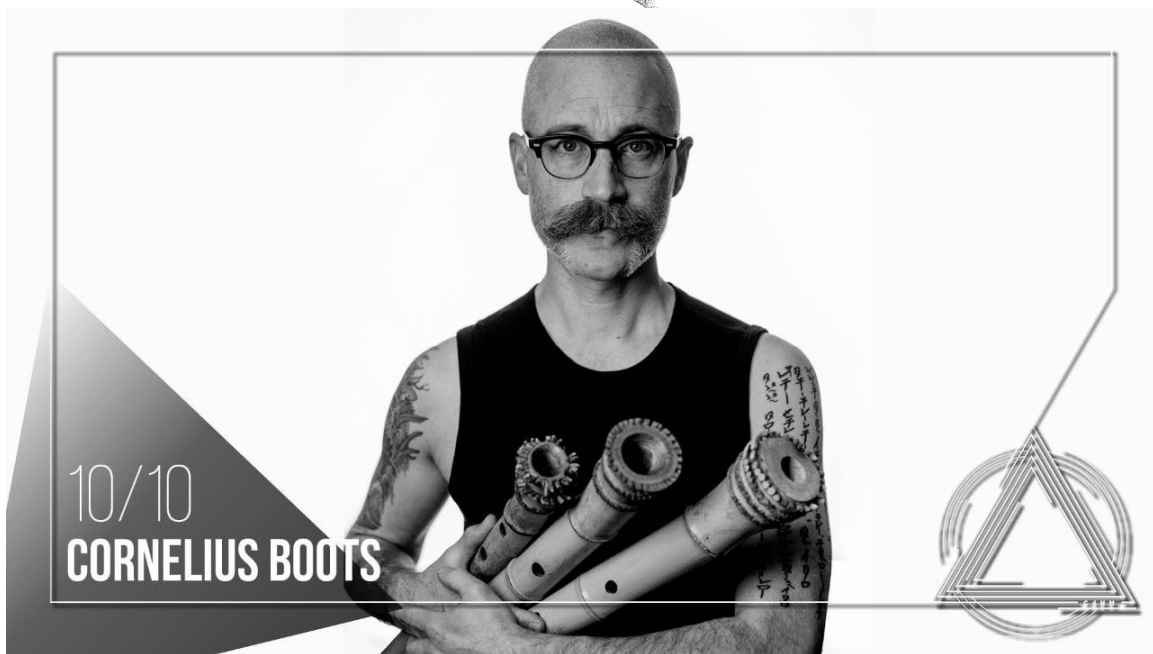
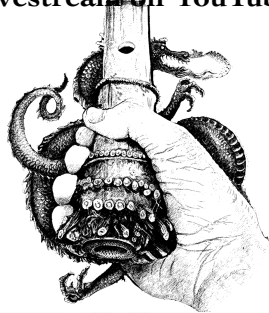


Center for New Music

10 Years of Mukyoku 無曲 : New Music for Taimu Bass Shakuhachi

October 10, 2020 - 7:00 pm

Livestream on YouTube:



Cornelius Boots – Taimu (bass jinashi shakuhachi); composer

The Turtle (mukyoku #1)..... Cornelius Boots (2009)
2.9 Taimu shakuhachi

Shunyata (mukyoku #2).....Cornelius Boots (2009)
2.8 Taimu shakuhachi

The Demiurge Takes Form (mukyoku #3).....Cornelius Boots (2009)
2.74 Taimu shakuhachi

Chaos Return (mukyoku #5).....Cornelius Boots (2009)
2.666 ŌMU shakuhachi

The Tree & the Maiden (mukyoku #7).....Cornelius Boots (2009)
3.2 Taimu shakuhachi

Doppelgänger (mukyoku #8).....Cornelius Boots (2009)
2.83 ÖMU shakuhachi

Theme of the Mendicant (mukyoku #22).....Cornelius Boots (2010)
2.9 Taimu shakuhachi

In Which the Sound Contemplates Your Existence
(mukyoku #24).....Cornelius Boots (2010)
3.2 Taimu shakuhachi

Pythias Dualis (mukyoku #25).....Cornelius Boots (2010)
2.75 Taimu shakuhachi

Shakthamunki (mukyoku #27).....Cornelius Boots (2010)
2.74 Taimu shakuhachi

To purchase and explore the original 2010 edition of Mukyoku Levels One, Two and Three including recordings, exercises, fingering charts, philosophy and complete calligraphic kinko notation for all 27 compositions please visit: <https://corneliusboots.com/projects/mukyoku/>

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THE 5 ASPECTS OF MUKYOKU

In creating a new repertoire for shakuhachi that was specifically for Taimu (the cello or Barry White of the shakuhachi world) my primary influences as a player and composer were honkyoku, blues, Tibetan chant, and 16 years of composition and performance on the bass clarinet. Chikuzen Sensei discusses the importance of the influence of Nature and Chant on honkyoku, so I began to think about a way to express the musical and stylistic context of these new pieces. Like the piece descriptions, if reading through these style descriptions and looking at the 5 Aspect Rating for each piece does not improve your connection to the mukyoku pieces, then please ignore them: they are optional.

Here are the detailed descriptions of the 5 main styles or Aspects that are found to greater or lesser degrees in each mukyoku piece. The fact that each piece is a song or training exercise unto itself is also part of its context, but these 5 Aspects can directly affect the tone, flavor, pacing, and intention of each piece more specifically. The 5 Aspects Rating for each piece is an approximate guide indicating the various levels of each Aspect within the piece as seen from the composer's point of view; however, if you feel that one of the Blues pieces is really a Nature piece because, for instance, you memorized it and play it outside while sitting on a huge rock, then this is just as valid.

1) STRUCTURED LONG TONES: Extending the Out-Breath; Breath Meditation

Long Tones are sustained pitches played in order to concentrate on your breath, tone and position (lips, mouth, arms, head, hands). These are very important for all wind instrument performance training, especially for shakuhachi. Sometimes the motivation to play Long Tones is lacking because the mind becomes restless and needs more to latch onto during this process: having compositions that are primarily formed from Long Tones and simple movement between them (like Kyorei, for example) are therefore very beneficial.

2) CHANT: The forming of ideas that are almost beyond language into intoned, structured sound. The direct influences of Chant styles on these compositions include: Gregorian, Tibetan (Gyuto and Gyume), Indian (Dhrupad), and shomyo. An indirect influence of chant on these compositions is through chant elements of the existing versions of honkyoku songs in the Kinko, Meian, and dokyoku styles. Some "chant" elements are designed to develop very slowly and focus on certain notes, melodic gestures or intervals, and some are intended to develop in organic, intuitive or unpredictable ways.

3) NATURE: The unpredictable sounds of all non-human manifestations on the planet: birds, volcanoes, creeks, oceans, leaves, jaws, claws, caves, snow, bark, wind, rocks, etc. Nature "music" can be imitations of, reflections of, or responses to these influences, or it can be music that is created while the composer/player is in Nature. Of course, in absolute terms there is nothing, least of all humans, which is actually outside of Nature; but in relative terms, the distinction between more non-human settings and the makings of humans is a useful one in order to be aware of their differences. In terms of music, we can generalize that the Nature influence engenders unpredictability, expansiveness, ebb and flow between chaos and form, and non-judgment towards right and wrong, or correct and incorrect. This is in contrast to human-made endeavors, materials and surroundings which can often be characterized by: the striving towards and seeking of perfection; a predetermined predictability; some constriction and desire for control; and a constant judgment mechanism attempting to separate good from bad, right from wrong, this from that, and so on.

4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES: The emotional and reptilian-brain experience of the human being turned into sound and song. "There was pain...but it was good pain." (The Last Poets) This sums up my interpretation of Blues music in its purest form: It was, in its original form, coming from the same place as the Nature observations and influence mentioned above, but it was this lens turned inward instead of outward: inward on the emotional suffering and joys of the displaced African-American in the late 19th and early 20th century American south. Although its rhythmic, harmonic and melodic structures are the single greatest influence on all aspects of American, British, jazz, rock, and popular music, my focus here is with the simpler, American rural shamanic approach to blues as exemplified by Robert Johnson, Son House, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Junior Kimbrough: translating raw human emotion (devotion, pain, reverence, suffering, gratitude) into structured sounds, then into small tales in verse, usually with very minimal use of words (like haiku) in order to not take the thinking mind too far away from the emotional and sound content of the song.

The reason I chose the label “Mississippi blues” in contrast with the more common “Delta blues,” is that Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside, the two primary influences on the blues riffs used in mukyoku, were from the Northern “Hill” Country of Mississippi, not actually from the Delta (a large region by the river, in the northwest corner of the state which is geographically distinct from the Mississippi River Delta which is much farther south). Also, Mississippi is fun to say, fun to spell, and to me it brings to mind instantly a kind of hot, rural farmland flavor that the word “Delta” does not accomplish. [My earliest and strongest blues influence, however, remains Blind Willie Johnson, a gospel bluesman from Texas whose main recordings (1927-1930) predate the seminal Robert Johnson sides by about 10 years.]

To elaborate on the primary blues influence on mukyoku, the mesmerizing and unrepentant Junior Kimbrough, his approach has been described as “unselfconscious and unassimilated,” and to most listeners he redefined authenticity within the genre of Blues. Medium tempo one- and two-chord tunes lasting 5 to 10 minutes with only 4 or 5 lines of lyrics, Junior’s blues is non-flashy, solid, raw and hypnotic: attributes shared by the Taimu. I have spent many hours of my Taimu practice playing along with Junior’s recordings and assimilating his bare-bones, straight-forward approach to blues tonalities, drones, riffs, and melodic gestures.

The parallels between Buddhist philosophy and the American blues ethos of the last 100 years are undeniable: essentially, life is suffering, but singing about it makes great music. Everyone can relate to this theme. Musically, the pitch vocabulary of the blues also parallels the primary set of notes used throughout the world for folk music, which also happens to be the pitches created by the main finger holes on the shakuhachi: Ro, Tsu, Re, Chi, Ri, a.k.a. the minor pentatonic scale. This seemingly limited set of notes is in fact extremely fertile territory for musical expression. Combine all of that with the often haunting or mournful vocal quality of lower-pitched shakuhachi (Taimu, hocchiku), and you’ve got a great vehicle for Buddhist blues.

5) NON-CATEGORY: Intuitive stream of consciousness.

A more internally mirrored version of the “Nature” approach, this is the unpredictability of the human mind and body interacting with the bamboo flute with minimal obfuscation by any kind of musical intention or goal. Moving away from the idea of “pleasing an audience” or “making good music,” there is still, however, a high level of discernment happening in terms of appropriateness and matching one’s Self to the flute.

MUKYOKU: TITLES AND DESCRIPTIONS

The titling of pieces has always been an important part of my process as a composer. Because I compose primarily instrumental pieces, the title has come to take on an even greater significance for me. The title generally serves as a guide, direction, or quality/flavor that the piece begins to adhere to as the writing progresses and the piece unfolds. For the listener or performer, it fulfills a similar role of Guide; it also serves as the link from the mostly exacting symbolism of our spoken and written language to the more abstract and open-ended realm of sounds and invisible structures (compositions, songs, recordings, etc.).

That being said, instrumental songs exist almost purely in this abstract world that thought, names, and titles cannot enter. In general, in spite of the "story" aspect of some mukyoku titles, I agree with Alan Watts' assessment that more intuitive, spontaneous music is Expressive as opposed to Descriptive, and pure music will usually be given titles like "Concerto Number 3" or something else as devoid of language-labeling as possible. But the titles came to me spontaneously, and I think they are fun and appropriate in this context. More important advice from Watts comes from his autobiography (*In My Own Way*, 1974): "Chanting, flute or drum playing, and dancing in demilitarized patterns are ideally natural forms of yoga-meditation, because they silence the hypnotic chattering of thought and give one a direct feeling of shabda--the basic energy or vibration of the universe."

These descriptions give some background to the titles and some musical details that might help in the playing of these pieces. If they don't help you or if they subtract from your experience of the pieces instead of adding to it, then I suggest not reading these descriptions and returning to the sound of your flute(s) and the notation itself to discover what the pieces might have to offer.

1—The Turtle

The turtle is very slow. It might stay completely still or inside of its shell when approached by an unknown. However, there is power in deliberateness, and a goal (i.e. getting to safety) or other strong motivation will cause the patient creature to increase speed, expand, or go forth in some way. We don't really know anything about animal psychology or emotions, it is all conjecture and anthropomorphization; I am not a biologist, and I don't even know if these impressions are accurate, but true observation of Nature can teach us if we pay attention with open awareness. This is a basic axiom of both Taoism and shamanic wisdom: two human approaches that pre-date just about everything (not including eating and fornication) that we consider important today. Even two of the "basic necessities" of clothing and shelter could have been taught directly from the Master: the turtle.

Musical Details:

This piece is loosely programmatic, meaning that the sequence of phrases reflects a possible story or event in the life of some

turtle somewhere. In this case, the first phrases struggle to get somewhere new (different fingerings for equal pitches, for example) and then they expand and balance themselves. Real movement comes in with the rhythmic phrases and the ending is a repeat of the opening, completing the cycle.

1) LONG TONES ●●● 2) CHANT ●● 3) NATURE ●●●●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES 5) NON-CATEGORY ●

2—Shunyata

Within a holistic Buddhist practice, the “concept” of Mu—or Emptiness, Void, Nothingness—always returns as a key feature for philosophical elaboration and contemplation. In an attempt to distinguish “conceptual emptiness” from the co-dependent origination of the Void, which is equal to the ground of all Being/Non-being as well as Tathagata (Suchness), Nagarjuna used the term Sunyata (sometimes spelled “Shunyata”). When your experience points beyond duality and returns you to absolute Emptiness, this is Shunyata. Emptying is a dynamic process, not a static state; there is movement in emptying. Returning your point of attention to the ground of being (no-self), and uniting and emptying with the sound and the flute is the process of this piece.

Musical Details:

Buddhist philosophy aside, this is just long tones, long tones with komi buki and larger spaces between phrases. I

recommend that the komi be done with the diaphragm: leave any tightening of the throat or any vocal sounds out of it when possible. Focusing your attention on the belly/diaphragm is recommended for all wind instrument tone development, and it is a practice shared with yoga, t'ai chi ch'uan, and many kinds of meditation. Focusing your attention on this point (lower tan t'ien: about 3 inches below the navel and 2.5 inches in from the skin) and making sure that the breath is generated and grounded at this point will increase your tonal power and your connection with the flute.

There are many wide intervals in this piece leading to expansive and simple melodic phrases that can help you connect the upper and lower parts of the flute into one whole. The pacing should be very slow and deliberate. You are free to: repeat individual phrases at will, breathe mid-phrase if necessary, scoop into some opening notes of phrases to get the position aligned, or otherwise modify the sustained sounds in order to get the breath into an active state.

1) LONG TONES ●●●●● 2) CHANT ●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●●

3—The Demiurge Takes Form

A demiurge is a craftsman or artisan associated with forming the material universe out of raw matter. He sometimes appears as the one to give form to matter and sometimes as the one to create ideas, depending on the era of philosophical theory in which he appears (Platonic, Middle Platonic, Neoplatonic, or Gnostic). The Demiurge figures largely in general occult practice as a force that can be used to get things to happen, bring about circumstances or bring things into being. It can also refer to a person acting in a life-giving capacity, as in an occult practitioner forming a being out of clay (golem) and inducing life-force into it through the use of spells and incantations. There is a double meaning in this title: one reading of “takes form” is to “take away form,” or destroy: the opposite of the creative action of the demiurge. Another reading is to “come into a form”, become a form or otherwise somehow create itself. This gives a kind of revolving perspective on the paradoxes of duality and the cycles of creation and destruction.

Musical Details:

If you remove “em-u” from the title you are left with the word “dirge,” and this is the primary musical aspect of this piece.

A dirge is a slow, often repetitive piece associated with solemn rituals such as funerals. Compositionally it is the halfway point between a drone and a riff, and the mukyoku

repertoire operates primarily on this continuum leaning more towards drones (long tones) at times and riffs (short melodic figures) at others. The tempo should mostly be slow and deliberate, but there are many possibilities for personal interpretation of tempo within this piece, particularly on the transitions between the metered sections (with beat markings) and the un-metered long note sections.

1) LONG TONES ●● 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES ●●● 5) NON-CATEGORY ●

5—Chaos Return

Written in the midst of moving from an artist loft into a house, this title is also inspired by the I Ching hexagram called "Return of the Dark Force." In daily material life, chaos causes much vexation and frustration; you could say that most of our daily efforts are angled towards ordering chaos or keeping it at bay. However, chaos is also the primordial "stuff" from which form and order are made. Therefore in spite of its lack of order and its unpredictability, Chaos is a cosmic template, parallel in concept to the Void, Space or Emptiness of Buddhist theory.

Musical Details:

This piece was written on the longest (2.8) and fattest of the 4 Taimu flutes that I work with, so no matter what flute this is played on, you should pretend that it is very wide and heavy: feel the air really bounce around inside the flute. This piece has some more dirge elements due to the slow, heavy pacing in addition to many honkyoku-isms. It is a sonic reflection of the disorder and potential within Chaos and so spaces between phrases can be increased, and the first section in particular should not sound especially musical or like it is really "going" anywhere. Delving into or facing Chaos takes effort; so most phrases should be at or close to full volume.

1) LONG TONES ●● 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE ● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES ● 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●

7—The Tree & the Maiden

I had an idea for a musical narrative which involved an in depth relationship between a young maiden and a very old tree. These two main characters would live in very different realities with different perceptions of time (i.e. one year for the Maiden would equal one minute for the Tree) and yet somehow there would be an intersection of these two realities at which they could meet and share perspectives and stories with each other. This song is the very reduced, instrumental version of the spirit I imagine this story would have if it ever gets told.

Musical Details:

This is the only piece of these 27 to be based on what I call the Mixolydian Pentatonic Scale, or in Western theory terms:

1 3 4 5 b7 (1), or in shakuhachi terms Ro, Re-meri, Re, Chi, Ri, (Ro or I). This is a great scale for free, unaccompanied improvisation, particularly on any kind of flute. It is a musical halfway point between common Western scales (major, minor, etc.) and non-major-scale derived "world music" scales and modes. The natural, strong-tone scale of shakuhachi, just to review, is what is called Minor Pentatonic in Western music theory or 1 b3 4 5 b7 (1), so this ("Mixolydian Pentatonic") scale only has one note shifted by a half-step: the Tsu or b3 (minor 3rd) now becomes Re-meri or 3 (major 3rd). This one little difference changes

the whole flavor of the set of notes, the 3rd being a very powerful tone in terms of flavor (usually referred to as "quality" but I find "flavor" to be more accurate) in musical scales and chords.

In spite of the "5 Aspects Rating" system that I came up with as guide for the influences and recommended stylistic approach to each mukyoku piece, some of the pieces, such as this one, are simply Songs, and should be played as melodically as possible.

1) LONG TONES ● 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES ●●● 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●

8—Doppelgänger

A doppelgänger is a double, a shadow-self, or an evil twin. In general, a direct confrontation with your own doppelgänger indicates that you are now or soon will be dead, and this confrontation with your shadow-self is part of a trial in the in-between- lives state that determines your purity of spirit or true core fortitude. Although most of these pieces were named independently from each other, certain patterns and themes such as Mortality, Duality, Paradox, and Self vs. Other began to emerge as the titles were given. As with the musical style of mukyoku, to the extent that there is a philosophical or thematic aspect to these pieces, it is essentially a personal synthesis of the mythology, psychology, cosmology, ideas and approaches from East and West. I am much more interested in the intersection, overlap and consensus conclusions from multiple doctrines (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Pagan, occult, for instance) than I am in their differences or their respective historical practices.

Musical Details:

In many ways, this is the most challenging of mukoyoku, mostly due to the fact that there are two "expanded" techniques involved. In Western music, the term "extended technique" is used to describe the use of fingering, playing styles or other techniques that were not generally incorporated in the original common practice era of the instrument. For Western flute, for instance, this can include multi-phonics, split-tones, flutter tonguing, mouth percussion, etc. I have come to prefer the term "expanded technique" for methods that serve to open up the possibilities of the instrument as opposed to guiding it down a cul-de-sac of novelty. On shakuhachi, who can really say what creative sounds were made on the flute back in the day? In my imagination there were mad monks and serious samurai who were getting all kinds of crazy sounds on the things. That being said, this piece involves two techniques that are not common in the present performance practice of shakuhachi: playing the flute backwards and circular breathing.

Playing into the flute backwards is a good way of forcing your embouchure and blowing style to really interact with the bamboo in the rawest way possible. If you can get a sound on a few notes with the flute turned backwards, turning it back around forwards will make it seem easy in comparison, and how often can we say that on shakuhachi? This is also an illustration of the shadow-self theme: same flute, same player, but different tone. The circular breathing is not necessary, but a hypnotic effect is created if each of the scalar phrases (the ones with small groups of notes in quick repetition: lines 2-4, 8 into 9, and p.2 bottom of line 6 into 7) are played at an even speed, not too fast, and are unbroken until their conclusion. Although I am an advocate of circular breathing on all wind instruments, and can make my case against its treatment as a novelty or "parlour trick" with great conviction, I have consciously designed mukyoku to be playable in the honkyoku tradition of one phrase per breath for many reasons. A couple of phrases in this piece bypassed this restriction, however, due to the musical effectiveness of playing them

strung together without breaks. In line 2 of p.2, cover the filled in holes and side-blow across the center hole for transverse flute effect. Like #7, this piece is structured as more of a song with melodic passages in contrast to the long tone nature of many mukyoku.

1) LONG TONES 2) CHANT ●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES ● 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●

22—Theme of the Mendicant

Only six Piece Descriptions left in this series and you might be wondering, "Where are the Japanese-y titles?" Maybe you are hoping for "Bonsai Buddha Blossom" or "Samurai Karaoke." This one, #22, is the best it's going to get in terms of shakuhachi/ komuso/ Japanese-y flavored titles (even the Buddhist title, [#2] was disambiguated Sanskrit). One of the first pieces I memorized on shakuhachi was the theme song for the TV series Kung Fu. This piece is much simpler than that song, and more Asian as well. The melody popped into my head, I whistled it into a voicemail to myself and transcribed it later. Sometimes you get these tunes that really are like theme songs. The life of a wandering mendicant is easy to romanticize: it is, after all, distilled, uncut, pure freedom in one sense. Unfortunately, today the word just means homeless and, by implication, useless and aimless. It is the older, pre-industrial, carefree, expanded, idealistic, pacifist wandering hero-sage to whom this theme is dedicated.

Musical Details:

The main theme owes a lot to basic minyo melodies. This is also a successful attempt at writing a "beginner" mukyoku; the second in the "beginner" series, #21-24. Due to its similarity to minyo and Japanese folk melodies, however, this piece is on the cusp of not qualifying as mukyoku since it works very well on any size flute and on 1.8 in particular. For this piece, my thinking goes like this: the bigger the flute, the closer in proximity you are to the mendicant: by the camp fire, just outside the horse barn, next to the creek at sunrise, that type of thing. The smaller the flute, the more the song implies distance: the mendicant is coming up or going down the hillside, on the edge of a cliff over the ravine, fading away into the sunset in the meadow, plain, or valley. The variations are not actually melodic modifications of the theme, but rather parallel melodies in the same spirit and with the same basic pacing and phrase structure as the theme. The kan repetitions within the Theme and Variation Two are optional and should be approached as a step from "beginner" to "intermediate."

1) LONG TONES 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES 5) NON-CATEGORY ●

24—In Which The Sound Contemplates Your Existence

A companion piece to #23, this is the final, short entry-level mukyoku in this series (#21-24). What seems at first to be a kind of clever or nonsensical title has, in fact, been a useful guide at slowing down my breathing, filling the flute and stretching my perspective on the sounds to hear myself from their perspective, so to speak. We spend so much of our time on the flutes directing our thought and energy one direction: out and down the flute. So much effort, focus, frustration, joy and discovery move in that direction that it is easy to forget that the physics at work inside the flute actually require the flute to "breathe" back at us. The air column that is in motion to create the sound we hear extends from just beyond the end of the flute, all the way back up the flute, back into your mouth, throat, lungs, nasal passages and sinuses. Getting this larger, more unified picture of the vibrating air column can help us refine and manipulate the small, focused air

stream that sets it in motion. I'm not sure, but I feel like if I knew anything about it, there might be an appropriate golf analogy—or at least a Zen archery analogy—that could be inserted here.

Musical Details:

Spending more time in kan, this piece is not as easy as it first appears. It also demonstrates the evolution from Long Tone to Chant as the melodic phrases expand from one- and two-note groupings with sustains, to 4, 5 and eventually 9-note phrases which end with a sustained tone. The contemplative, very-full-breaths-between-phrases approach should be in full effect on this piece, and the tempo will vary significantly depending on the phrase-length/breath capacity of the player (or depending on day-to-day changes).

1) LONG TONES ●●●● 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●●

25—Pythias Dualis

This is the fourth and final of four specific-flute-based intuitive improvisation pieces (#11, #12, #13, #25). For each of the four Taimu that I work with, there is one piece that was made by playing it, recording it, and transcribing/adjusting it later. The results were some musical streams of consciousness, and mukyoku that are even more specifically oriented towards the flutes on which they were written than the others. This one was created on the 2.75 Taimu, the skinniest and most versatile of the four. The name has the same Latinisms as #13, Morticus Leviticus, but this time there is more specific meaning. As referred to in the description of #16, Doubled Dragon, this 2.75 Taimu has a dualistic character. The doubled-serpent imagery and metaphysical implications were looming large in my mind when I first acquired this amazing flute from Ken; at that time I was reading Jeremy Narby's *The Cosmic Serpent* (which I recommend if snakes, shamans, creative anthropology and DNA interest you at all). The mythologies of Python the earth-dragon and Pythia of the Delphic Oracle are intertwined with the location of Delphi and the figure of Apollo, although these are Greek words and the original serpent or serpentis are Latin words. [As indicated before, I reserve the right to make up words in any or no language as part of the creative process...] There are cosmic-, chthonic- (subterranean), vision-, rainbow-, tree-, sea-, fire-, long-, double-, and plumed-serpents from every world mythology that you can find. Getting to know them all might take as long as learning to play Taimu, but it wouldn't give you as much sound. Like the giant deities from #14, it somehow seems useful to think of giant serpents and dragons when working with the Taimu.

Musical Details:

You will find some phrases lifted completely from honkyoku, and you will also find melodic "violations" of certain honkyoku clichés. More than any other mukyoku, this piece uses the scale/set of pitches that is common in honkyoku. The goal is for your best sound on the flute to be easier to find than a dragon.

1) LONG TONES ●●● 2) CHANT ●●● 3) NATURE ●● 4) MISSISSIPPI BLUES 5) NON-CATEGORY ●●●

27—Shakthamunki

For many years I have wanted to use a title that incorporated word play on shakuhachi, Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha's tribal name) and the Peter Gabriel song title "Shock the Monkey." The fact that the word "monk" (munk) is in there is an added bonus, but basically I wanted to combine these words and phrases into one, so that at first glance it looks like either shakuhachi or Shakyamuni, but when it's read, it sounds like "Shock the Monkey." This final, long-form blues mukyoku seemed like an appropriate opportunity to use the title. The connection between shakuhachi and Buddhism is well-known and frequently referenced, particularly in honkyoku and dokyoku titles such as Koku, Tamuke, Ajikan and Bosatsu, but what about the shock the monkey connection? In fact, Mr. Gabriel's cryptic lyrics to the 1982 hit song utilize "the monkey" as a metaphor to examine how jealousy can release one's baser instincts (it can also be interpreted as related to drug addiction, but the metaphor for addiction and jealousy are almost the same). "Shocking" the monkey is a severe means of reigning in and controlling these base instincts. Also, recognizing the wild and violent nature of some of our own reactions can be quite a "shock" to our self-image. Similarly, the Buddha's teachings mention that "the mind is like a monkey, difficult to control: it is hyperactive, jumping and swinging between tree limbs without any moment of rest." Many of the Buddha's teachings focus on practical methods of recognizing, calming and handling the mind. The "mind" includes our own reactions to the arrival of more primordial instincts or emotions such as jealousy (i.e. territoriality) as they arrive from the lower brains (reptilian and mammalian) into the neo-cortex (our narrow focus of attention; our "thinking," "rational" or "problem-solving" brain).

The fact that the thinking mind is persistently mistaken as the "Self" is also the focus of practical teachings by 20th teachers such as Alan Watts and Eckhart Tolle, who are adept at unmasking the illusion of the "thinking" Self. To attempt a paraphrased example: can you think about yourself thinking, and once you have split in two to do this, which one of you is the real You? All of these examples and metaphors are not to be confused as metaphysics, philosophical debate or reasoning: they are methods to lead a person to the direct experience of reality: the primary and practical aim of Buddhism and other distilled teachings. In the words of Watts: "There is simply experience. There is not something or someone experiencing experience." As much as the mind rebels against it, the unavoidable truth is that all the pain and suffering in this world are created by the mind. Transformation, a shift from ego consciousness to pure consciousness, cannot be accomplished by the mind. Using the mind to try and discuss it or describe it leads to infinite cycles and paradoxes of duality, a theme running through many mukyoku titles. Can we instead use big bamboo and fat flutes to return to the primordial ground of being, to "The One Sound" of Watazumi? Can we attain ichi on jobutsu or will we just attain dizziness, tendonitis and the occasional full, glowing note? Anything is possible, but Nothing matters.

Musical Details:

This is a blues with intro, main section and ending. This was an improvisation inspired by a personal synthesis of many Mississippi blues recordings and a single image: a rural man playing electric guitar through a small amplifier on his porch after a long day of hard, physical labor; a pure expression of living without pretense or context. There is skill and knowledge of blues music in these phrases, but the intention and the form are free-flowing and in-the-moment. It does not tell a story, it does not have meaning: it is predictable and unexpected at the same time. Making a sound and going where the flute wants to go at the close of one rotation of the earth. This image was already inspiring me because of the music of Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside at the time when I chanced to ask Chikuzen (again, after waiting 7 years from the last time I had asked) about the connection between Zen and shakuhachi. After about 3 minutes of silence, he described memories of his grandfather and this exact same image.