The Phoenix AZ Shakuhachi Friends

A Beginners Guide to the Shakuhachi

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Contents
First Comments about learning the Shakuhachi................................................................. 3
So what is a Shakuhachi? ...................................................................................................... 4
Shakuhachi Flute Parts ........................................................................................................ 4
  What’s Inside a Shakuhachi? ............................................................................................ 5
History of flute...................................................................................................................... 5
Shakuhachi Schools ............................................................................................................ 5
  Kinko-Ryu ......................................................................................................................... 5
  Tozan ................................................................................................................................. 6
  Comparison between Kinko and Tozan styles .................................................................... 6
Shakuhachi music genres .................................................................................................... 7
Blowing your first note! ........................................................................................................ 7
Basic Notes and Reading the Notation ............................................................................... 9
Octave Register Indications ............................................................................................... 9
Meri-Kari (A.K.A. flats and sharps) ................................................................................... 9
  MERI TECHNIQUE .......................................................................................................... 9
  KARI TECHNIQUE .......................................................................................................... 10
Tempo Notation .................................................................................................................. 11
Fingering Chart .................................................................................................................. 12
Beginner Shakuhachi Practice ............................................................................................ 13
  Basic mechanics .............................................................................................................. 13
  Using the fingering charts try to make all of the basic notes. ........................................ 13
  Practice your basic notes in a song. ................................................................................ 13
Internet Resources ............................................................................................................ 13
First Comments about learning the Shakuhachi

There is a significant challenge to the new shakuhachi player especially if you are teaching yourself; there are what seem to be many contradicting bits of information.

• To start with the flutes themselves can have different names depending on their type.
• Shakuhachi notation read top down from right to left, the new player has to become comfortable with this.
• Then an even bigger one is styles on notation. Western staff notation is very consistent whereas shakuhachi notations can one of several styles.
• Then even down the individual characters for the note, there can be differences.

And there another very big change from western to shakuhachi notation; the western notation represents a specific pitch, shakuhachi notation represents a fingering pattern. The notation for all 5 holes closed on the flute is called Ro and whenever a shakuhachi player see’s Ro they close all five holes. With this in mind, longer flutes will create a different pitch note when playing Ro than a smaller one.

All shakuhachi notes have names and a unique symbol, each representing a different fingering. I did not say “different pitch” for several reasons; first the long/short flute thing, secondly different fingerings can make the same pitch but have a different feel or tone color. Two notes that produce a D pitch on a standard 1.8 shakuhachi one may be clear and bright the other may be breathy and rough. Then depending on what teacher your teacher had... etc... etc... they may have chosen to finger the exact same note differently.

If all of this seems a bit frustrating, just wait till you try and play more and more and these contradicting bits of information keep popping up!

It’s my hope that The Phoenix AZ Shakuhachi Friends can inspire and help you start your shakuhachi journey. I highly recommend if you enjoy playing the shakuhachi and want to continue that you find a professional teacher. Unfortunately here is the Phoenix area are not much on the way of teachers. There are some teachers that will instruct you from across the internet. If you’d like a recommendation on a teacher please ask the group.
**So what is a Shakuhachi?**

The name shakuhachi means "1.8 shaku", referring to its size. It is a compound of two words:

- **Shaku (尺)** is an archaic unit of measurement equal to 30.3 centimeters (0.994 English foot) and subdivided in ten subunits.
- **Hhachi (八)** means "eight", here eight sun, or tenths of a shaku.

Thus, "shaku-hachi" means "one shaku eight sun" (almost 55 centimeters or about 21.5 inches), the standard length of a shakuhachi. Other shakuhachi vary in length from about 1.3 shaku up to 3.3 shaku. Although the sizes differ, all are still referred to generically as "shakuhachi".

**Shakuhachi Flute Parts**
What's Inside a Shakuhachi?

**Jiari** - shakuhachi that are most often made in two pieces having a center joint and display an inside that is heavily altered with paste and urushi to form a more uniform inner bore. **Jiari** can also describe any shakuhachi that has a completely fabricated inner bore that leaves little to none of the original bamboo bore uncovered. Such flutes can use plastic, plasters, and anything that will adhere to the bamboo and allow the maker to sculpt the interior.

**Jinashi** - the opposite of jiari, jinashi shakuhachi range from all natural to more refined, however, the main characteristic of any jinashi is that most of the natural bamboo bore geometry is left intact. A jinashi can be tuned by making subtractions from the bamboo bore or by adding material at key points along the bore. Jinashi can also have urushi lacquer applied to the inner bore.

History of flute

According to one theory, origin of the family of end blown reed flutes of which shakuhachi is a part, has been traced back as far as ancient Egypt and is presumed to have migrated through India and China before entering Japan in the latter half of the Seventh Century. Its popularity, however, was short-lived and it wasn't until the Thirteenth Century that it was revived by the Fuke sect of Buddhism which sought to replace sutra chanting with sui zen or "blowing zen." Not until the Edo Period (1603-1867) did this instrument reach its final and most decisive phase of development. During this era, marked by the disintegration of feudal Japan, the shakuhachi was favored by swelling numbers of uprooted samurai warriors (ronin) who joined the ranks of itinerant preachers known as komuso ("Priests of Emptiness and Nothingness"). The komuso wore large baskets (tengai) over their heads to symbolize their detachment from the world. Violent clan struggles which marked the late Sixteenth Century forced some of the komuso to organize themselves into a society for self-protection. Members of the Fukeshu sought to deceive the shogun -- Japan's supreme warlord -- with forged documents giving them exclusive rights to play the shakuhachi and to solicit alms with it. In return for this privilege they agreed to spy on the activities of other ronin. Legend has it that these komuso, forbidden to carry their revered swords, redesigned the shakuhachi from the root of the bamboo making it longer and stouter for use as a club as well as an instrument for spiritual attainment.

Shakuhachi Schools

TWO SCHOOLS OF SHAKUHACHI: KINKO and TOZAN

**Kinko-Ryu**

Kurosawa Kinko (1710-1771), founder of the Kinko style of shakuhachi, was a komuso monk born into a samurai family. He was responsible for taking the honkyoku of the past, which was concerned mainly with
meditation, and adding a higher degree of musicality to it. He travelled all over Japan and collected 33 honkyoku pieces, which now make up the core of the Kinko style of shakuhachi. He also improved the instrument, perhaps improving the bore structure to access certain tones easier. It wasn’t until the second generation of the Kinko family that the delineation of a Kinko style was recognized since there were no styles of shakuhachi during his time.

During the Meiji restoration (1871) the sect of shakuhachi monks (Fuke-shu) was banned by the government. It’s use as a ritual tool was outlawed, but musically, it was enjoying great popularity among the secular classes, being used in ensemble with koto and shamisen (sankyoku). However, the shakuhachi was in serious threat of becoming obsolete, so the two men responsible for taking shakuhachi into the modern world were, Yoshida Itcho and Araki Kodo of the Kinko style. They persuaded the government to let anyone play shakuhachi as a musical instrument, thus making it accessible to everyone. It was through their efforts that the musical popularity of the shakuhachi spread after it was outlawed as a religious tool. One of Araki Kodo’s most significant accomplishments was the development of a system of notation for the music of the shakuhachi utilizing the katagana script, which is read vertically (up to down, and right to left). Also, a system of dots and lines was created to indicate rhythm and tempo when gaikyoku (outside pieces) were played. Three generations later, the disciple of Kodo II, Junsuke Kawase I (1870-1957) improved on the notation even more making it easier to read and more accessible to the public. He organized the Chikuyu Sha shakuhahchi organization which became the largest organization within the Kinko style and has membership throughout the country and the world. It is his music which became the standard for all Kinko players.

**Tozan**

Nakao Tozan (1876-1956), founder of the Tozan style of shakuhachi, was born in Osaka. He came from a musical family, his mother being a daughter of a famous shamisen master, Terauchi Daikengyo of Kyoto. He learned how to play shamisen as a child and learned how to play shakuhachi on his own. When he was in his late teens he joined the Myoan Society of shakuhachi monks and developed technique with them. In his early 20’s he opened up his first shakuhachi studio in Osaka. This was the beginning of the Tozan style. In 1904 he began composing pieces for the shakuhachi which later became the honkyoku of the Tozan style. He was very knowledgeable about western music, creating new performance and teaching methods, and revising the music for shakuhachi. Consequently, he was very successful at popularizing the shakuhachi, attracting a large following, especially among the youth of Kansai. He moved the Tokyo in 1922 and collaborated with the famous koto composer, Miyagi Michiyo; but Kansai still remains the center of the Tozan school.

**Comparison between Kinko and Tozan styles**

Unlike the Tozan School, the Kinko style has no central organization. This has allowed the Kinko style to enjoy more diversification and freedom of expression. Students of the Kinko style who were proficient enough usually broke off and formed their own sects and created their own gaikyoku and notation styles (but was usually based on the original script of Araki Kodo I). Both styles however emphasize musicality rather than suizen (blowing meditation). Both place high emphasis on gaikyoku training, especially
playing with an ensemble of jiuta shamisen and Ikuta style koto. Furthermore, both styles have always had a positive attitude towards new music and are active in the contemporary music scene.

**Shakuhachi music genres**

It is important to realize that all types of shakuhachi music have influenced one another. The shakuhachi is tuned to the minor pentatonic scale or "blues" scale which the Japanese call "Yosempo". They consider the minor pentatonic scale to be more "upbeat", however, most shakuhachi music is played with deep note bending/flattening called "meri" to achieve the "Insempo" scale which is considered dramatic or mysterious.

- Modern AKA **gendai-kyoku** and **shin-kyoku** - (gendai=modern shin=new and kyoku=music) gendai-kyoku includes playing with non-Japanese instruments, "Western" scales, and doing cover songs. Shin-kyoku is playing new music in an old way.
- **Honkyoku** - (Hon="original/self") fairly free rhythm having pauses where no sound is made except that of inhalation and often having natural or spiritual themes. Honkyoku are often played in the darker Insempo scale making use of deep meri notes by lowering the head and or shading finger holes.
- Ensemble **Sankyoku** -(San="three(3)") shakuhachi, koto and shamisen with strict rhythm. Most always Insempo or dark with melancholy or dramatic themes.
- Folk **Minyo** -(minyo, uta, bushi, buri, all="song", "folk song", "country songs", "songs of the common working class people") can be played solo or with any combination of vocals, **shamisen**, and drums. Almost strictly Yosempo scale or "happy" upbeat music.

**Blowing your first note!**

To blow your first note; stand in front of a mirror so you can see exactly what your embrasure looks like.

You bottom lips need to seal up most of the mouthpiece. If air can escape at around the mouthpiece you’ll really have a problem trying to get a note.

With your head basically in an upright normal position; the backside of the mouthpiece should be resting on your chin. The angle of the flute in relationship to a centerline down through your body is very roughly 45 degrees.
The opening between your lips should be no more then the size of an almond sliver. The opening should be centered on the cut beveled edge of the mouthpiece (utaguchi).

Make a 'puh' sound as air gently escapes between your puckered lips. Your lower lips should be basically soft and your upper lip will have a tension in it as it holds the shape of your embouchure.

Your stream of air should be shaped like you were trying to gently blow out a candle or trying to make a sound plowing across a beer bottle. Only about half of your air will be going into the bore of the flute. The rest of your air will be going over the outside (over top of) of the utaguchi.

It can take a good amount of time just to get your first tones. Concentrate on the feel and look of your embouchure. You may get light headed at first while trying to blow the shakuhachi. This is often because you embouchure is too big. You’re expending a lot of air that is not being used to make sound.

Here’s are a couple examples or what an embouchure should look like.
Basic Notes and Reading the Notation

The Basic Notes: RO □ TSU ♦, RE ←, CHI ↑, RI ♦.

The finger holes are numbered on the fingering chart in Japanese from one to five, starting from the bottom (root end) of the shakuhachi.

Octave Register Indications

Ryo is the lower register and looks like a Z and Kan is the upper octave looking like a stick with a crossed box on top.

Meri-Kari (A.K.A. flats and sharps)

Meri and Kari are traditional blowing techniques used to manipulate the pitches to play shakuhachi music. We also use it to get notes into proper pitch while playing. All shakuhachi need embouchure adjustments to some degree to be able to play in very good tuning. They do not play in tune automatically like a recorder, but some better than others. Getting a handle on these two very important blowing techniques early on will enable the beginner to learn shakuhachi music quicker since the traditional music incorporates lots of “in-between” notes that Western ears are not used to.

MERI TECHNIQUE

Much of the shakuhachi’s Japanese feel is done with deep note bending/flattening called "meri".

Meri notes are the lowered pitches achieved in several ways: by slightly dropping the chin inwards towards your neck, so your air-stream changes direction, and/or by partially covering a lower hole. The flute stays at the same position and angle. Try blowing an even tone then slowly tilt your chin inwards. The pitch will slide down. Some notes (tsu meri) require blowing quite softly to get the correct meri pitch. Generally speaking, meri notes are played softly. However, with experience, players can develop their meri technique to play either softly or relatively loudly depending upon the musical application.

There is a certain tonal color or timbre associated with these meri notes that forms a significant part of the sound picture of the shakuhachi. The variations arising from playing notes in a meri position lend character to the aural palette.

Tsu meri is well worth spending time exploring. It is pitched between E flat and D (in most shakuhachi traditions, and on a 1.8 length), and requires careful fingering on the lowest hole (1). Most of that hole will be covered. Blow softly to get the correct pitch. The chin will have to be pulled inwards quite significantly. It is useful to be able to 'roll' your finger over hole one to adjust the tsu-meri pitch. If you move the finger rather than roll it, you are less likely to nail the correct pitch consistently. Pitch accuracy
in the meri notes comes from a combination of aural experience and tactile memory of how the fingers are covering the holes. 'Softly' means different things to different people. Blow tsu meri as though you are faintly ruffling the wings of a butterfly. Over time you'll discover that tsu meri, like any note on the flute, has a surprising range of tonal possibilities, including being able to go quite loud!

**KARI TECHNIQUE**

The opposite of meri, kari technique intends to raise pitch. Either push your chin out (thus opening up the mouthpiece and changing the direction of airflow) or rock your head sideways, blowing to the side of the sharp edge of the utaguchi: achieves the same result.
Tempo Notation

← This shows RO through RI as whole notes.

Here’s a mix of the tempo marks out together →

← This show each note played as ½ beat.

← Each of the notes is played as ¼ beat.
### Fingering Chart

#### BASIC NOTES

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Beginner Shakuhachi Practice

Your shakuhachi practice should be based on a progressive learning approach.

Basic mechanics

a. Posture
b. Holding the shakuhachi
c. Simple note production
   i. Check list for making your first sounds
      1. Tongue flat and the tip touching around the top of the lower teeth.
      2. Make the opening of your mouth small. The opening should be about
         the width of the flute’s utaguchi (the beveled blowing edge) or smaller.
      3. Do not blow too hard, softer; relax your arms, back, neck, throat, jaw,
         chin, cheeks and lips.
      4. Use a mirror to check the shape of your mouth and the mouthpiece
         position.
      5. Check your lips; they should be lightly wet.
      6. Before you blow, take a deep breath and hold it for a moment to check
         items 1 through 5. Then blow and repeat. For your very first note try
         blowing RE. This note seems to be easier for most people in the
         beginning.

d. Reminder the basic notes are: RO □ TSU ♭, RE ○, CHI ♯, RI Ⅽ.

e. In the beginning as you’re trying to make the notes from time to time go back to the
   check list above and re-ground yourself.

f. As you find you’ve got a note that’s not coming out right, give that note some extra
   focus.

Using the fingering charts try to make all of the basic notes.

g. A good basic song for this is HINOMARU or The Flag Song.

h.

Figure 1 HINOMARU or The Flag Song

Internet Resources

| Phoenix AZ Shakuhachi Friends Blog | http://phoenixazshakuhachi.blogspot.com/ |
| Monty H. Levenson Shakuhachi Maker | http://www.shakuhachi.com/ |
| The Shakuhachi Yuu Flute | http://www.shakuhachiyuu.com/ |
HINOMARO (The Flag Song)