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Skyping Shakuhachi: How Internet Mediation Affects Transmission and Japaneseness of Shakuhachi Practice

Brandon Stover

University of Colorado, Boulder

Abstract

This article argues that shakuhachi tradition is becoming more mainstream and losing its sense of Japaneseness as the pedagogical practices and learning opportunities of the instrument digitize. This is not to say the tradition is dying, but that it is evolving. Through participant observation, interviews with shakuhachi teachers, online surveys, and netnography, this article attempts to put together a picture of the state of the growing digital shakuhachi world. Because the shakuhachi is still a niche instrument, the internet allows practitioners to interact with one another. The internet also, however, magnifies every small change in the tradition. Since the invention of video conferencing applications such as Skype, more teachers provide music lessons in a digital space. There are increasing numbers of practitioners in rural areas far removed from Japan as well as teachers who have never studied in Japan. What happens when tradition moves online, away from its origin? Shakuhachi performance and learning has expanded since the rise of internet based lessons, but at what cost? As traditional instrument practices digitize, practitioners find themselves at a crossroads where their responses to the internet will forever shape the future of their tradition.

Keywords: Digital Learning, Traditional Music, Shakuhachi

The World Shakuhachi festival originated in Bisei, Okayama Prefecture, Japan in 1994. Having spread world-wide from Boulder, USA (1998), to London, UK (2018), the World Shakuhachi Festival will return to the birthplace of shakuhachi for the 2022 festival in Chaozhou, China.¹ The World Shakuhachi Festival began with the rise of the internet and global shakuhachi musical tradition has been shaped by digitization ever since. Whereas traditional

¹ “WSF History,” World Shakuhachi Festival London 2018; <http://wsf2018.com/about/wsf-history>, accessed 11 November 2019.

teaching methods required students to travel to Japan, sit across from their teacher, and parrot that teacher's style, today's styles differ. No longer does one need to travel to Japan to gather information, access shakuhachi recordings, purchase an instrument, or learn from a teacher. When I began lessons in December 2013, I was living in London. I found a teacher via the internet and traveled to his home three hours round trip for a one-hour lesson. Now, one can use the internet to accomplish all this and more. A visit to the shakuhachi website Komuso.com reveals around 50 teachers located in 13 different countries advertising lessons. This list is by no means comprehensive as my own teacher, Justin Williams, is not on the list.

To study the shakuhachi in its present state means to study practitioner's interactions with and on the internet. As Hallett and Barber argue, "Studying a group of people in their 'natural habitat' now includes their 'online habitat.'"² Musicians are making a name for themselves through online file sharing, uploading videos, and providing lessons in an online space. Developing technology is changing the nature of Shakuhachi learning and teaching and as Hallett and Barber argue, "Ethnography as a whole... needs to respond, adapt, and reflect these shifts to more fully capture and understand the multiple spaces—both physical and digital—where people experience contemporary social life."³ As online learning changes the way people interact with the shakuhachi, ethnographic methods must adapt as well.

Methods

For this project, I recorded and analyzed my lessons with shakuhachi teacher Justin Williams. My participant-observation of this tradition granted me new insights into how the

² Ronald E. Hallett and Kristen Barber, "Ethnographic Research in a Cyber Era," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43, no. 3 (2014): 306.

³ Hallett and Barber, "Ethnographic Research," 311.

internet plays a role in enhancing general understanding of the tradition in a digital space. Justin, a London resident, studied in Japan from 2005–2011. He earned his shakuhachi teaching license in Japan and continues to perform shakuhachi across Europe. For my lessons, I used the internet chat program Skype which allows for both audio and video calling. I also traveled to Justin's home and took an in-person lesson in order to compare the differences between online and in-person lessons. I conducted four interviews with shakuhachi teachers from around the globe. Those teachers were Justin Williams from London, Riley Lee from Sydney, Michael Firman from Chicago, and Elliot Kallen from Santa Rosa, California. Each of the teachers have been teaching for six or more years and have numerous students. Three of the four teachers interviewed went to Japan to get their teaching licenses and all four of them have used internet based lessons either to teach or to take their own lessons. Topics of discussion included the teacher's preference for in-person and online lessons and their perceived strengths and weaknesses, how teachers transmit tradition, and where the teachers see the shakuhachi world 5–10 years in the future. Aside from personal interviews, I used the website Komuso.com to gather data from shakuhachi teacher websites. The information that teachers broadcast to the public helps to show potential students what their learning experience may entail in a digital space. Personal websites are a primary way for potential students to learn about and connect with shakuhachi teachers. This information shows teachers' thoughts on basic pedagogical issues dealing with in-person versus online lesson formats. Lastly, I posted a survey to several Shakuhachi Facebook groups wherein 35 participants responded to various questions on how long he or she had performed and by what means he or she took or gave shakuhachi lessons, what platform he or she used to take such lessons, and what benefits and disadvantages online

lessons provided. In order to protect respondent anonymity, the survey recorded anonymous responses.

One limitation to the survey was that it was posted in an online medium and thus may have gathered data from shakuhachi players who tend to prefer internet based interaction. It is not a full representation of shakuhachi practitioners as the survey was conducted in English and left out a number of non-English speaking performers and teachers. Instead of claiming to be a holistic view of the state of shakuhachi teaching and learning, this project represents the state of shakuhachi in parts of the United States, Europe, and Australia. More extensive in-person and online research is needed to better understand shakuhachi habits on a more global scale.

Survey Results

Of the 35 respondents, 25 reported having used internet-based chat services to either give or receive shakuhachi lessons. All respondents who used online chat platforms reported using Skype while Facetime, Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and Youtube were also mentioned. Respondents represented all levels of performance ability and time practiced, falling into roughly equal groupings of less than 1 year, 1–4 years, 5–10 years, 11–20 years, and more than 20 years. In each category, at least 60% of respondents reported using online lessons, with the less experienced respondents reporting higher usage. Respondents were asked to comment on their impression of online lessons. Among the numerous answers, some of note include:

1. I would not have been able to have lessons to begin with [without skype]
2. At first I was skeptical—but now find them very helpful.
3. It is beneficial to be able to teach remotely, but also difficult. I have a general policy to only teach online AFTER I have met/taught the student in person. My feeling is there is a level of musical intimacy is lost in online lessons: the student's awareness of all that is being said and

demonstrated is not as clear, and the teacher's evaluation of the student's efforts is also not as clear.

4. With such a rare instrument, it is perhaps the only way to both keep it alive and offer some choice for style and approach that suits the student.

The last comment speaks to the need for shakuhachi to embrace digitization as a tool to spread the tradition. Respondents who reported never having taken online lessons were asked the question *Is there a reason why you do not take/give online lessons?* Answers include:

1. No need—teacher very close by.
2. I've not tried them, but I really like the connection when taking a physical lesson with a teacher.
3. wasn't available most of the time I have studied, prefer in person.

Of these, the most prominent was that the student had a teacher nearby so he or she had no need for online lessons. Most students, however, are not so lucky. Throughout the responses, there is a perceived pedagogical difference between online and in-person lessons. Is this perception a reality in digital Shakuhachi space?

An Inseparable Link: Shakuhachi Tradition and the Internet

The internet has become a means for shakuhachi performers and teachers to transmit the tradition to the next generation while giving rise to student autonomy. In traditional Japanese lessons, students absorb pieces and style through static learning. The teacher has supreme authority and expects students to become mimeographic copies without question.⁴ With the rise in recording technology, the shakuhachi world expanded. Students recorded their teacher and

⁴ Christopher Yohmei Blasdel, *The Single Tone: A Personal Journey into Shakuhachi Music* (Tokyo: Printed Matter Press, 2008).

used that recording to twin the teacher's performance, sometimes going months between lessons. Students became more active in the learning process while learning on their own time. Today, Skype and other internet-based communication tools allow students to access their teachers from around the world while receiving instant feedback. Students have taken more control over their own learning. By digitizing, power has shifted from the teachers to the students. Whereas both traditional authoritative teachers and recordings provided a one-way exchange of information, teachers using an internet-based communication tool influence and are influenced by their students each week. Because the internet allows for instantaneous feedback, a teacher's tradition is changing based off of their students' own learning. In my lessons, Justin equated it to being like bacteria. He and I each have our own unique strains (our playing style) and the more lessons we have together, the more our different strains of bacteria tend to model each other. His strain tends to shape mine more, but mine, from time to time, changes his as well. Online lessons allow for a more fluid and living tradition of shakuhachi music due to student and teacher interaction.

The internet, however, has a dark side. Where in the past something might be written down and stored in a safe location, today information is stored in the cloud. However, the web is both ephemeral and eternal.⁵ Information is stored, but it moves around, websites come and go, data is stored and deleted, and additional data continues to pile up. As a result, teachers have to teach their students how to find and access the data such as recordings, scores, and instructional videos. Among this list are a multitude of poor-quality playing examples and instructional videos. Teachers must teach students how to assess if a recording is good quality. Because there is infinitely more data to sift through, shakuhachi risks disappearing amongst the plethora of other information available on the web. Shakuhachi teachers and practitioners must incorporate

⁵ Christine Hine, "The Making of a Virtual Ethnography," in *Virtual Ethnography*, 68-82, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), 6.

the growing amount of online data into their pedagogical methods in order to continue the shakuhachi tradition.

The primary means by which shakuhachi teachers and students interact with one another via the internet is through Skype lessons. Most respondents stated that in-person lessons were superior to online lessons, but that their benefit was not always apparent. On his website, shakuhachi teacher Michael Gould states:

I can honestly say that I have seen great strides made by people who have never had a lesson in person... You can still study just like you can in person except that you can't see as much at once and the sound may be different coming through microphones. It is rather difficult to play at the same time but this gives rise to various teaching/studying techniques that wouldn't be employed if the lesson was in person.⁶

Skype lessons change the way in which teachers and students interact with one another and teachers usually have to adapt their pedagogy style to fit these changes. Teacher familiarization dictates the success of online lessons. As Justin Williams points out, it is more about the teacher's perspective which affects the quality of lessons than the technology itself.⁷ Each teacher is different in his or her ability to cope with translating in-person shakuhachi lessons to a digital medium as online lessons differ from in-person lessons so pedagogy must differ as well.

In my own studies, I have seen how the lessons differ from one another. My in-person lessons all begin with tea and end with a guided meditation focusing on me as a person and my perceptions of other beings around me. Online, however, the lesson is entirely focused on the music, thus giving me more time to work on musical components. While undertaking this research, I was able to travel to London to take an in-person lesson with my teacher, during

⁶ Michael Chikuzen Gould, "Webcam Lessons," Chikuzen Studios, accessed 16 November 2019. <https://chikuzenstudios.com/webcam-lessons/>.

⁷ Justin Williams, Personal interview with author, 2019.

which I was extremely cognizant of the differences between the lesson settings. Justin made two batches of tea and our in-person lesson ended up lasting one hour and thirty minutes due to the special nature of in-person lessons. Justin spent a majority of the in-person lesson attempting to correct and evaluate my playing posture and position. He stated near the beginning of the lesson that he would move around to observe me up close. This was echoed in Elliot K's and Michael F's interviews in which they stated that they preferred to work with beginner shakuhachi players in person due to their desire to physically manipulate the instrument and the student's body in the in-person lesson. Once a student has reached a moderate proficiency level they no longer need regular in-person lessons to correct physical errors and can instead work on more musical aspects of shakuhachi performance. Teacher pedagogy naturally shifts from posture oriented to musicality oriented as the student improves. Digital lessons heighten that shift.

Many survey respondents reported that their biggest issue with internet lessons was the lag between the teacher and student. Responses from the survey about a negative to online lessons include:

1. Teacher and student can't play simultaneously. Sometimes there are connection problems.
2. The instructor cannot see very subtle things you might be doing wrong and you cannot see very subtle things the instructor does.

The lag issue has a clear fix, better internet connections. In dealing with subtlety, Justin has devised a way where he plays close to the camera to show subtle finger movements when needed. He listens very carefully and deploys this technique when he hears there may be an issue with sound production or pitch. Justin embraces online lessons and finds them to be successful. Student and teacher perceptions of online lessons play a big role in determining their outcome.

Cyber Pedagogy

How do shakuhachi teachers reconcile the need to change pedagogical methods when moving from in-person to online lessons? Justin does this, in part, by becoming more visual in his instruction online while focusing less on the student's posture. That is not to say that he is not carefully watching for what he can see, but he is more likely to fix a posture issue by listening to intonation and tone color during an online lesson. He even said he can catch fingering and posture issues when the online lesson video is turned off due to poor internet connections or computer equipment.

A number of Shakuhachi teachers reported not wanting to teach beginners via Skype due to the lack of physicality. The survey, however, shows that newer students are more likely to use online lessons in some capacity. Additional research is needed to show the correlation between beginner success and online versus in-person lessons. How flexible and adaptive teachers are plays a large role in student success. Teachers who are flexible and embrace change are more likely to be successful, but embracing change brought on by the digitization of shakuhachi does not guarantee success. Teachers must find what is their online pedagogical voice. On Justin Williams' website, he states, "Although studying in person is preferable, online lessons are in fact particularly well suited to studying shakuhachi."⁸ In an interview, Justin said:

I would say that skype doesn't work worse than in person... It's an added benefit for the teacher to hear the student when they are playing together. But actually, relative to traditional Japanese lessons, I'd say it's a much greater difference is the style of the teacher and whether the teacher cares to spend time helping the student or not.. Each teacher has different skills for that. It is still way better than the alternative.⁹

⁸ Justin Williams, "Lessons," Justin Senryū: Shakuhachi maker, teacher, performer, accessed 9 December 2019. <http://senryushakuhachi.com/lessons>.

⁹ Justin Williams, Personal interview with author, 4 December 2019.

The alternative being no lessons at all. Online or in-person, neither is better, but each has its own peculiarities that teachers need to master to be successful.

Shakuhachi teaching, as it stands, would benefit from a closer look at the possible need for change in pedagogical methods. Shakuhachi teachers often harken back to traditional Japanese methods. Many of those I talked to were looking at the past, towards how things were done. But what if, instead, teachers were forward looking, toward what shakuhachi teaching could become and adopt their pedagogical methods as such? In the end, it comes down to teacher style and preferences. Some teachers may have valid reasons for not wanting to start beginners while others see it as the only option. If there were no teachers who started new players using online lessons, the player base would remain stagnant or even diminish.

The internet has played and will continue to play an integral role in the changing nature of shakuhachi teaching and performance. Pedagogy methods are changing as shakuhachi has moved from traditional Japanese lessons to Western style lessons to cyber-based lessons. Because of the prevalence of online lessons, developing cyber pedagogy plays an important role in the future transmission of shakuhachi tradition. If one has the ability to choose between in-person and online lessons, what path should one follow? One respondent summarized the answer to the blending question by saying that, "I figure a blend between in person and online would be the best at around a 20:80 ratio." Twenty percent in-person and 80 percent online, when available.

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