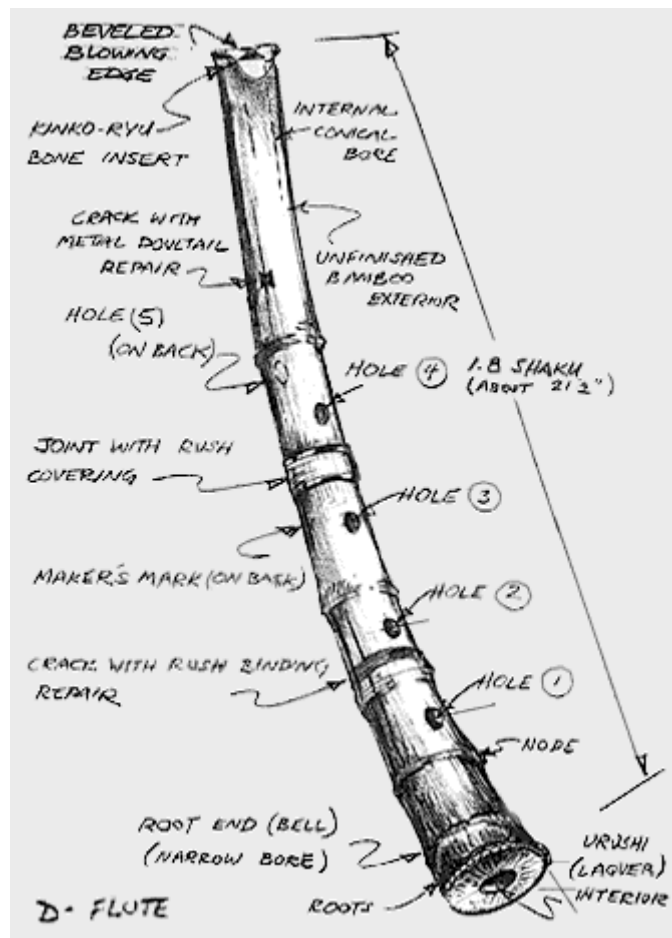


## SHAKUHACHI FACT SHEET

The shakuhachi is a Japanese bamboo flute, still used today by Buddhist Zen monks as a meditation tool. Also popular in the past with samurai warriors, its eerie sound is heard in Japanese folk and classical music. The sound of the shakuhachi is quintessentially Japanese – it is one of those instruments (like the bagpipes maybe) which have a strong emotional link with national identity.

The shakuhachi is a heavier, thicker instrument than the Chinese flute from which it originally evolved. With a hefty bamboo root left intact at the foot, it has even been used as a weapon of self-defence by Buddhist monks performing for alms in the street. The mouthpiece is a wide, crescent-shaped notch – this very open design works together with the five large finger holes and the wide, lacquered bore to produce the shakuhachi's characteristic ethereal tone and gusts of breath. Traditionally the player aims at the sound of the wind blowing through a decaying bamboo grove.

Clive Bell studied the shakuhachi in Tokyo with the respected performer and composer Kohachiro Miyata.



*(SHAKUHACHI FACT SHEET continued)*

The standard size is called 1.8 (“one point eight”). The name “shakuhachi” is a description of the length: one shaku and eight sun. There are several other sizes for playing in different keys. The lowest note on the standard shakuhachi is D next to middle C. The range is two and a half octaves.

Not all the notes are equal. The scale made by opening one hole at a time is: D F G A C. The remaining notes are made by half-holing, and may sound weaker. The difference in tone colour between the notes is one of the points of interest in the traditional music.

Two pentatonic scales used in Japanese music are: D F G A C, and D E flat G A B flat. Notes are not tongued, but articulated by fingering, as with traditional Irish flute. Phrases tend to be ornamented in ways that are learned orally from a teacher. The shakuhachi has its own notation system based on “kana” syllables. Each note is represented by a syllable, something like the Western doh-re-mi system. Koto and shamisen have different notation systems.

Types of traditional music that include shakuhachi:

1. Honkyoku – traditional solo pieces, associated with Zen Buddhism. Their origins are shrouded in the mists of antiquity, but they were collected and transcribed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Minyo – folk music. the flute shadows highly ornamented singing.
3. Sankyoku – classical chamber music for shakuhachi, koto (zither) and shamisen (lute). Mainly from the Edo period (1615-1868), before Japan had contact with the West.

Some thoughts on writing for shakuhachi:

The Western flute is a highly evolved machine, with plenty of keys, designed to enable nimble movement in any key, and chromatic acrobatics. The shakuhachi has no keys, and different priorities. Rapid, chromatic movement is very difficult, and not every note has the same timbre or dynamic strength. However the shakuhachi does some things well that are tricky on the Western flute: glissandi, including glissando on a tremolo; breath sound, and breathy attacks; development of timbre and dynamic within one note. The complex virtuosity of some types of contemporary music, where the extreme difficulty of performance seems to be part of the point, is not necessarily appropriate on this instrument (though I suppose Frank Denyer and Yoshikazu Iwamoto might disagree). Finally, one way to make a shakuhachi player struggle and curse is to give him or her music that would sound far better on a flute.

More information:

*Japanese Music And Musical Instruments*, book by William Malm, published by Tuttle 1959.

<http://www.shakuhachi.com/> Monty Levenson’s site.

<http://www.shakuhachisociety.eu/index.html> European Shakuhachi Society.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Euroshak/> list started by Kiku Day, UK-oriented.

<http://www.mejiro-japan.com/> Japanese website, with English section, based in Mejiro, Tokyo. Instruments, sheet music, CDs. I bought a shakuhachi at this Tokyo shop in 2003.

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