



# madake

## *the magic bamboo of the Japanese Shakuhachi*

by THOMAS ALLOCCA

The Shakuhachi is a traditional Japanese bamboo flute. Its origin is unknown, even if some experts say it comes from Egypt, through China, a thousand or more years ago. Anyway, it is the most amazing flute in the history of music, for its aesthetic directly from Nature, and its sound so close to the universal harmony that most of its players declare they are in ecstasy when they play it.

The counting system used to measure the shakuhachi is "shaku/sun/bu", where one "shaku" is about 30.3 cm, one "sun" is about 3.03 cm, and one "bu" is about 0.303 cm. It is similar to the metric system being based on ten, but the

◁ ▷ *shakuhachi*  
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intervals are different. As the story was told to Jeff Cairns by his master, the length of shaku was developed from the relative length of a grown man's forearm, and it may well be that the original shakuhachi were often made by the person who played it, being so sized by the player's own body in that way. "I think that is a very romantic concept - precises Jeff - that likely will never be proven". The fact is, that counting system was used in many other fields, not only in shakuhachi making, and it is still used in the making of kimonos today.

This way, the name shakuhachi comes from the length of the instrument, i.e. from the Japanese system of lengths associated to the traditional bamboo flute. The Japanese word for eight is "hachi", so the name ShakuHachi means one shaku and eight sun, i.e. one shaku and hachi sun... that has been simplified into ShakuHachi.

According to the original story, the ideal and most original size of a shakuhachi is 54.54 cm: longer or shorter sizes are a later adaptation of the shakuhachi to consider it not only as individual meditative flute, as it was born for, but also as ensemble instrument where the players need to correct the pitch in relationship to the ensemble sound, to get perfect harmony from many shakuhachi playing together.







◁ ▷ shakuhachi  
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node above the last root node that has tendrils... the inside diameter at that point is best around 2.0 cm... then, there are all the aesthetic questions and the hardness of the cane that is at the best when cut between 3 and 6 years old". This is why the harvesting of madake for making shakuhachi is something only experienced masters can do to avoid we cut many canes and then we have to waste most of them. This is why most of the outside Japan makers of shakuhachi, still today, every year, they go to Japan to buy madake even if they have now possibility to grow and cut everywhere it since it was exported from Japan to all over the world, even if some subspecies are still just for collectors, as for example

We can build shakuhachi using many species of bamboo, but if Japanese tradition does it using above all the species *Phyllostachys Bambusoides* *Bambusoides* (named in Japan "madake"), there is a reason, a specific reason, there are hundreds and hundreds years of experience reasons, and this is why, still today, though the shakuhachi is going to be played and made all over the world, the best masters are from Japan, as well as from all the rest of the world where we can find very deeply involved in the Japanese culture, not just knowing about music and shakuhachi but being totally in harmony with the Japanese way of thinking and living, to get back the best energy from Japanese bamboo woods when they play madake. It comes from this, why a lesson of Shakuhachi with great masters like Jeff Cairns or Derek Van Choice, as well as listening to their music, is an amazing holy adventure in Japanese spiritual world, where everything looks different, sounds different!

Most of the magic and legends about shakuhachi come from the fact that it is one of the most difficult instruments to play, with over 2-1/2 octaves with only 5 holes (4 on the front, 1 on the back), and it is not uncommon that we need to spend 5 or more years before we can say "now I am ready to start to learn", but there is no magic without magicians, and







◁ ▷ *shakuhachi*  
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the history of shakuhachi teaches that the first of them were the wandering Komuso Priests, the masters of the Samurai warriors. To play a shakuhachi is like to come back to that time and to feel all the energy and the knowledge were handed-on century after century by those priests and warriors, by those spiritual disciplines, those minds and souls so close to Nature and the Universe.

"Warm and woody to sweet and pure, intense dynamics, dramatic, breathy pitch bends, piercing attacks, and long, pure, round, mesmerizing notes that can transcend the player holding it and those hearing it". This is the way Derek

Van Choice describes the shakuhachi sound. What else? But we can get all this magic just using madake bamboo, the perfect one to get the magic sound that brings us to the beginning, to the deeper and purest dimension we lost thousands and thousands years ago when we stopped to live in the woods, loosing this way the direct connection with Mother Earth that nowadays just a few of culture still keep alive, and if the Japanese is one of them, it works above all through Shakuhachi and its amazing bamboo, madake. If we are able to pay just one dollar for each year of knowledge and experience in the history of madake and shakuhachi, we can understand why when the best masters ask thousands of dollars for a professional shakuhachi it is not yet so much as it should be asked.

Madake is the hardest bamboo in the world amongst the over 1200 already known species, and it grows quite fast to be a real giant bamboo, running everywhere, reaching in less than ten years the size of 25 m in height and 15 cm in diameter, but just a few canes in a giant growing wood are the right ones to make a shakuhachi, since the best sound comes out from a specific size. "A good size for shakuhachi - Jeff Cairns told me - is near 3.5 cm outside diameter just below the 4th node up from the 'goro-bushi' which is the







◁ ▷ *shakuhachi*  
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Culture of the Sustainable Development, playing it in shape of shakuhachi can be one of the most efficient writings, amazing the World sensible to Green matters with woody sound words, arriving for sure more directly to the spirit as much as to mind. So, let's play shakuhachi!

One of the most fascinating dimensions of Japanese culture is the ritualization of daily life, the pursuit of perfection through discipline, strict discipline, the perfection that comes from the coordination of mind and body, thought and action, interacting in this way as best as possible between man and nature, between what is desired and what is indeed necessary, between what we want and what we really can, between instinct and wisdom. It is from this deep conception of life, from the holy conception of its most simple and common daily dimension, that the Japanese Art finds its most authentic and ancestral dimension, its extraordinary ability to transform the simple apparent in wonderful energy. So as much in the Japanese architecture as in the Japanese art craft, and one of the most amazing expression of this is the art of shakuhachi. From a simple piece of bamboo, a simple piece of madake, the greatest masters can achieve the best flute in the world, the most emblematic instrument of Japanese musical culture, a flute capable of

the subspecies "tanakae", a real rare Japanese bamboo introduced in Europe just about 20 years ago, amazing for shakuhachi with a special aesthetic because of its very fine spotted canes. The experience of the Japanese masters in choosing the best canes is still the best and well protected.

Anyway, the culture of shakuhachi will be very important to make madake can be appreciated always more also outside Japan, because of its potentials, an amazing bamboo species, a real miracle of nature, as much in the specific sector of the music as in architecture, design, art craft. And if just writing of it we can give to madake the right importance in the Green







◀ ▾ ▶ *shakuhachi*  
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emitting sounds that unite earth and sky, coming from the earth to elevate the spirit through harmonious vibrations that bring back the soul to its birthplace, mother earth.

Talking with Derek Van Choice about shakuhachi, he said to me "with madake, nature has enjoyed to surprise us over any human expectations about its perfection... its technical properties, its aesthetics, the unique sounds and vibrations that the air produces through it... it is the greatest gift of mother nature to music... as it was been prearranged by nature before the man could invent music and shakuhachi, and madake, for the meantime, was already waiting in its

perfection just to be used... this is why, its sound becomes from the origin of the existence, it brings us back to the roots, it closes the circle". If playing a shakuhachi, or just listening its music, we feel like we are inside a circle, protected by a special energy, universal energy, now you know why: it's the magic of madake in shape of melody!

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*shakuhachi masters*

**Derek Van Choice** (California) [www.hollowbamboo.net/shakuhachi](http://www.hollowbamboo.net/shakuhachi)

**Jeff Cairns** (Japan) [www.windwheel.com](http://www.windwheel.com)

