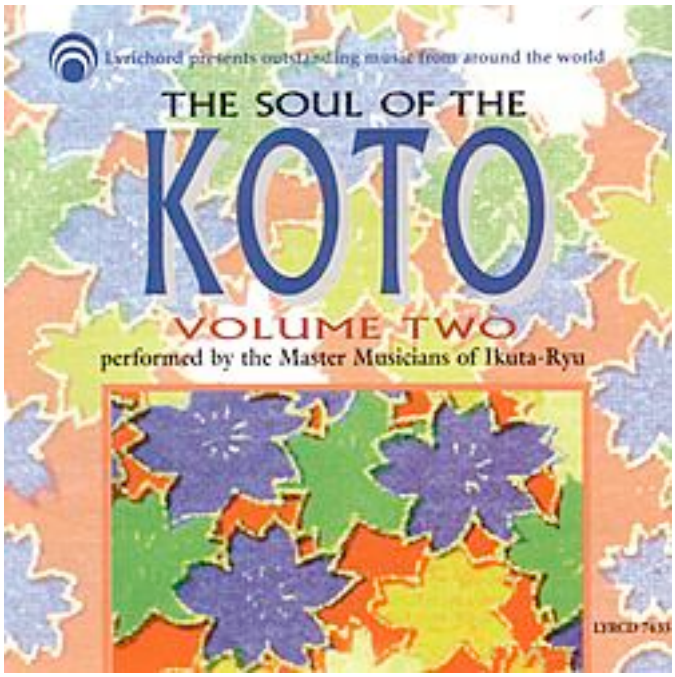

(LYRCD 7433)

THE SOUL OF THE KOTO
VOLUME TWO

Performed by the Master Musicians of Ikuta-Ryu

The development of koto music was one of Japan's most valuable contributions to the history of classical music. Some scholars trace the instrument back to the 8th Century or earlier, but koto music became firmly established in the 16th Century. The present-day 13 stringed instrument and the music written for it are inherited from that time. Originally a court instrument, the koto with its harp like sound became a symbol of gentility and good taste in the home. Playing the koto well is an accomplishment that enhances the marital prospects of well-bred Japanese girls.

Koto music is divided into two distinct types. There is a kind, which accompanies singing, and another, which is solely instrumental. The oldest known form of vocal koto music was called Kumiata, which was a group of short poems set to music to be sung in a given order. In the later koto music that developed from this, each poem was called a step or dan. The term "dan" is therefore basic to all discussion of koto music forms. (Ichidan, for example, means one step or poem; Midan, two steps. Rokudan refers to six steps; Kydan, to nine.)

Shirabemono is the term for all strictly instrumental works written for the koto. "Rokudan" is a classic example of this form. There is reason to believe that this piece is of very ancient Chinese origin, although Yatsuhashi Kengyo, who began the Yatsuhashi School of popular koto music in Kyoto in the seventeenth century, is credited with this

composition, as well as the other classics “Midare” and “Hachidan.” Not until the end of the seventeenth century, however, when Ikuta Kengyo founded a new style of koto music, was the instrument combined with the shamisen and either kokyu or shakuhachi. This ensemble form, called sankyoku, “music fro three” became and, still is, a most acceptable way of presenting koto music.

Three schools were established among koto musicians from the 17th to the 19th Centuries. The traditions of each school (ryu) exist today. They are the Yatsuhashi-ryu, Ikuta-ryu and Yamada-ryu. Each school used differently shaped finger picks, thereby producing different sounds and techniques. For example, musicians of the Ikuta-ryu who made this recording use square picks and play a koto that is longer than the usual six-foot size.

During the Edo Period the koto began to be played in concert with the shamisen (a three-stringed, plucked instrument) and the shakuhachi (bamboo flute). Such performances were called sankyoku, or music for three instruments.

In Sankyoku concerts, shamisen plays the dominant part and is considered the “bone” of the music which koto is the “meat,” shakuhachi, the “skin.” Sankyoku music is represented on this recording, as well as solo pieces for the three instruments.

All three can be traced back to Chinese prototypes. The koto was used at the Japanese Imperial Court (where it was known as the wagon or gaku-so) in the playing of Gagaku (Elegant Music) (Lyrichord 7126 and LL126).

The sound of the shamisen to many a Western ear is the very sound of Japan itself. It is the heart of Kabuki music. No party is without the sound of its sharp, slightly wistful twang.

The history of the shakuhachi is a curious one. In the 17th Century, the freedom of those brave warriors, the samurai, as restricted. Masterless samurai, forbidden to carry weapons, redesigned the bamboo flute, making it strong enough to serve as a weapon as well as providing them a means of livelihood as musicians. The heads concealed inside wicker basket hats, the komuso, as these flute-playing beggar-priests came to be called, wandered the streets, developing the art of the shakuhachi. Eventually the government recognized them as a religious sect in return for having them act as spies. Kumuso are still present in modern Tokyo, and it is believed that much of what they see and overhear from under their basket hats is passed on to the police.

In the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, yet another koto teacher, Yamada Kengyo, borrowing from narrative shamisen music, founded a school and a style in which vocal expression to koto accompaniment was emphasized. The Yamada and Ikuta schools each possess their basic repertoires of standard pieces. Even in the Nineteenth Century they still tended to emphasize – one, the vocal aspect, the other, the instrumental. And though both produce more of the instrumental type of music today, the distinction is still present in people’s minds as they compare the two.

TRACKS:

1. MIDARE - (7:52)
Yatsuhashi Kangyo, founder of a koto school who lived from 1614 to 1685, is the composer. The title means “unorthodox.” There are a number of harmonic tones produced by plucking two strings at once, giving an unusual after-tone. This piece is played by two musicians.

2. HARU NO UMI - (Sea Spring), (6:23)
This piece was composed by Michio Miyagi (1894-1956), a blind genius of modern koto music. As Miyagi understood Western music as well as his own, his work blends Western and Eastern harmonies very skillfully. A piece so well known internationally that it has been adopted for many Western instruments, it is best appreciated in the koto and shakuhachi duet for which it was written, as presented here.

3. NEBIKI NO MATSU - (Pine Tree Hunting), (6:03)
This piece, composed by Koto Mihashi is a traditional piece for Shamisen. It was once a custom for people to go out to forests to pick short pine trees to decorate their homes at the New Year. The composition is actually a musical description of a pine tree being plucked from the ground. The three strings of the instrument are plucked and q drum effect is caused by the snapping of the plectrum against both the string and the tight catskin covering the square box of the instrument.

4. ROKUDAN NO SHIRABE – (7:46)
Rokudan No Shirabe by Yatsuhashi Kengyo, follows a traditional form. The title stands for its form – six sections of 52 beats of ½ counts. It dates from early koto history, is neither descriptive not symbolic. Simple of melody and technique, it is reminiscent of Bach, takes the form of a concerto grosso played koto, shamisen and shakuhachi.

5. CHIDORI NO KYOKU – (Music of Plovers) (12:53), was composed by Yoshizawa Kengyo in the early 19th Century. Consists of four parts, the first part gives an impression of Gagaku followed by a classical poem which reads:

The plovers, which live
Out on the shore
Will chirp
“Forever, the court”

The music in the third part is gay and refreshing. Then the second folk song type poem is sung:

The Watchman at Suma
Keeps dreaming all night
Because he hears
The crying of Chicory

The voice of plovers is played by sliding the nail piece on the string, twice and twice again, before the music ends. The music is played by two kotos and four shakuhachis. The performers are masters of Ikura-ryu and the recording was made by Katsumasa Takasago.

6. SORAN-BUSHI – (1:14)
Soran bushi is based on a popular song of fishermen of the northern part of Japan, Hokkaido.

7. KURODA-BUSHI (2:14)
Originally a song of warriors of the Kuroda family. The music is now adapted in Japanese spear dances, poetry chant, and for drinking parties.

8. NIWA NO SANSHU NO KI (1:53)
This s music based on the silverberry tree planted in the garden.

9. UTSUKUSHIKI TEN-NEN (9:19)
The exact translation of the title is "Beautiful Nature." This is one of the very first popular melodies since the restoration (1868).

10. BANSHU (6:34)
Bashu (Late Autumn) was composed by Katsuko Tsukushi, master of the Tsukushi School from Kyushu. This music is also called Ochibasurukoro ("The Time of Falling Leaves").

CREDITS

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