



(LAS 7209)

JAPANESE SHAMISEN

Chamber Music (Jiuta) with Koto and Shakuhachi

Though there is much excellent traditional Japanese music written for orchestra, the concept of chamber music is more truly Japanese in character. Classical court music (GAGAKU, THE IMPERIAL COURT MUSIC OF JAPAN, LL 7126) or theatrical music (Kabuki Nagauta Music, LL 7134) exemplify the orchestral art. In a more modest way, the drums and wooden flute of JAPANESE NOH MUSIC, (LL 7137) are the orchestral background for the Noh drama. But the most compelling form of musical expression for composers is now, as in the past, the repertoire for small ensemble or chamber music, “the meat and bones of music.” Rising to the challenge of creating subtle balances and nuances within a rigid and severely limited framework of sound and dynamism is as typical of the Japanese composer's art as the 17-syllable poem called *haiku*, which conveys so much in so few words, is typical of Japanese poetry.

The koto is probably the oldest of the instruments heard in this recording. Its ancestor, the *wagon* and *gaku-so*, date back to early imperial court music which originated in ancient China. The koto is a horizontal, plucked chordophone. Generally, the modern instrument has 13 silken strings stretched over a graceful body of curved wood. (Some have 17 strings). The strings are plucked with ivory picks, in this case, square picks since this recording was performed by members of the Ikuta School. Allusions to its gentle faintly harp-like tones pervaded all the romantic tales of Japanese literature of the past.

The shamisen is the great cultural bequest of the Edo Period (1615-1868). Its bittersweet twang accompanied the early folk songs, the sagas of military heroes, and was part of the background cacophony of the pleasure district of old Edo (Tokyo). A three-stringed

plucked instrument with a square sound box and long neck, it is made of wood covered with skin and played with a large plectrum. It still dominates the music of the Kabuki theater and is used as the guitar elsewhere in the world to accompany many kinds of songs.

The shakuhachi or bamboo flute that is heard in some of the compositions on this recording is also of Chinese origin. It is simple in form and has a rather plaintive sound that is pleasing to most Western ears. In ensemble these three, koto, shamisen and shakuhachi playing contemporary music are referred to as *jiuta*. The compositions often combine vocal interludes with instrumental ones.

THE TRACKS:

1. MIYAKO ODORI (2 Kotos) (5:35)

Miyako odori is the dance performed in Kyoto in early April every year. It is one of the spring festivals for the Geisha (entertainers) and Maiko (dancers) of Kyoto. The music was composed by Michio Miyagi while he was traveling in Korea. Designed for the shamisen and koto, it describes brilliantly the dance performed by Geisha and Maiko.

2. KUROKAMI (Shamisen, Koto) (6:10)

Black hair represents the great appeal of traditional Japanese women. The slow and sensuous atmosphere of love is often described in the *Jiuta*, songs for the shamisen. It is not known with certainty who composed *Kurokami* (black hair). However, it was originally designed for the koto (*hirajoshi* - standard tuning) and the shamisen (*sansagari* - low tuning). The shamisen, however, is often replaced by the *kokyū* (two-string violin), which makes the atmosphere even more sentimental.

3. KESHI NO HANA (Koto, Shakuhachi) (4:39)

The “Poppy Flower” is a classical piece composed by a blind musician, Kengyo Kikuoka, and revised by Kengyo Matsuzaki, the second. There are three species of poppy flowers. The red flower represents consolation, the white lower represents sleep; and the deep red represents love. The flowers are also likened to the *Nara* dolls, roughly carved and brilliantly painted.

4. ZANGETSU (Instr. & vocal) (14:58)

The “Morning Moon” was composed by Kinto Minezaki from Osaka. It is regarded as the masterpiece of *Jiuta* (shamisen and song). *Zangetsu* is said to have been composed for the death of a daughter of the Matsuya family, a disciple of the composer Minezaki. It begins with low and sad atmosphere and ends with a relief from sadness.

5. UKIFUNE (Instr. & vocal) (7:34)

Ukifune, (“A floating boat”) is based on the story of the Genji family. *Ukifune*, a beautiful lady of Uji (near Kyoto) is loved by Captain Kaoru, but she is unfaithful to him. After many disillusionments, she attempts suicide, fails, and spends the rest of her life in a nunnery. The music is designed for the shamisen, koto and voice. The words describe the sad story of Lady Ukifune.



THE LYRICHORD ARCHIVE SERIES

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291
email: nick@lyrichord.com Web: www.lyrichord.com

© and (P) Lyrichord Discs Inc. These texts (including images) are published under copyright by Lyrichord Discs Inc. All rights are reserved.
The texts, and the music associated, with them, may only be republished, duplicated or sold, with written permission from Lyrichord Discs Inc.