

Yokoyama Katsuya: Recollections by three European students.

Horacio Curti, Jim Franklin, Véronique Piron



On 21st April 2010, Yokoyama Katsuya, one of the great shakuhachi players of the 20th century and a central figure in the recent development of the shakuhachi in Japan and overseas, passed away in his seventy-sixth year.

Yokoyama-sensei was renowned for his propagation of the line of shakuhachi honkyoku derived from Watazumi Do, as well as for his championing of contemporary composition for the shakuhachi. He was a principal interpreter of the music of Fukuda Rando. and came to

prominence through his premiere performance of Toru Takemitsu's "November Steps" in 1967. His legacy as a teacher is seen in the Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan (International Shakuhachi Institute), the school of teaching and performing which he called into being especially to strengthen the position of the shakuhachi outside of Japan as well as in its homeland. Furthermore, it was in this spirit that he instigated the World Shakuhachi Festivals in 1994.

Three students of Yokoyama who received teaching licenses from him are now living on the European mainland. They present their recollections and thoughts about this great master of the instrument.

Horacio Curti: **Presence**

Yokoyama sensei has been a very strong presence in my life since I started playing the shakuhachi. As a disciple of Kakizakai Kaoru-sensei I would consider myself his “grandson student” and it was from his hand and brush that my shakuhachi Shihan license originated in 2004.

I remember receiving advice from him on several occasions during the workshops of Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan held in Bisei, Japan. He was always clear, to the point, strict but encouraging, and knowing that even such a great player was always thinking about how to get better, was a great motivation to me.

Besides these occasions of direct contact with him, he was, is and surely will be very present in so many of my sensei's teachings. Through anecdotes, stories, images and ways of understanding shakuhachi music he was present at my shakuhachi breakthroughs, in the fun side of the learning process and also in the hard parts of it.

I feel grateful to him for his sound, his teaching, playing and also for the way he conceived his *Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan* and the people he formed and brought together. It is not by chance that the great qualities embodied in people like Matama-sensei, Furuya-sensei and Kakizakai-sensei, among many others, coalesced around him.

It is a great inspiration to listen to his recordings and look into the many different shakuhachi paths he followed, from koten Honkyoku to Takemitsu's pieces, through his own and personal “Sangai Rinten”.

I feel sad knowing that he is not among us any more, but at the same time happy and grateful for his sound and all the things he presented to the shakuhachi players that had the fortune to cross paths with him in one way or another.

Jim Franklin: **Blowing the human spirit**

My association with Yokoyama-sensei was not terribly long, but was highly intense. It is no exaggeration to say that learning with Yokoyama-sensei changed my life. As a student of Riley Lee in the 1980s and early 1990s, I decided soon after starting with shakuhachi that the musical repertoire that interested me in particular was the set of honkyoku transmitted by Yokoyama-sensei, and that my ideal (by no means achieved by me!) for playing the instrument was the sound and spirit that Yokoyama-sensei produced. It was therefore a clear decision that, when finances, employment and personal circumstances allowed, I would go to

Japan to study with him (and with Furuya Teruo-sensei, his most senior student, whom I met on my first trip to Japan in 1990). My recollections are thus derived from a short period, rather than from an extended period of development lasting decades, which some of the senior KSK players have had the good fortune to experience.

Apart from the Yokoyama-sensei's musical gift and skill, which are obvious from his performances and recordings, what touched me most was his generosity. The nature of teaching is to give of oneself to one's students, and Yokoyama held nothing back. In my experience, he was always prepared to give of his time, his resources and his insights, in support of (comparatively) young players such as myself. This support placed demands on the student: Yokoyama called forth the best that one could offer. There were no half measures, and no compromises; exactness was demanded, and one did one's best to give it. And there was no end to the pathway: Yokoyama taught that one should never rest with what one had already achieved, but should keep on improving and working. After receiving my shihan-license from him, I was subjected in lessons to the same incisive (and simultaneously supportive) criticism as before - something for which I am perpetually grateful.

Although my Japanese is very limited, and Yokoyama's English was mediocre, communication was never a problem. Above and beyond the mish-mash of languages, which we employed in personal conversations as well as in lessons, communication was always clear on a musical level. And it was often non-verbal: one of the peak experiences of my life so far was the day in 1996 when I finally felt ready to work on the honkyoku *San An* with him. I had prepared for this highly demanding piece well in advance, having first learned it with Riley Lee and then reworking it intensively with Furuya-sensei. In playing the piece with Yokoyama-sensei, he stopped at a couple of points and let me play on alone. When we reached the end of the piece, we both spontaneously burst out laughing - an outburst of pure joy and freedom within the music, a communication without words but full of energy and intensity. The sense of this freedom, and the spirit of humanity from which it ensued, is a great gift, which I received particularly through Yokoyama-sensei.

There were amusing moments in my encounter with him, and I close my contribution with one of them. In late 1996, Yokoyama-sensei had his teaching studio in Tokyo converted into a small private recording studio. The apartment was a building site for some weeks, and it was in this period that Yokoyama-sensei issued me with my teaching license. So, in the middle of dust, mess, plasterboard and so on, he took out his writing set, and in the presence of myself and several of the senior KSK teachers, wrote a superb piece of calligraphy. It was for me a sign of Yokoyama-sensei's deep humanity that the ceremonial nature of the occasion and of the piece of calligraphy involved was played out in such unlikely circumstances - without the least sense of incongruity. His generosity and openness of spirit made the circumstances irrelevant - the spirit was what mattered.

It is my hope that all those who came into contact with Yokoyama-sensei will be able to pass on such vision and human richness.

OKAGE SAMA DESHITA, thoughts and a tribute, by Véronique Piron

As a flautist, it was first at the end of 1980s that I discovered through recordings the shakuhachi, and more especially Katsuya Yokoyama's way of playing, being myself then in search of a deeper tone and of a more sober way of playing for my flute. It was a big discovery, although nothing at that moment gave a premonition of the course which was going to start for me in 1992.

" All those who are concerned by the questions of life and death are concerned by the shakuhachi."

This was the way that my first meeting with the master commenced, in Paris in 1997 together with Yoshikazu Iwamoto with whom I had started learning. The scenery was set, in the manner of the strength of character (the comments of a samurai?): the impression was vast and the desire was awakened to go and look further.

A STRENGTH OF LIFE

In August 2000 (almost 10 years ago now), finally my first face-to-face lesson took place in Tôkyô. The anticipated meeting was intense. As an involved musician it all my conviction and my desire not to waste a single morsel of these 2 years that had been given to me, thanks to him and the obtaining of my scholarship, in order to work with him and his school, that I appeared, playing frankly and openly. "Conquered...", he said clearly and loudly with his strongly marked character, and after my interpretation of *Kumoi Jishi*, suddenly he stood up and started dancing: a demonstration of the sliding steps of the Japanese classical dance, even in that year when his legs had already started to abandon him. Everyone present held their breath: it was his incredible strength of life and the demonstration of the overcoming of oneself, one of his banners.

A SOUND, A GENEROSITY

In October 2000, at last I got one of my first Katsuya-kan, a shakuhachi made completely by his own hands, and furthermore, a 1.6 cut from magnificent black bamboo that he had chosen meticulously - an impression of wabi-sabi - with a sound of the same quality as the long instruments, his sonic signature: the generous, wide sound, in his likeness and also just like the work of famous classical musicians, and it is to this rank that he had obviously been elevated by his desire and by his realizations.

During one of my last lessons in 2002, just a short time before I received from him my shihan license, Yokoyama-sensei confided to me with the small voice which he also commanded and which marked his attachment to humankind: " it is love which urged me to do - all of that - "... of course..., we've heard it!

To blow in this instrument marked with this sound signature, is a gift but sometimes something disturbing: he is thus imprinted there forever.

SPEAKING: A HUMAN LESSON

As is generally the case, the lessons are collective, running from 13:00 to 21:00, the atmosphere is especially convivial and always welcoming with a cup of tea. The student, or perhaps a teacher, interprets by memory the chosen piece in front of everyone present. At the end of the rendition, Yokoyama-sensei opens a "round table" where everyone reacts in turn to what he has just heard, the student still sitting in front of them: impressions, dislikes, comments, critics, eulogies, even some poetic quotations ...

simply to "say" without discussing,
for the student to "listen" simply without reacting,
Yokoyama-sensei is the last one to comment.

What a brilliant lesson of pedagogy and life! ...giving each and everyone a free space for expression, but also a good opportunity to become aware of our duality and our own internal conflicts, to learn how to let go, and finally to live an incredible human experience! Unique and unforgettable...

In that way we understand that he has been able to open the way of the shakuhachi to the greatest possible number, that he knew how to gather diverging horizons and built a large family around himself who accompanied him until his last breath.

But as with the rhythm of the breath of the komibuki, he will still resound for a long time and far away.



Yokoyama-sensei's contribution to the world of the shakuhachi was immense, and his broader contribution went far beyond the boundaries of the instrument. The world is indebted to this great musician, whose life work remains a milestone and a foundation for the future. He will be sorely missed, and gladly remembered.

HC, JF, VP

