



(LAS 7304)

KOTO KUMIUTA

Classical Song Cycles by the Great Master Composers of 17 - 18th Century Japan

1. ABOUT KOTO KUMIUTA:

Kumiuta in Japanese means a "set of songs" or "song cycle," and thus koto kumiuta implies a "song cycle accompanied by the koto." It is usually performed by a single musician who serves as both singer and accompanist.

Kumiuta, along with its instrumental counterpart danmono, forms the oldest layer of the koto repertoire. It was thought to be the most important, and almost sacred, repertoire for voice and koto. In fact, the Japanese term *sōkyoku* (literally "koto music," but implying a specific style for voice, koto and the shamisen, a lute-type) once meant the koto kumiuta exclusively.

The present form of koto kumiuta was brought into existence by Yatsunashi-Kengy* (1614-85), a blind master of the koto (as well as shamisen and biwa, another lute-type) and the founder of the modern koto style. Yatsunashi's thirteen kumiuta compositions are the oldest in this form; however, some were derived directly from the earlier koto tradition, Tsukushi-goto, which was in turn rooted in the ancient court music, gagaku.

At first Yatsunami arranged and adapted the somewhat religious Tsukushi-goto pieces into his own style, introducing a "modern" and "vulgar" musical scale of miyako-bushi (or in scale). Eventually, he created a new genre of secular koto music" (zoku-sō).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KUMIUTA MAY BE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS:

- 1) A song cycle is usually composed of six songs; however, there are some kumiuta composed of three, four, five or seven songs. The text of each song is self-sufficient so that the six songs within one kumiuta are not necessarily related to one another in terms of subject matter.
- 2) An individual song is set to a verse consisting of four lines, each of which is based on a syllabic versification principle. The combinations of syllabic units found in kumiuta are rather irregular Japanese verse, and uncommon combinations such as 7+4, 5+5, 6+4 and 5+4 are prevalent as well as the more common 7+5.
- 3) Musically speaking, kumiuta is composed in a remarkably regular and symmetric structure. Every song is composed in a frame of 32 measures or 64 beats, and consists of 8 phrases of 8 beats each.
- 4) Kakezume, an instrumental pattern typical of the koto, and its variations play an important role in the opening phrases of kumiuta. The end of each song is usually marked by a typical cadential pattern of kumiuta. The close of a whole song cycle is also marked by a distinctive cadence.
- 5) The symbolic usage of stereo-typed patterns and special techniques on the koto suggesting and responding to the words in the vocal part is particularly significant.
This very strict and highly refined form allows little room for arbitrary variation or improvisation of an individual performer, in either vocal or instrumental part. As a rule, kumiuta is to be learned from a master with profound reverence, and should be transmitted to the next generation with the greatest possible accuracy.

Because of this rigidity, kumiuta at one time lost its popularity among the koto players and their students and was replaced by lighter, and more instrumentally-oriented and ensemble-oriented forms.

It is pleasing to note that in recent years koto kumiuta has been rediscovered and has regained its popularity among serious sōkyoku musicians and connoisseurs. Its noble and transparent beauty is more than worth listening to, and we hope that the release of this disc may make some contribution to this favorable trend.

2. ABOUT THE PIECES ON THIS RECORDING:

Each of the four greatest composers of sōkyoku is represented by one kumiuta composition in chronological order: Yatsunami-Kengyo (1614-85), either Kitajima-Kengyō (d. 1690) or Ikuta-Kengyō (1656-1715), Yasumura-Kengyō (d. 1779), and

Yamada-Kengyō (1757-1817). [Due to the limited space of disc, another important composer of kumiuta, Mitsuhashi-Kengyo (d. 1760), is not represented here.]

UME-GA-E ("On a Plum Branch") is one of "Yatsushashi's Thirteen Kumiuta," which are the oldest compositions, and thought to be the model for later koto works. The six songs are not related to each other, each being taken from different sources.

The first verse is based on one of the Etenraku-utamono, devotional popular songs practiced at Buddhist temples of medieval Japan. The second and fourth verses obviously refer to the Book of "Village of Fallen Blossoms" and the Book of "Exile at Suma," respectively, from The Tale of Genji, a novel by Lady Murasaki written in the early 11th century.

OMOIGAWA ("River of Memory") is generally considered to be a composition of either Kitajima, a student of Yatsushashi, or Ikuta, a student of the former; however, its real composer remains anonymous.

All the verses in this kumiuta deal with unsuccessful love. Because of the sad and reminiscent mood of the song texts, this piece is often sung at memorial services in Japan.

HI-EN NO KYOKU ("Flying Swallow") is considered a masterpiece among the works composed later in the same form after Yatsushashi.

The six songs are preceded by a short prelude of 32 measures. All the verses, which are interrelated, are based on a free translation of a Chinese poem by Li Po (701-62), a T'ang poet, entitled Ch'ing P'ing T'iao.

The poem relates Emperor Hsuan Tsung's love life. The first three songs refer to his deceased consort, Wu Hui. The rest of the songs refer to Yang Kuei-Fei, his new and ultimate love. "Hi-en" in the title is the Japanese pronunciation of Fei-Yen (literally "Flying Swallow"), a rare beauty of the former Han dynasty, the only woman in Chinese history comparable to Kuei-Fei in beauty.

HATSUNE NO KYOKU ("First Song of the Year") is a unique and distinguished work in many respects. This piece was composed after Yasumura, the kengyo-general of the guild of blind men, had discouraged composing kumiuta without authority. This is the only work that Yamada, the founder of a new school of sokyoku, composed in the kumiuta form, and demonstrates a departure from conventional form. This kumiuta is performed only by Yamada school musicians.

All the six songs in this cycle are based on the events from the Book of the same title from The Tale of Genji. This kumiuta begins with a special opening pattern called shirabe on the koto composed of three beats, typical of Yamada school style.

TRACKS AND TIMES:

1. Ume-ga-e - 13:17
2. Omoigawa - 13:08
3. Hi-eh Ho Kyoku - 14:39
4. Hatsunne No Kyoko - 10:26

TRACKS AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS:

TRACK 1

Yatsushashi-Kengyō (1614-85)

On a plum branch,
Bush Warbler,
You build
Your nest.
But what will you do,
Sheltered in a flower,
When the wind blows,
Bush warbler?

Bored, she
Of the village of fallen blossoms;
Plucks feebly, yet more feebly
At her koto.
A sleeve fragrant
With orange blossoms;
The little cuckoo*
Comes calling.

Asleep yet longing,
In my dream at dawn
I saw you -
We were together.
I awoke
To my sorrow of yesterday
Alone, my pillow and I --
And only tears.

Plover,
Calling, crying
In the dead of night --
What keeps you from sleeping?
Banished from the world
To these shores of Suma,
Do you, too,
Shed tears?

That sprindletree,
White wood of the archer's bow,
Should bend,
But it doesn't.
Yet that old man
Of eighty
Bends
To new love.

The pine winds
At Miho beach
Have stilled.
On the ocean,
No waves.
The moon casts itself on the water
With Mount Fuji
Far in the distance.

TRACK 2

Anonymous (Late 17th Century)

We meet in vain
in the River of Memory.
Thoughts like water weeds
caught among the rocks
struggle to flow, in vain.
Only my sleeves are drenched.
When will they dry?
I do not know.

His look still lives
in my memory.
I can't forget him.
He never shows up,
even in my yearning dreams.
The rooster crows
at dawn, too soon, too soon.
My heart is broken.

Suddenly, but when . . . ?
No more word from you.
Too far apart now,
all we once shared together.
We met at "Letter Pass."

Does it now stand between us?
Mojigaseki!*

I hate that name!

He doesn't care.
He leaves me.
I can't stop him.
Now he's gone,
Here's his empty cloak . . .
Oh, my sleeves!
Drenched in the dew
of my tears.

I loved, I lost.
Alone,
in my bed,
in this poor hut,
all through the night,
my falling tears
gush forth,
a silent waterfall.

He should have been
heartless, just that.
But he wasn't.
Did he betray me
because he cared?
The more I think of it,
the more wretched
I feel.

TRACK 3
Yasumura-Kengyō (d. 1779)

The memory of
her dancing sleeves
reaches far across
the clouds of the
distant past.
I live on, as
fragile as the dew
lingers on the flower.

She is like
a thousand diamonds
sparkling in the sky.

No? Then she is
a celestial maiden
wearing a hair-do
of gleaming jewels
in the moon.

Like a drop of dew
in the deep-red flower,
her beauty unworldly!
A quick dream - then -
only a line of clouds
in the morning sky,
and a flood of tears
on my sleeves.

O, those days gone by!
My sleeves are musty
with the past.
I air them
on the bamboo screen.
O, look!
A friendly swallow
comes 'round the eaves!

To the matchless
beauty of this flower
our lord turns his heart,
and as love deepens
for this rare peony
day after day,
he loses his senses
with infatuation.

"Flowers in full bloom
are easily scattered
by the wind."
I thought only others
met this fate, but
now, so have I.
I cannot, then, blame
the spring breeze for 'blowing.

TRACK 4

Yamada-Kengyō (1757-1817)

Plum blossom fragrance
Steeps the bamboo screen;
The scent of the screen?
Alive with spring
The courtyard trees
And flowers.
Beyond words!
Beyond words!

In Ōmi,
In Ōmi,
The mountain of renown
Is none other than Mirror Mountain
Reflected in
The lake waters of spring,
Its image is
Unchanging.

Today
Is Ne-no-hi
Of the New Year and,
That there be
A Thousand Springs,
People gather pine seedlings --
Their hearts
At peace.

Wonderful!
The uguisu*1 nesting
Amidst high,
Courtly flowers
Flies back to the pine tree --
And the nest she left --
To visit her old home
In the valley.

In the evening
Breeze
Gently wafting
Bringing the fragrance of flowers,
The plum too
At long last is blossoming.

Such a delight to play
Kono tono!*2

At dawn we dance
The otoko-dōka.
Today's wine
Is not ordinary!
And passing the
Cotton headdress
We sing the
Song of Ten-thousand Years.

ABOUT THE MUSICIAN:

Namino Torii is one of the leading musicians of the Yamada school of sōkyoku (classical Japanese music for voice, koto and shamisen). She holds a B.A. and Masters in Music from Tokyo University of Fine Arts, specializing in traditional Japanese music. In 1953 she was authorized to succeed Tonami Torii V, her adoptive mother, as iemoto or headmistress of a distinguished musical family of the Yamada school.

She is a member of councils of the National Society for Sankyoku and the Society for Yamada School Sōkyoku, and also an active member of the performing groups of Sōkyoku Shinchō Kai and Sōyū Kai.

Since 1965, Namino Torii has been actively performing and teaching classical Japanese music in the United States. She taught at the University of Washington, American Society for Eastern Arts and Columbia University. She is currently artist-in-residence at Mesleian University and teaches sōkyoku and sankyoku ensemble.

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