yatai* are among the biggest in Japan, ranking with those in the Gion Festival in Kyoto and the Takayama Festival in Hida. The floats are pulled along the streets (by hundreds of people holding long ropes) to the

accompaniment of the Chichibu Yataibayashi (float music), while performances of *kabuki* are given high up on the float's platform. The musicians are housed inside the *yatai* and are not visible. The three *chudaiko* (medium sized drum) players beat set patterns in various combinations of solos, duos and trios continuously, in an astounding feat of physical and mental endurance. Also housed inside the *yatai* are members of the *hayashi* ensemble which give respite to the three *chudaiko* players as the float is raised, balanced on wooden poles and turned, so as to be maneuvered through the narrow streets of Chichibu. Making up the *hayashi* ensemble are the festival flute *yokobue*, the bell-like *atarigane* and the high pitched drum *shimedaiko* (rope-tied drum). On the evening of December 3rd, six of these floats illuminated with numerous paper lanterns (*chochin*) and other lanterns with a special wooden frame (*bonbori*) set out for the festival site at Ohanabatake in Chichibu City.



On the way to this festival site the floats (which weigh more than ten tonnes) are pulled at a dash up the steep slope known as Dango-zaka, motivated by the incessant pounding of the drums. This movement is the climax of the festival and is marked by large-scale fireworks displays. Everyone must work together, with equal commitment to pull the floats. Lack of commitment can spell death just as lack of commitment in the fields can spell death. Thousands of people come from all over Japan to witness this spectacular event. The *taiko* groups rehearse the Chichibu Yataibayashi all year. They are not professional musicians, just members of the Chichibu community.



The *kabuki* actors are also local community members. Local children dressed in *kimono* perform traditional dances called *hikiodori* on the floats during the day and the streets are filled with local stall-holders selling food and traditional arts and crafts. You get a sense that the whole community is involved in this annual festival to honour the deities of the Chichibu Shrine.

I have performed the concert version of the Chichibu Yataibayashi on *yokobue* numerous times with TaikOz in Australia. To see this music performed in its original context was an invaluable educational experience for me. The sights, sounds, smells and spirit of this event will now accompany me to the concert platform.

Conclusions

Before I went to Japan I had two niggling doubts. The first, my ability as a non-Japanese person to really play traditional Japanese music, especially the *honkyoku*. The second, my ability as a woman to really play the *shakuhachi* (the *shakuhachi* is traditionally played by men). I came away from Japan feeling confident that both are possible if I am passionate enough and if I work hard enough! I think that I already knew these things but going to Japan was essential confirmation for me. In the end, we are all human beings trying to realise this music (and in that process ourselves), no matter what our cultural background or gender. We all have to begin at the beginning, trying to make that first sound. We all have to practise the techniques for hours a day, until those techniques finally become our liberators and our tools for a deeper expression. We bring our own unique experiences to the instrument and we express them through the bamboo in our own unique way. The source of this expression is the heart and the heart has the ability to cut through all barriers.

To truly realise this music, you have to own it. To own it you have to make your own song and in making your own song, your soul and the soul of the bamboo become one. When this happens, you go beyond the duality of right and wrong and enter into the original spirit of the *honkyoku* as Zen practice.

In the last twenty years, there has been an increasing interest from the West in the *shakuhachi*, as more people become exposed to and captivated by its soulful, meditative and beautiful sound. It is an ironic twist that many Japanese people are being reintroduced to their musical heritage through the sounds of a westerner playing the *shakuhachi*. In the ten week period that I was studying the *shakuhachi* in Japan, there was a student from Majorca, two students from Australia and a group of ten Canadians also studying the *shakuhachi*! The *shakuhachi* and its tradition is now world music which, in the words of my teacher Riley Lee, belongs no more exclusively to Japan than Mozart's music belongs exclusively to Austria.

When I perform, the most frequently asked question is "why did you start playing the *shakuhachi*?" I always answer "the sound". A western meditation teacher and psychotherapist once said to me that the sound of the *shakuhachi* has the ability to cut right through to the core of the personality. In Yokoyama's words, the sound of the *shakuhachi* is honest, beautiful and profound. When Mahatma Gandhi first heard the sound of the *shakuhachi*, he supposedly wept and said he had finally heard the voice of the dead. I believe that it can be a window to the soul.

The best way for me to disseminate the information that I have learnt (and will continue to learn in 2005) is by teaching the *shakuhachi* and performing on the *shakuhachi*. By making Japanese music and culture as visible as possible to Australian society, we will add another dimension to the rich tapestry that is multicultural Australia.

Recommendations

"In this age we face problems which are both political and economic in nature. To free ourselves from such problems I think the most important thing is the ability to understand each other deeply through cultural exchange." Takemitsu Toru

The *shakuhachi* has become relatively well known in Australia over the past twenty years, largely due to the efforts of *shakuhachi* Grand-Master Dr. Riley Lee. With increased exposure to high-level performances and teaching of Japanese music in Australia and further exploration into cross-cultural collaborations, we will see a strengthening of cultural exchange and intercultural understanding. I am committed to being a part of this exchange and what better way than to start in 2006, the Year of Exchange (YOE) between Australia and Japan!