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Misunderstood music Shakuhachi player insists the sound is not meant to have meaning

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"I always say to the audience, 'Do not try to understand -- please misunderstand this music.' Shakuhachi's sound is not a music with a meaning -- it is 'no meaning' music -- so you may understand as you like. "

That philosophical observation came from sensei Yoshio Kurahashi, famed shakuhachi player, during a recent telephone interview from his home in Kyoto, Japan.

This world-renowned master of the ancient bamboo flute will be performing at One Longfellow Square in Portland this Thursday night. In fact, his trip to Portland was the next topic of conversation.

"This will be my second time to visit there, but it will be my first time to perform in Maine," the flautist-teacher said.

The next few minutes went to describing the venue to Kurahashi -- a small, intimate room with the audience up close and personal to the performer.

"I like a small space," he said, "especially with my instrument. It's good for a small space."

The shakuhachi has been in Japan for a long time, but its origin is more West of the island nation.

"It is originally from China," the sensei said, "there are very few flutes similar to the shakuhachi, even in Asia, but its history is very long. It came from China in the 8th century, but it is no longer (there), it survived only in Japan."

His CD "Kyoto Spirit" (Sparkling Beatnik Records, 1999) was recorded and produced by Portland resident Phil Nyokai James (the person who set up this interview and a teacher at both Nyokai-An Shakuhachi Dojos in Portland and Boston). The CD features the master performing a series of eight compositions of traditional Japanese music that is peaceful, contemplative and meditative in nature. One wondered if that description correctly assessed what he intended as he played the solo flute pieces.

"I think so and I hope so," was the teacher's response. "For us, as players, we're always making efforts to be peaceful (and) to be meditative, but it is a little difficult sometimes."




The flautist went on to explain that the eight compositions he performed on "Kyoto Spirit" were ones he learned from his father.

"I learned other kinds of shakuhachi music from another teacher -- he taught me ensemble music with stringed instruments, and I learned from my father solo pieces."

As a teacher himself, Kurahashi explained he teaches all the different kinds of flute music -- traditional solo pieces, classic ensemble pieces, modern pieces and sometimes Western pieces.

"In Portland I'd like to perform only classic pieces because they're my favorite pieces. I like classic pieces much better than modern pieces, but as a professional player I must play every kind of music."

Lucky Clark is from Sweden, Maine.

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