

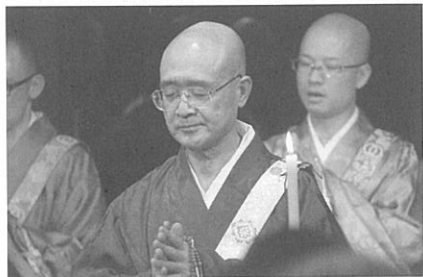
IHJ Japanese Music Series No. X
Shōmyō Sutra Chanting
The Wisdom of the Voice

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For the final concert of the IHJ Japanese Music Series, the I-House presented an evening of *shōmyō* chant by a group of Buddhist monks, Sen'nen no Koe, from the Shingon Sect of Buddhism on Friday, March 25.

Shōmyō is the ceremonial chanting and singing of the sacred texts and prayers of Buddhism. It originally entered Japan in the sixth century, and in 752, at the "eye-opening" consecration ceremony of the Great Buddha in Nara, thousands of priests from all over Asia gathered to celebrate and sing *shōmyō*, along with *gagaku* music and *bugaku* dance. This event was well documented and showed the importance that organized prayer chanting held in both the religious and secular life of early Japan.

A few hundred years after this grand ceremony, during the Heian Period, *shōmyō* developed new styles and repertoires. This was largely due to the efforts of two great scholar/priests, Saichō (766-822) and Kōbō Daishi (774-835, also known as Kūkai). Both these men visited China in the early ninth century and came back to found the Tendai and Shingon Sects respectively. Like their



religious doctrines, Tendai and Shingon *shōmyō* styles are slightly different, but even today these two styles comprise the majority of Japanese *shōmyō*. Other Buddhist sects, like the various Zen sects, Nichiren and Jōdo Shinshū, sing *shōmyō*, but most, if not all,

were influenced by either the Tendai or Shingon *shōmyō*.

Shōmyō originated in India—as the art of singing ancient vedic hymns—and passed through China before entering Japan. *Shōmyō* is written with the characters for voice 聲 and light (or enlightenment) 明. The word is derived from the Sanskrit, *śabda-vidyā*, which literally means “wisdom of the voice” or “enlightenment through the voice.” *Śabda-vidyā* (consisting of linguistics, rhyme and vocalization) was one of the five major courses of study for the ancient Brahmins of India, ranking along with the technical arts, martial arts, logic and religion.

Word and its musical manifestation, song, are an integral part of the development of any culture and religion, all of which use some sort of ceremonialized vocalization to call worshipers to prayer, praise or supplicate the deities or convey the souls of the departed into the other worlds. To wit, the utterance of the word in song or chant carried unparalleled spiritual importance for the ancients.

Japan was no exception. There is no other genre of Japanese music which wrought more influence on the musical psyche of the Japanese than *shōmyō*. As the prototype of singing in Japan, *shōmyō* subsequently influenced almost all genres of Japanese song and narrative traditions, for example the *noh* theater, Heike and other *biwa* traditions, various genres of *shamisen*, *kabuki* music and many folk traditions.

Shōmyō has also left an important legacy in the field of notation. During the Kamakura Period (1185-1333), notation, song books, musical theory and lineages from *shōmyō* were developed and refined. In 1270, the priest Kakui developed the most rational of all notational methods, known as the *go'in bakase*, a system of dots and lines whose directions indicate pitch, duration and ornamentation of the notes. This notation system is still in use today. In 1472, priests at Mt. Kōya (where the Shingon Sect is based) introduced wood block printing techniques and published a collection of *shōmyō* chants. This collection, possibly one of the first examples of published music in the world, demonstrates the advanced state of printing technology in Japan at the time. The Edo Period (1603-1868) also saw much publishing of *shōmyō* texts as well.

The Shingon monks at IHJ presented a typical *shōmyō* ceremony known as the *nikahōyō*. At the heart of this beautiful ceremony is a

melodic rendition of the Rishukyō Sutra (*Adhyardhasatika-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*), a relative of the famous *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Hanya-shingyō* or Heart Sutra). The Rishukyō Sutra is a precise compendium of the teachings of the Shingon sect and the purpose of the *nikahōyō* ceremony is to transmit these teachings. This ceremony is used for a variety of Buddhist-related functions: memorial services, dedication ceremonies and funerals. The March 25 *nikahōyō* presented at IHJ was performed as a requiem for those who lost their lives in the recent earthquake in northeastern Japan.

The Rishukyō Sutra is at the center of the *nikahōyō*, but before and after are sung a series of songs, the purpose of which is to prepare for and glorify the sutra itself.

The monks entered the Iwasaki Koyata Memorial Hall blowing a conch shell and singing a hymn to Dainichi Nyorai (Mahavairocana). After bowing three times, they took their seats and began singing the *ungabai*, the first “song” of the ceremony. Following this was the *sange*, where the priests scattered paper flowers in the hall. *Taiyō*, a dialogue type song, and *Zenshō Rei*, a song of repentance, followed. After this came the Rishukyō Sutra. Since rendition of the full sutra would take several hours, it was abbreviated to around seventy minutes.

A series of hymns (*gosan*, *goshōrei*), and the *ekō* closing prayer to request that the merit attained through the ceremony be shared with all, followed the sutra. The ceremony came to a close as the priests lined up and left the area of worship, singing and blowing the conch shell.

The monks' plaintive voices, natural and rich in overtones, reverberated throughout the hall and into the audience. In the midst of



the mayhem, anxiety and destruction brought about by the earthquake and its tragic consequences, it was soothing to hear voices reminding us that in spite of the temporal nature of life, music speaks to an eternal part of our being.