

Approaching Contemporary Music on the Japanese Shakuhachi

by Shawn Renzoh Head



Brief Background

To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, “good composers borrow, great composers steal.” During my studies at the Cleveland Institute of Music, I dedicated hours each day to devouring new music from around the world, and I took world music courses to help expand my experience beyond the Western canon. When I started to perform shakuhachi more widely, I composed my own pieces. However, later I decided that I wanted to adapt some of my favorite silver flute compositions to the instrument.

This proved challenging, as the range, techniques, and maneuverability of an open-holed shakuhachi differs widely from the keyed western flute. Thus, I found direct transcriptions of existing pieces to be somewhat hit or miss. Some pieces sounded very natural on the shakuhachi, while others required changes that felt like too great a deviation from the originals. Eventually, I began to commission works for the shakuhachi. Working directly with the composers eliminated these technical difficulties, resulting in works with a more satisfying fit for the instrument.

In this article, I will share my experience adapting Toru Takemitsu’s *Air*, which I have performed throughout Japan and America. This challenging work seemed fitting for the shakuhachi, as its harmonic language fits wonderfully with the Eastern tone and timbre of the shakuhachi. I will also discuss working with composers and performing their works, specifically detailing my experience with HsinJung Tsai’s composition, *Empty Cicada Shell*.

Technical Approach in Takemitsu’s *Air*

One aspect that makes shakuhachi different from the Western flute is the variety of fingerings and ways of playing any given pitch. For example, in the opening of *Air* there is a sustained A_4 pitch tied into an eighth-note bracketed septuplet. There are two ways to execute this pitch. One fingering allows more dynamic range, while the other offers a unique timbre. As a shakuhachi player, I naturally chose the fingering that gave me more color and expression. There were many passages like this in this piece. For example, the second measure contains four notes that have alternate fingerings, including a $G\#_5$ with three effective options. Shakuhachi players generally seek out the fingerings that offer the most timbral variation. Some of these passages actually made *Air* sound more like a shakuhachi piece, rather than a Western silver flute piece. Measure fourteen, for instance, contains an A -flat to E -flat interval jump. This perfect fourth is the same interval as an alternative fingering for the *chimeri tsu* technique. Choosing this traditional fingering gave me more timbral range with which to work.

In addition to the edits needed for fingering, there was also the issue of range. Measures 23 through 26 have many low B -naturals. This note is in fact possible on the shakuhachi, but it is highly unreliable. It is played with the head and neck in an extreme downward position (*dai dai meri*), and thus it is extraordinarily soft. In my experimentations, the tone was more air than pitch. In retrospect, it might have been a better choice to use the airy sound, since the piece is titled *Air*. I decided at the time, however, to instead raise those pitches up an octave.

Takemitsu’s music has a signature circular melodic line that departs from and returns seamlessly to its home base, in this case the low B -natural 3. Because of this, taking it up an octave actually had little effect on the composition’s integrity, and luckily there were only a few sections that required this kind of shift.



Here is a list of similar changes I made:

1. Measure 34, first *B* up an octave
2. Measure 40, *B* up an octave
3. Measure 50, both low *B*s up an octave
4. Measure 52, replace low *B*s with *D*₄
5. Measure 55, *B* up an octave
6. Measure 58, *B* up an octave
7. Measure 72, *B* up an octave
8. Measure 75, first two beats of $\frac{3}{8}$ meter up an octave
9. Measure 78, last *B* up an octave

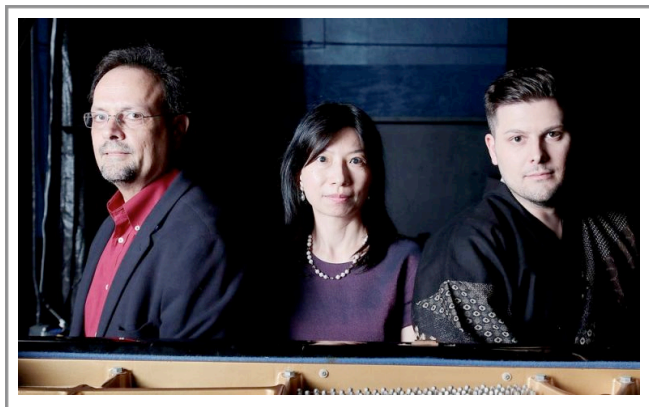
The next issue was determining when and where it was appropriate to add the famous *korokoro* trill. *Korokoro* is the onomatopoeic name for a trill between *C*, *C*#, and *C* quarter-tone-sharp. This technique and its variations are an integral part of the voice and character of the shakuhachi. One of my big concerns with original compositions or arrangements for shakuhachi is the indiscriminate use of traditional techniques like this one.

There was one section in Takemitsu's *Air* where I was able to add a variant of the *korokoro*, *boroboro*. *Horoboro* is slightly airier and centers itself around a *C*#. This happens in measures 52 to 53. The first *E*-natural trill was done by trilling on the second hole, but the following *C*# was achieved with the *boroboro* technique. The *G*-natural trill in measure 54 was created with a technique called *karakara*, where the player repeatedly hits the first hole. The *F* trill was played in a similar fashion by half-hole trilling the first hole. This was the only passage where *korokoro* could be effectively utilized without sounding forced, unnatural, or gimmicky.

The next technical question concerns tonguing. Traditionally speaking, the shakuhachi is not a tongued instrument; meaning, players re-articulate by striking open holes, or by quickly opening and closing a hole. In Takemitsu's *Air*, there are a few places where tonguing is necessary. The first is the echoed motif in measure 4 (*E*, *D*#, *C*#, *A*). In this case, I tongue the first two notes for two reasons: the first note is marked with a *marcato*, and because the shakuhachi does not speak well on that first *E*. Separating this phrase with tonguing preserved the clarity needed for this line. Other locations marked with an accent are also tongued in most cases. Lastly, the quasi-flutter tongue sections are done with double tonguing. On the repeated-note sections, I used the traditional method of re-articulation. This only happens a few times, in measures 52 and 75.

I added other techniques to the performance, as well, including airy sounds known as *sorane* and *muraiki* on the Japanese flute. If you are interested, you can watch the full performance of Takemitsu's *Air* on YouTube at the link below.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=304gD-_WYBY



Working With Composers

I have a simple approach when I work with composers. I tell them, “write whatever you want, and I will find a way to make it happen.” To date, only one of the works that I have commissioned remains unperformed, due to the Coronavirus pandemic. I would like to thank the following composers for their wonderful compositions: Bo Li, Gary Smart, Hsin-Jung Tsai, Chapman Welch, Adam Vincent Clay, Eric Charnofsky, David Vayo, Gabriel Lubell, Stephen Yip, Omar Peracha, and Aaron Beilish.

I chose to commission these pieces because the shakuhachi does not have an expansive repertoire like the violin or piano. As much as I love playing the traditional and contemporary canon of the shakuhachi, I wanted something different. I started to arrange pieces that I enjoyed, like Takemitsu's *Air*. Other works, like Debussy's *Syrinx*, were riveting to play, but I was left still wanting something different. I studied composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music, so I began to write compositions myself, including the solo shakuhachi pieces *Burning Roots Sketch No 1* and *Vicissitudes*, and *Inside My Glass Doors* for shakuhachi and string quartet. However, I have my own style and voice, and I was still left wanting something different. I began commissioning pieces from my composer friends, and, eventually, I hosted a composition competition, commissioning composers from around the world.

With each of the composers, the process was similar. The first step was giving them a packet and a selection of videos that I made detailing my instrument and how it works. After they reviewed the material, we would sit down, either in person or over a Zoom call, and they could ask me questions, have me try some musical ideas, and/or collaborate through experimentation. During my time working with these composers, I did not express interest or disinterest in any genre or style of music. I wanted to encourage each composer to write whatever they wished. I did, however, offer them the scores of my shakuhachi compositions as study guides. In addition, I sent a list of traditional works, as well as some contemporary compositions, that I felt were extraordinarily well-written for the shakuhachi.

A question common to all of the composers was how to develop the shakuhachi idiom. The instrument has many set phrases that are repeated throughout the traditional music. Showcasing and sometimes transcribing those passages for the composers helped immensely.

To illustrate how this process worked, I will discuss the creation of Hsin-Jung Tsai's composition, *Empty Cicada Shell*. Hsin-Jung Tsai is a Taiwanese native who, at that time, lived in the same city as me, Houston, Texas. She now resides in Taiwan and I live in Japan, but we are still hoping to work together again. We built a close relationship and performed concerts together, before she wrote any compositions for me. Her approach to composing for shakuhachi was to perform with me, doing improvisations, classical compositions, and contemporary works. Hsin-Jung Tsai's first composition was titled *Empty Cicada Shell*. It is a truly challenging work, filled with treasures that make the hard work worthwhile.

She chose to use standard five-line Western notation. In my specific shakuhachi lineage, our notation only has breath marks, with no rhythmic indications at all. The opening sections of Tsai's work holds to the same standard. There is no time signature, the note heads are left without stem markings, and there are breath marks notated with seconds, elegantly mimicking the pacing of traditional honkyoku music. After this opening section, rhythmic notation begins.

Tsai included additional breath marks, and indicated passages that were open to rhythmic interpretation, brilliantly mixing the time signature with the time-sensitivity found in Japanese music. In addition to the rhythmic and melodic passage work, Tsai mixed traditional and Western techniques, blending the natural sounds of the Japanese world with the mechanical sounds of the West.

The next section of the piece is articulated with staccato eighth notes. This builds energy for the upcoming section of virtuosic eighth notes associated with Western classical music. This passage races on, exploring the upper register of the shakuhachi, which is almost never touched in traditional music. In this setting, it sounds almost ghostlike, with the blending of airy sounds and piercing high pitches. As this section comes to a halt, Tsai calls for a shouted "Ha!" that happens twice. The main theme then returns, with flutter-tongued articulation. It is repeated in variations, while taking advantage of the shakuhachi's open holes. Each note slips and slides to another before landing on "Ro," or *D4*, which is considered one of the most important notes on the shakuhachi.

With Ro acting as the drone, Tsai then adds an additional staff which indicates playing and singing at the same time. Shortly after, the shakuhachi player is asked to chant in the Shomyo style (Buddhist liturgical chant), which is said to have a close historical connection with the shakuhachi. The shakuhachi melodies and shomyo chanting then weave back and forth in free rhythm. When the final text is chanted, the shakuhachi player ends with a timbre trill (*karakara* in Japanese) on an *A5* pitch, ending the piece with a question and a statement in one figure.

HsinJung Tsai's work embodies balance. She blends Japanese aesthetics, Western musical expression, and her own voice. This, coupled with her careful research of the instrument, created a challenging and rewarding new composition for the shakuhachi. Her other work, *Autumn*, inspired by the Buddhist equinox, is of the same caliber. All of the composers have created brilliant works that are enriching the shakuhachi's repertoire. My hope is to continue this trend by commissioning new works.

You can hear Tsai's piece here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNguBPPg_9o



With an active career as a shakuhachi soloist, chamber musician, recording artist, and composer, **Shawn Renzoh Head** is at the forefront of Japanese traditional music and its expansion into the Western world. His dedication to the shakuhachi transcends borders through the commissioning of new works and performances in a multitude of mediums. A meticulous musician with an appetite for the new, Head is committed to the shakuhachi as a vehicle with transcendental capabilities.

Shawn Renzoh Head offers shakuhachi lessons. Please visit his Web site for more information about lessons and for more of his performances.

www.shawnheadmusic.com