

CONCERT REVIEW

Solo Shakuhachi

NATASHA KULER-VON-DER-LUHE

After a long and difficult few months, I finally sat down to review Music on the edge of Silence; the solo shakuhachi (Japanese bamboo flute) recordings of Adrian Freedman. Frankly, I was not in the most tranquil of moods as my health had taken a turn for the worse and I was wrapped up in the long and frustrating process of moving house. I couldn't have been further away from falling cherry blossoms carried on a jasmine-scented breeze. Zen, in short, I was not.

Peace is a difficult thing to pin down in the midst of our modern madness; it's hard for people to stop 'just for five minutes', let alone give ourselves the precious moments we need to unwind and let some of the stress roll off our shoulders. Meditation is universally praised for it's ability to calm even the wildest mental waves; but who, in our busy anthill existence, really takes the time out to do such a thing?

Well, apart from the yogis and the gurus of course, but how does their hessian-clad example help those of us trapped in an office, staring numbly at a computer screen for hours on end battling the hydra-headed beast known as overtime? Well, my fellow rat-racers, I bring good news! In a harmonious blending of the ancient and avant-garde, Mr. Freedman has found a way of putting soul-cleansing meditative bliss onto a CD.

The shakuhachi was considered by the Komuso (Zen monks of nothingness) to be a way of achieving enlightenment through the development of 'spirit breath', or *kisoku*; the idea being that through this *tettei on*, or 'absolute sound' would be achieved; in *tettei on*, the grand entirety of the universe is supposedly contained within a single note. Quite something to aspire to, I think you'll agree.

Music on the edge of Silence contains seven tracks, three of which are traditional *honkyoku* 'original music' pieces, which are still passed down from master to pupil to this day, in a continuous stream of musical knowledge. One piece, *Miyama Higurashi* (Deep Mountain Cicada), was composed by Fukuda Rando in 1928, and the rest are pieces of Freedman's own devising, with the final track, 'Moon Light', played on the *xiao*; a Chinese bamboo flute predating even the shakuhachi.

I first experienced the enchanting power of this visionary instrument at a recital given by Freedman at St John's Church, Bridgetown in November 2007. I clearly recall the experience as a transformative one, as I entered the venue with 'cynic' practically stamped on my forehead, and walked out loose-limbed and grinning inanely at my fellow listeners in a spirit of transcendental camaraderie. I was almost nervous at the prospect of listening to the same piercing sound on disk, how could it possibly carry in the same way? It would be rather like reading a book then watching the film, surely? Constantly moaning about how they cut out most of chapter eight.

Thankfully, I was proved wrong from the first note; the same soaring melodies that speak directly to the soul, the same thrilling, hypnotic trills. A smooth, unsullied river of sound poured out of the speakers just as beautiful as I remembered it. I am still in awe of the sheer concentration and absolute focus of each exhalation; moreover, it's the passion apparent in each piece that makes this music such compulsive listening.

It is nigh-on impossible to continue tearing your hair out with 'Spirit Rising' winding it's way through your bedroom, or Sanya 'Three Valleys' echoing in your kitchen, turning a cup of tea into the most relaxing experience you've had all week. I found myself, at the end of the CD, sitting on my bedroom floor surrounded by the chaotic debris that always accompanies even the most meticulously-planned house move (which it wasn't), staring out at the rooftop spaces turning a glaring electric silver in the sun, head empty of anything but the music rising and falling in pure, harmonious waves. Somewhere downstairs there was a kitten creating merry havoc, lost house keys and an unpaid gas bill, but suddenly they were all happening a long way away, I'd successfully stolen time out of the hands of a stressful day and it felt great.

It's a sad fact that few of us are ever going to find ourselves spending our valuable time halfway up a mountain, smiling contentedly at the curling dawn mist. We are just as unlikely to spend it doing all those stress-relieving, beneficial things we know we should and keep telling ourselves we will do when we have a minute. Well, round up the seconds and give this CD a go. You won't turn into the Buddha overnight, but you might stop screaming at the computer, the telephone and your nearest and dearest, and that's got to be a step in the right direction.