尺八

翁海華

YUNG FLUTES
Perry Yung
125 West 106 Street Apt 2A
New York, NY 10025

(646) 942-7540
perry@yungflutes.com
www.yungflutes.com

Illustrations by Scott Malin
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About Perry Yung

In 2002, Perry became the only shakuhachi maker ever supported by both the American and Japanese governments to live in Japan and specifically study shakuhachi making. Through grants from the Japan-United States Friendship Commission, National Endowment for the Arts and the International House of Japan, he traveled through prefectures meeting with master makers of both Zen and modern shakuhachi flutes.

When he wasn't in the shop working under Kinya Sogawa, he studied with music masters of different musical styles to get an unbiased understanding of shakuhachi music. His past and present, longtime and short-time teachers include—Ralph Samuelson, Kinya Sogawa, Laurie Sogawa, Ronnie Nyogetsu Reishin Seldin, Brian Tairaku Ritchie, Keisuki Zenyoji, Christopher Blasdel, Akikazu Nakamura, Yukio Tsuji and Genji Ito. Perry enjoys making both Hocchiku and modern 1.8 Jiari shakuhachi.

www.yungflutes.com

www.myspace.com/perryyung
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A Guide into the World of Shakuhachi

The best way to learn shakuhachi is to sit with an experienced teacher whose sound you find compelling. If that is not possible, the next best thing is a guide such as this.

This guide is intended as an introduction to appreciating the essence found in a single tone of the shakuhachi. In a few months, you may study with a teacher of a particular style and in a lifetime become a master. Or, you may discover that you choose to cultivate peace in blowing one or two long tranquil notes.

One’s approach to playing is ever evolving.

Enjoy the process.

Namaste,

Perry
Shakuhachi History

Historians attribute the earliest form of this flute to India. At that time it had a different scale and blowing edge. It then migrated along the Silk Road, through Korea, China and then Japan. After centuries, it evolved into this shakuhachi with its five hole pentatonic scale.

During the medieval period, shakuhachi were most notable for their role in the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhist monks, known as *komuso* or “Priests of Emptiness”. They used the shakuhachi as a spiritual tool. Their songs, called *koten honkyoku*, were paced according to the players’ breathing and were considered meditation, or *suzan*, as much as music. Listen to first honkyoku, *Kyorei* (Track 1). With their faces hidden beneath rattan headdresses, *tengai*, they played their shakuhachi with their beggar bowls for alms.

The earliest shakuhachi was made from the middle section of the bamboo, but later the bottom root area came into use. According to folklore the shakuhachi was developed as a root-end instrument so it could be used as a Samurai weapon—the root-end is heavier and stronger and makes a blunt weapon.

Scientifically speaking, we know that because the bamboo bore narrows as it nears the root, it enables the second octave to play in pitch and give the shakuhachi its distinctive sound as a modern music instrument.
Let’s Get Started... Basic Notes

Here is the basic finger chart to start with:

![Finger Chart]

Legend for the Finger Chart

- Open hole
- Closed hole

Listen to what the scale sounds like in two octaves stating with Ro (Track 2).
Holding the Shakuhachi

Here is the hand position for holding a standard shakuhachi. Number 1 through 5 refer to the finger holes—#1 starting from the bottom and moving up to the thumb hole, #5.

Guard Position

The middle fingers rest between holes 1 and 2, and 3 and 4. This is called guard position.

Hold the shakuhachi comfortably and lightly. Never grip the flute. Your fingers should be relaxed so they can respond quickly and easily.
Making a Sound

To make a sound, place the blowing edge, or *utaguchi*, directly onto your lips. Rest the back of the flute comfortably in the area below your lower lip and chin. Hold the flute at about a 45° angle. Without moving the flute, tilt your head back so there is a 1/4” or .7 mm gap from the middle of your lips to the bottom middle of the utaguchi.

Don’t cover any holes as you attempt your first sound.

Make a gentle smile shape with your lips. This will pull your lips against the front of your teeth and make the proper shape of the shakuhachi embouchure. Keep the slight smile and then open up the smallest possible hole between your lips. Blow this tiny thin air stream onto the middle of the utaguchi. Fifty percent goes into the flute and fifty percent goes over the utaguchi.

Your lip opening should be more like the shape of a blade, not round. Look in the mirror and remember how the blade-shape feels.
Sasa Buki Breath Exercise

The essence of shakuhachi is all about the quality of a one single note. Learning how to blow one note with colorful timbres and subtle overtones is the essence of playing shakuhachi music. My method, Sasa Buki (breath of bamboo leaf) will guide the beginner into developing the skills required to play and appreciate shakuhachi at the fundamental level.

Once you have a grasp on consistently producing a long sound or tone, start to manipulate the sound into Sasa Buki—thin at the beginning, gradually get louder and back to thin at the end, like the shape of sasa. There are varied shapes of sasa leaves, as some are short and fat, while others are long and slender. It will be determined by your breath for that day. One of the best practices for Sasa Buki is to blow as long a note as possible, which requires full lung inhalations and long exhalations. Time yourself daily to ensure improvement.

After a while, you will play longer, louder and more beautiful tones. Your lips will learn when to bear down, when to open up, when to get close and when to pull back to achieve Sasa buki. Be aware of what is happening with your lips moment to moment, from the beginning of the tone to the end of the tone. Pay attention to the sound and what your lips are doing to get that sound. You’ll be amazed at how your lips are constantly adjusting, however miniscule, to timbrel shifts.

After some time, you may need to understand pitch. If you have a grasp on Sasa Buki, you will easily adapt your playing into proper pitch for playing music. Finger movements will come easily and naturally once you have a grasp on producing and maintaining long confident notes.
Hear the different types of Sasa Buki (*Track 3*).
Marii san no hitsuji

Here are the symbols you will need to know for your first song, Marii san no hitsuji, also known as Mary Had a Little Lamb:

? Repeat note.
(Usually done by quickly lifting and closing the finger hole above the note being played.)

— Take a breath.

\[\text{Sustain a breath.}\]

Note that shakuhachi music is read top to bottom, right to left.

Listen to Marii san no hitsuji on Track 4.
Marii san no bisyuu
Blowing in the Wind

Here are additional symbols and new notes for this classic American folk song. Can you name this tune?

Indicates second octave.

Indicates low octave.

Meri Notes

Cover half the #1 hole with your finger (known as half-holing).

Cover half the #4 hole.

Listen to Blowing in the Wind on Track 5.
Blowing in the Wind
Kojo no Tsuki

Let’s try our first Japanese folk song, translated as *Moon Over the Castle*. It remains one of the most popular folk songs in Japan.

Shaded #3 hole with #1 and 2 covered.

Listen to *Kojo no Tsuki* on Track 6.
Kojo no Tsuki
Amazing Grace

Let’s now play a more difficult, but popular song. Here are the symbols you will need to know.

Connect two notes to be played together fast.

Here is a common usage with symbols learned earlier.

Hear this notation (Track 7).

Play second octave #4.

Listen to Track 8 to hear Amazing Grace.
Amazing Grace
Sakura

Now, let’s play our first Japanese folk song, Sakura. This song depicts spring, the season of Japanese cherry blossom trees (sakura). Cherry blossoms are a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life.

To play the song, you will need to know the following symbols:

Open thumb hole note.

\ on a note means to flatten by a semitone.

This is done by covering part of the hole with your finger (shading). Sometimes you will need to combine shading with embouchure to get the correct pitch.

Now listen to the difference on Track 9.

Listen to Sakura on Track 10.
**Fudaiji Kyorei**

Let’s now learn our first honkyoku from the Fudaiji temple.

![Image]

**Play a full step flat of Ro loudly.**

![Image]

**Flatten the note by blowing softer and by moving your lips closer to the blowing edge (accompanied by a slight lowering of your head, while keeping the flute still.**

![Image]

**Stop.**

Listen to *Fudaiji Kyorei* on Track 11.
Fudaiji Kyorei
**Choshi**

Let’s now learn how to play a more challenging honkyoku, *Choshi*.

\[ \begin{align*} &\text{\( \times \)} \quad \text{in a note means to flatten a semitone.} \\
&\text{\( \sim \)} \quad \text{Quick bending of the previous pitch one semitone and back.} \\
&\text{\( \) \quad \text{Strike \#1 to articulate a loud breathy note.} \\
&\quad \text{Listen to Track 12 from *Choshi*.} \\
&\text{\( \) \quad \text{Cover \#1.} \\
&\text{\( \) \quad \text{Bend pitch melodically a semitone and back.} \\
&\quad \text{Hear this on Track 13.} \\
&\text{\( \) \quad \text{Strike \#3 for repeat of note.} \\
&\text{\( \) \quad \text{Cover \#1, \#3. Shade \#2, \#4, and \#5.} \\
&\quad \text{Play flat (actual pitch is same as \#4).} \\
\end{align*} \]

Listen to Track 14 to hear *Choshi*. 
Choshi

[Handwritten text in Japanese]
How to Make a 1.8 PVC Flute

Below are the directions for an easy-to-make PVC shakuhachi (with credit to my teacher Kinya Sagawa). This length will make a flute in the pitch of D.

What you will need:

- 542 mm-long PVC pipe with a bore diameter 20 mm
- PVC joint (one joint provides enough material for two shakuhachi)
- Drill with a 10mm drill bit
- Saw, file, knife, sandpaper, thread, cellophane tape, pencil, ruler, PVC glue

Apply glue to inside of the joint. While the glue is still wet, fit the pipe into the joint with a twisting motion. Use a rubber mallet to hit the joint until the pipe reaches the middle of the joint.

Use a saw to cut through the middle of the joint.

File the surface edge of the joint until it is flat with the pipe inside.

With a pencil, draw a line tangent to the circumference of the inner wall. Make an oblique cut along the line at the a 25 degree angle.

File the surface of the oblique cut until it is smooth and the depth of the mouthpiece indentation is 2mm.

Use a file to slightly round the back edge of the mouthpiece where it rests against the chin.
Tape a piece of thread to the center front of the shakuhachi. Use this as a guide to mark the centers of the finger holes with a pencil (according to the measurements below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0 mm</th>
<th>112 mm</th>
<th>164 mm</th>
<th>217 mm</th>
<th>277 mm</th>
<th>542 mm</th>
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</thead>
</table>

To mark the location of the thumb hole, cut a strip of paper to the same measurement as the circumference of the pipe. Fold the strip of paper in half, and mark this spot with a pencil. Align the spot with the center front thread, and where the ends of the paper meet in back of the flute is where you mark for the center of the black hole.

Use a 10mm drill bit to open the holes.

Use sandpaper to smooth all the newly cut or filed surfaces, including the finger holes. Wrap sandpaper around a wooden block for straight edges, and around a pencil for round edges. Use very fine sandpaper to round away a very small amount from the inside of the mouthpiece.

Your PVC shakuhachi is finished!
Binding Your Flute

Things you will need:

- Nylon cord or 20-25 pound monofilament line
- X-acto knife
- Large c-clamp
- Pliers
- Solid surface to clamp onto

Pull out two arm-lengths of cord from the spool.

Clamp spool to a solid surface.

Make a 5-inch loop at the end of the cord.

Lay the loop flat on top of the flute at the spot where it is to be bound. Holding the neck of the loop flat with a thumbnail, wrap 2 rounds of cord around the flute towards the loop. Be sure not to cross one round over another.

Remove your thumbnail and begin to bind, holding your thumbs on either side of the binding and rolling the flute as you maintain moderate pressure on the line.

By the 4th round, let go of your thumbs and increase the pressure slightly as you continue to roll the bamboo and bind. Maintain equal pressure from both hands, as much as possible without snapping the cord.

Continue to bind until binding is approximately 3/8” wide.

Use your thumbnails to push the binding tightly together.
Carefully press with your X-acto knife on the loose ends of the binding so that the cord is cut where the binding ends. Take care not to cut the cord you have bound.

Slip the excess line through the loop in the direction you have bound. Hold the end down with one finger from the hand holding the flute while you grip the other against your palm.

With your pliers, pull on the end of the loop (on the beginning side) until the crossed cord (on the ending side) slips under the binding about halfway through, making an “X” underneath the binding.

Successful binding will take several tries until you learn how much tension your line can take and how much tension you can apply. The more pressure the better so the bamboo remains stabilized, as bamboo shrinks and swells to climage changes.
**Storing Your Flute**

Always store your flute in an airtight container.

If you plan to store your shakuhachi, put a small 2” by 2” damp (not wet) piece of cloth in the plastic storage bag. This damp cloth will be a humidifier. Keeping your flute properly humidified will reduce the chance of cracking. Do not leave the cloth too damp as it may cause mold if you do not play the flute often.

If you do not play your flute every day, it is a good idea to take it into the bathroom once a month when you shower. The steam will help prevent it from drying out. Do not, however, take it into the shower! Leave it in the corner and then put it back in its airtight container.

With proper care, your shakuhachi can last more than a lifetime.
Tsuyutoshi Instructions

After each playing session, drop the weighted end of your tsuyutoshi, moisture cloth, into the mouthpiece end of the flute. Pull the weighted end through your flute from the bottom to remove excess moisture.

If your shakuhachi has no lacquer, you do not need to do this step.
Two-Piece Shakuhachi

When assembling your two-piece shakuhachi, line up the two halves so the marks on the back of the joint are in line. Slide the female part over the male part, while adjusting the orientation of the two marks. To close the gap in the joint, place the root-end of the shakuhachi against your abs or thigh. Then grab the upper barrel of the flute and push towards your body. If the two halves are not aligned, separate the two halves and start again.

To disassemble your two piece flute, never pull or twist it apart. Instead, grab the instrument with your hand curled around the middle joint, knuckles up. With the other fist, gently hit the area between the middle and ring finger. The instrument will separate under your fingers. Be gentle though as joints can be damaged at the last moment of separation.
# Teacher’s Info

The following teachers are members of the International Shakuhachi Society.

## Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Riley Kelly Lee</td>
<td>Manly, New South Whales</td>
<td><a href="mailto:riley@rileylee.net">riley@rileylee.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew MacGregor</td>
<td>Lilydale, Victoria</td>
<td><a href="mailto:info@shakuhachiflutes.com">info@shakuhachiflutes.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham Ranft</td>
<td>Kanbah, Camberra</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ranftg@iinet.net.au">ranftg@iinet.net.au</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Ritchie</td>
<td>Hobart</td>
<td><a href="mailto:brianritchie@mac.com">brianritchie@mac.com</a></td>
</tr>
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</table>

## Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcvin Ramos</td>
<td>Madeira Park, BC</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ramos@dccnet.com">ramos@dccnet.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clive Bell</td>
<td>Tottenham, London</td>
<td><a href="mailto:clive.bell@tesco.net">clive.bell@tesco.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horacio Francisco Curti</td>
<td>Barcelona, Spain</td>
<td><a href="mailto:horacio.curti@musikeon.net">horacio.curti@musikeon.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiku Day</td>
<td>London, London</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kiku@kikuday.com">kiku@kikuday.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Japan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinya Sogawa</td>
<td>Saitama</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Sogawa@fides.dti.ne.jp">Sogawa@fides.dti.ne.jp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshio Kurihashi</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mujuan@nifty.ne.jp">mujuan@nifty.ne.jp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kaizan Neptune</td>
<td>Chiba</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jneptune@awa.or.jp">jneptune@awa.or.jp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo Rodriguez</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td><a href="mailto:info@rodrigo-rodriguez.com">info@rodrigo-rodriguez.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Ryder Souzan</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ryjf371@nifty.com">ryjf371@nifty.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd Barton</td>
<td>Ashland, OR</td>
<td><a href="mailto:bartonmusic@mac.com">bartonmusic@mac.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Lu Brandwein</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:marylubran@aol.com">marylubran@aol.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Duncavage</td>
<td>Austin, TX</td>
<td><a href="mailto:dduncavage@austin.rr.com">dduncavage@austin.rr.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Gelb</td>
<td>Oakland, CA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:phil@philipgelb.com">phil@philipgelb.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Gould</td>
<td>Ann Arbor, MI</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Michael@chikuzenstudios.com">Michael@chikuzenstudios.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morimasa Horiuchi</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td><a href="mailto:joyce_mori@sbcglobal.net">joyce_mori@sbcglobal.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil Nyokai James</td>
<td>Portland, ME</td>
<td><a href="mailto:nyokai@nyokai.com">nyokai@nyokai.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Jonas</td>
<td>Northampton MA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jonas@emptybell.org">jonas@emptybell.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masayuki Koga</td>
<td>Berkeley, CA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mkoga@sbcglobal.net">mkoga@sbcglobal.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa Kosugi</td>
<td>Gardenia, CA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:marisa.kosugi@yahoo.com">marisa.kosugi@yahoo.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Samuelson</td>
<td>Chappaqua, NY</td>
<td><a href="mailto:rsamuelson@accny.org">rsamuelson@accny.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Nyoraku Schlefer</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td><a href="mailto:james@nyoraku.com">james@nyoraku.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Online Resources

www.komuso.com
The best resource for the history of the shakuhachi and its music.

www.shakuhachiforum.com
Home of the International Shakuhachi Society. Great place for discussion.
Yung Flutes Legend

Daily Zen Shakuhachi - Introductory flute/zen tool
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Lau-tzu (604 BC - 531 BC)