

## Recording Reviews

*Marty Regan: Forest Whispers . . . Selected Works for Japanese Instruments, Vol. 1.* North Hampton, NH: Navona Records, 2009. One CD-ROM (61 minutes, 45 seconds).

The traditional music of Japan (*hogaku*) has long been of interest to composers, performers, and scholars from other countries. In the United States, this interest was stimulated first by the presence of musicians within the Japanese immigrant community, and later by the establishment of Japanese music studies at several universities. Since the mid-twentieth century a number of American composers have been drawn to Japanese music, a notable early and influential example being Henry Cowell, whose “The Universal Flute” for solo *shakuhachi* (1946) and “Koto Concerto I” (1961) were extraordinary works in their time.

In the years after World War II, Japanese composers who had trained in Western composition turned their ears to traditional music and started to work with and challenge *hogaku* artists in new directions. Subsequently, composers and performers from other countries have, in growing numbers, pursued serious study of Japanese music and have forged fascinating encounters with musicians in Japan. Indeed since the latter twentieth century, a remarkable transformation has been taking place, as instruments like the *shakuhachi* and *koto* that were typically associated with a particular place and time are increasingly part of the contemporary global music community. *Forest Whispers . . . Selected Works for Japanese Instruments, Vol. 1*, a 2009 recording on the Navona label featuring works by American composer Marty Regan, is a telling example of this exciting new musical landscape.

Mr. Regan, an Assistant Professor of Music at Texas A&M University, studied at the Tokyo College of Music and has maintained strong associations with a circle of talented composers and performers in Japan. His study of and deep respect for the music are evident in this fine recording of five pieces from his large repertoire of works for Japanese instruments, spanning the period from 2001 to 2008. These works are sensitive to the idiomatic character of the instruments, generally utilize a pitch collection characteristic of Edo period *hogaku*, and reveal an aesthetic that one cannot help but describe as romantic, even nostalgic—like much of Japanese music itself. In this recording the composer is collaborating with a group of wonderful music artists representing different generations of *hogaku* performers, who bring the music to life with sincerity and skill.

The first track on the recording, “Song-Poem of the Eastern Clouds,” composed in 2001, is an early work that set the composer on a path to explore a Japanese aesthetic within a personal framework. Scored for *shakuhachi* and 21-string *koto*, the piece is strongly influenced by *shakuhachi honkyoku* and tries to capture that tradition’s time sense, one built on breath cycles rather than on a metered pulse. In the digital program booklet accompanying the recording, the composer describes his efforts to create a “proportional notation” system of “rhythmic indeterminacy” appropriate to *shakuhachi* music. This understated work begins with alternating solo parts for the two instruments that nicely reflect their innate qualities and that basically adhere to the scale structure of the traditional music, as do the ensemble sections which follow. Seizan Sakata on *shakuhachi* and Reiko Kimura on *koto* seem to enjoy the freedom to express a musical sensibility they know so well within a contemporary setting. In terms of both compositional structure and musical character the work is somewhat reminiscent of Teizo Matsumura’s influential 1969 composition, “Shikyoku (Poem) 1.”

“Song-Poem” and the final piece on the CD, “Forest Whispers,” form complementary bookends for the recording as a whole. *Forest Whispers* is a more recent work from 2008 that updates the composer’s ongoing search for a distillation of Japanese music aesthetics, and for a notation system that can more accurately reflect the nuances of the style. This work, scored for *shakuhachi* and cello, benefits from fine performances by Mr. Sakata and by cellist Asako Hisatake. The work again opens with a *shakuhachi* solo, this time with tonal material that veers slightly away from the traditional. The cello solo which follows echoes the *shakuhachi* in melody, phrasing, and dynamics. A kind of call and response pattern moves throughout the piece, often overlapping, creating a theme-and-variations conversation.

The third composition on the CD, “In Remembrance,” is the other work that combines Western and Japanese instruments, again the *shakuhachi* but this time with piano (Yasuko Furuse), violin (Kioko Miki), and cello (Ms. Hisatake). The composer’s notes tell us that the work is an elegy for the victims of 9/11, and that he is trying to express not only a sense of loss and mourning but also one of hope and beauty. It is especially challenging to place the piano in context with Asian instruments, and here the composer meets the challenge by never letting the piano become too forceful. The *shakuhachi* is again prominent, with a short opening solo and later several cadenzas incorporating elements of *honkyoku*, including excerpts from “Tamuke,” a requiem piece from the *honkyoku* repertoire. In the ensemble playing the texture of each instrument is nicely illuminated, but for this listener there is an exaggerated sweetness in the harmonies and melodic phrases, and a kind of “stock” feel to the *shakuhachi* cadenzas, that hold back the work.

The recording's remaining two pieces feature the *shamisen*, an instrument that is particularly difficult to write for but that offers opportunities for more rhythmically dynamic ideas. "Evanescent Yearning" is a 2008 composition for *shamisen* and *koto* comprised of three sections. The composer states that he was inspired by Japanese *sakura*, the fleeting cherry blossoms that recall the impermanence of life. The two young musicians, Tetsuya Nozawa on *shamisen* and Sahoko Nozawa on *koto*, together give a vibrant performance. The first movement is an attractive, clean blend of the two instruments, working well within a recognizable *hogaku* framework. The second movement, opening with a *koto* solo, introduces some compelling melodic and harmonic material. In the third movement, the *shamisen* and *koto* enter with a faster-paced duo in energetic but fairly straightforward rhythmic phrasing. A rubato *shamisen* solo leads into a slower, nicely framed duet that is then followed by a pulsing, syncopated conclusion.

The remaining work on the recording is a 2007 composition, "fastpass!" inspired by the long lines and busy energy of a visit to Disney World. Here Mr. Nozawa's *shamisen* is coupled with the shoulder drum, *ko-tsuzumi*, performed by Kaho Toshi. The piece begins with an up-tempo *shamisen* passage followed by the drum entrance, with the two instruments then trading phrases. The lively rhythm, the drum calls, and the intertwining hocketing of the two instruments create a piece of music that is enjoyable to hear and no doubt to play as well, although perhaps a bit clichéd at times. A slower, lyrical *shamisen* solo in the middle of the piece provides meaningful contrast and is one of the nicest moments in the entire recording.

A word about the production: Navona Records is a division of Parma Recordings. According to its website, the company specializes in the "development and implementation of unique and impressive musical products and production solutions," and indeed the technical aspects of the recording are excellent. However, the handsome packaging lists only the composer's name and biography and the names of the pieces, in both English and Japanese. Other details about the music and the musicians are included as part of an interactive media package that can only be accessed by inserting the CD in one's computer. Once that is done, there is useful information about the compositions, the instruments, and the artists. In my view, it is a great injustice, a travesty really, that the musicians' names do not appear on the physical CD packaging. These fine performers should be visibly acknowledged at the outset.

Marty Regan is one of an expanding group of non-Japanese composers who are intelligently approaching Japanese music and musical instruments with both in-depth study and fresh ideas. These composers are making a meaningful contribution to contemporary *hogaku*, which is now a music that extends far beyond the borders of Japan. Mr. Regan's well-crafted compositions show a serious,

almost cautious, respect for the tradition, even when they begin to expand that tradition musically or conceptually. I look forward to future works that might stretch the boundaries even further.

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***Birmanie: Musique du théâtre classique/Burma: Classical Theatre Music.***

Compilation and text by Ward Keeler, recorded by Philip Yampolsky (2005). Geneva: Archives Internationales de Musique Populaire VDE 1317/1318, 2010. Two CD-ROMs (2 hours, 9 minutes, 38 seconds). Includes 43 pages of liner notes in French and English with photos.

*Zat* and *yokthay* theatre of Burma/Myanmar has an important and distinguished place in the culture of the lowland Burmans. The conspicuous absence of available quality recordings of these traditions has at last been remedied by this valuable two-CD collection. *Birmanie: Musique du théâtre classique/Burma: Classical Theatre Music* samples a rich array of vocal and instrumental music from the theatre of the Burmans (the ethnic Burmans make up about 60 percent of the population of the country renamed Myanmar in the early 1990s).

*Zat*, the term used to denote the traditional live-actor dance drama, derives from the Pali word *jataka* that refers to stories recounting the past lives of the Buddha. There are reportedly 550 *jataka* tales, ten of which are well known, that are employed in multiple theatrical and storytelling contexts. Burmese *zat* also contains many more local stories, myths, legends, and historical tales of Burma's renowned rulers. Burma's *yokthay* (marionette) theatre also maintains the transmission of these *jatakas* and other tales. The *yokthay* marionettes preceded the *zat* classical drama and, in days past, even superseded them in public esteem.

Both of these traditions are at risk today. The marionette theatre has dwindled most significantly and is only rarely found outside of brief, edited presentations for tourists. While today's *zat* performances maintain a popular audience, they only sparingly include the stories from the classical tradition (the *jatakas*). The musical accompaniment for the shows has been radically altered to incorporate electronic instruments (guitars, keyboards, and turntables) and is structured much like a vaudeville show with short, often unrelated, skits, songs, and comic routines in quick succession. Increasingly rare in the contemporary *zat* world is a performance of the *nauk paing* (last part) classical story, usually in the wee hours of the morning of the nightlong event. Given audiences' changing tastes and expectations, *zat* and *yokthay* troupes capable of performing the classical repertoire are increasingly scarce. With such significant and rapid change the repertoire is vanishing.