



(LYRCD 7137)

JAPANESE NOH MUSIC

The Kyoto Nohgaku Kai

From behind a curtain comes the sound of a flute playing “*O-shirabe*.” As the tune ends the curtain rises, and the musicians enter in order, carrying the flute, shoulder drum, side drum and floor drum. They seat themselves on the stage, an elevated platform separated from the audience by a narrow moat. Next the chorus enters, taking up a position on the right-hand side of the stage. Members of the chorus place their fans before them. The wooden Noh flute is heard again in another ancient melody. The sound is a signal to the audience which now may follow every word and movement from individual scores. A Noh play is about to begin.

Noh drama had its origin in old forms of entertainment. One was called *sarugaku*, literally “monkey music”, which was a type of comic show. The other, *dengaku*, or “rice field music,” referred to dances performed by peasants. Both forms became popular with Japanese peasant and nobleman alike early in the Heian Period (900-1200 A.D.). But it was not till the beginning of the 15th Century, when a father and son team of playwrights were assigned the task of instilling a more serious character into these diversions, that Noh was born. The new, refined form of *sarugaku-no-Noh* (Noh means skill) was finally shortened to “Noh”.

Kannami and Zeami, the father and son, retained the instruments of *sarugaku* and *dengaku*, but borrowed from the slow, dignified *Shomyo* chant of the Buddhists (Lyrichord LL 116 - *Zen, Goeika and Shomyo Chants*; or LL 118 (2-12”) *Buddhist Chant*) to carry the story line of the plays, the plots of which were essentially inspired by Buddhist concepts. Indeed, strong influences of Zen philosophy can be noted in the marked restraint of performance and constant use of allusion in Noh.

Five different types of Noh plays exist within a repertory of some two hundred fifty pieces. These differ in that their subject matter deals with Shinto or Buddhist deities, ghosts of warriors, noble ladies, manifestations of human life such as passion or insanity, and lastly, demons. A classical Noh performance would consist of five Noh plays, one from each category, and three comic interludes. Each play has three sections.

The plots involve events that have taken place in the past, which give the drama the effect of poetic recall rather than active realism. While the stage setting is simple, the costumes are gorgeously elaborate. Above all, the beautifully carved wooden mask worn by the principal character (shite) produces a memorable effect. The gestures are remarkably understated - one step can denote a whole journey, the slow raising of hand toward face will signify anguish. Weak as to plot, employing cryptic and archaic language, the Noh drama, so different from the aesthetic realism of Western theater, nevertheless imparts lyric overtones that invade and subtly alter the mood of the attentive spectator.

The mosaic of chorus, actors, dancers, musicians ...all combine to create this effect. And Noh would not achieve this delicate balance without its own kind of music. The singing of Noh is called Yokyoku. Both actors and chorus sing. There are also the musical introductions for the characters and accompaniments for dances. The Nohkan (flute) with its high piercing tone is the only melodic instrument in the ensemble. It sets the pitch for chorus and the tempo for dancers among other functions. The three percussion instruments are: the Ko-tsuzumi, a small drum held at the shoulder, the O-tsuzumoi, somewhat larger and held at the left hip, and the Taiko, a large drum placed on a floor stand and beaten with two thick sticks. The smaller drums are struck with the finger tips.

Hearing Noh for the first time, a spectator will be surprised to hear the drummers calling to each other. Since Noh is set in a flexible rhythm, the calls serve to mark the time between beats. Originally used in rehearsal, the calls became an integral part of the performance.

TRACKS

1. DEHA - The *Nohkan* carries the melody in this musical introduction for a male dancer. *O-tsuzumio*, *Ko-tsuzumi*, and *Taiko* provide the percussion. The composition is also known as Taiko Issei which means first song.
2. NAKAIRIRAIGYO - This is a musical description of gods and superhuman beings flying in the air. If one were to observe such a phenomenon from the earth below, the movements would appear to be slow. Therefore, a slow drumbeat is used to create this effect. The latter half of the piece is called *Kyogen Raigyo* and describes the appearance of divine hermits.
3. JONAMAI - This work accompanies dances in HAGOROMO, one of the "noble lady" plays. It contains three variations. Atama is the introduction preceded by five drumbeats. Kakari conveys the central motif, and oroshi, the finale with gradually diminishing sound.

4. OTOKOMAI - In the play, Morihisa this fast powerful music accompanies male dancing. It denotes the joy and gratitude of warriors in the historical drama of heroes. Taiko is omitted.

5. SAGARIHA - Also known as *Wataribyoshi*, it is a fast piece to accompany swift motion of the actors on stage. Flute and drums maintain close harmony. It is used in Shojyo and in other plays.

6. HAMMAI - An accompaniment for dances in “deity” plays, the music describes gods frequently seen in the form of old men. It is also the prelude to the appearance of main characters in *Kami-noh* (Noh of Divinity).

7. GAKU - Also called *Banshiki-gaku*, it descended from Chinese music., Gratitude is the theme. In the play, Kantan, it accompanies a delightful dance featuring a Chinese saint in which the dancers use Chinese fans. The flute plays melodic phrases reminiscent of Gagaku (Lyrichord LL 126 [7126-Stereo] Gagaku, Imperial Court Music of Japan).

8. KAGURA - The word *Kagura* means shrine music and this selection, with its overtones of purity and gravity, certainly was derived from such a religious source. In the plays Muwa and Makiginu the composition accompanies dances by divine women offering consolation to a god.

9. HAGOROMO - (Excerpts from an actual performance in Kyoto). The play is a Japanese folk tale about a fisherman at the seashore who finds the robe of a divine lady and hides it, not knowing the lovely creature came down from heaven to bathe. The lady begs him for her robe. He asks her to dance and her graceful dances constitute the main attraction of the play. Chorus, actors and instruments all are heard in these excerpts.

SCHOOLS OF NOH AND CREDITS

Five different schools of Noh exist in Japan today, performing and passing on the traditions and skills of many centuries. There are also different schools (ryu) in which the instruments of Noh are taught. Katsumasa Takasago directed the recording and Kingichi Kodaera, Nohgaku expert, supervised the musicians in this performance, made in Kyoto Japan, 1993. Cover photo by Nick Fritsch, booklet design by Duy Ngo.



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