The Search for Sacred Flutes

by Candy Stern and William Malm

The term "a Friend of the Stearns" has many meanings. It can even generate exotic adventures. Here is an example. Helmut Stern has been a long time friend of the Stearns and has served on its advisory board for many years. Such an extended exposure to the fascinating variety of musical instruments in the world made it natural that he should think of The Stearns when he and his wife Candy went to Papua New Guinea. He asked me, "Is there any instrument you particularly want from New Guinea?" The answer was "Yes, two sacred flutes." The original collection of 1899 already had several excellent New Guinean drums and Vida Chenoweth gave us a handsome slit gong, now seen in the Vesta Mills gallery, when she lectured as part of the 1988 Stearns series (cf Newsletter, vol. 3, no. 1). However, it was the giant flutes that I most wanted to study. The drawing of such a flute was already made for the next edition of my textbook, Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia, but I still could not find a satisfactory explanation of how the instrument was played. Now, with the help of friends, the Stearns, I can study an instrument and video tape of its performance from one of the world's largest pre-modern islands. Here is Candy's description of the sacred flute adventure:

The Sacred Flutes were purchased in September of 1991 in the village of Korogo, which is in the Middle Sepik River area of Papua New Guinea. The purchase was negotiated with the help of James, a Papuan New Guinean and a member of the crew on our catamaran, the Melanesian Discoverer. The flutes are approximately ten years old.

Sacred flutes always reside in the Haus Tambaran, the men's spirit house, and only the men are allowed to see them and to play them. There are two flutes, male and female, made from bamboo, carved at the upper ends and always played in tandem. According to tradition, the music emitted by the Sacred Flutes represents the voices of the clan's ancestor spirits.

The men of the village agreed to demonstrate the playing of the flutes and invited Helmut to the upper floor of the Haus Tambaran, reserved for the men's sacred rites. Helmut was permitted to videotape this event so that Professor Malm could see the fingering used to produce the unusual sounds.

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The Continuation of a Japanese Music Tradition: Suzanne Law and Emilie Sargent

by Daniel Burdick

When you visit the galleries of the Stearns Collection and see instruments from Asia, do you wonder who plays these instruments? Certainly, everyday people in the U.S. don't play them... or do they? Well, right here in Ann Arbor, MI, we are fortunate to have an expert performer of shamisen who teaches it to the students at the University. Suzanne Law studied shamisen at the Tokyo University of Art and Music in Japan. She was the first non-Japanese person to complete a degree at Tokyo University where she received a two-year performance certificate in shamisen.

Suzanne started studying shamisen here at the University of Michigan while completing her B.S. in biology. During the 1986-1987 academic year, Makoto Ajimi, daughter of a famous shamisen professor in Japan, visited the University and assisted Professor Malm with the Japanese Music Study Group. When Ms. Ajimi returned to Japan the next year, they conducted their lessons through the mail! Suzanne would send recordings of her playing to Japan. Ms. Ajimi would send letters and cassettes back illustrating solutions to Suzanne’s problems.

In 1988, Suzanne graduated in biology with honors. At this point, she decided to go to Japan. By 1989, she was enrolled at Tokyo University and was studying with Makoto’s father, Toru Ajimi. During her second year in Japan, she switched teachers and studied with Professor Tajima. She was the only non-Japanese person in the program and this was a cause of consternation and amusement. In the beginning, her Japanese was not very good and it was hard to communicate. She made friends with another shamisen student, Chiharu Okubo, who had gone to high school in Seattle and therefore spoke English fluently. Chiharu was able to help Suzanne translate lectures until her Japanese improved.

One week, a magazine came to interview Professor Ajimi and they wanted pictures of him teaching a student. He asked Suzanne if she would be willing to help and if she would wear her kimono. As the interview progressed, it focussed more and more on Suzanne. The feedback from the article was enthusiastic. Everyone was impressed that a non-Japanese person was learning a traditional art form. However, what really amazed them was the fact that Suzanne could put on her kimono without any help. In fact, the caption under her picture read, “She can even wear kimono by herself!”

Since she has returned to Ann Arbor, Suzanne works at the University in the Department of Cellular and Molecular Biology as a biologist. She has a keen interest in spreading the good news about the shamisen. Therefore, she volunteers her time to teach shamisen in the ensemble in which she was once a student herself, the University of Michigan Japanese Music Study Group.

One of her students is Emilie Sargent, a junior majoring in horn performance at the School of Music. Emilie became interested in non-European Art Music instruments and Japanese instruments in particular when she went to a flute recital with a shakuhachi piece on it. She signed up for the Japanese Music Study Group the next semester and picked the shamisen to study on a whim at the first class meeting. It was providential. Emilie commented, “I love it. The shamisen is a great instrument. I particularly love its sound." Emilie practices for her lessons and rehearsals on a shamisen provided by the University. Emilie remarked, "There are enough shamisens that each student can keep one at school and at home. This is essential for practicing since it’s not possible to acquire one easily in the United States. You have to go to Japan to get one!"

Emilie particularly enjoys her lessons with Suzanne. “Suzanne translates the oral tradition of the shamisen for a non-Japanese student. She teaches by blending the non-verbal mode (the Japanese way) with the verbal mode (the American way) of teaching. With this combination, Suzanne really communicates the music to me. I enjoy our lessons a lot.

The feeling is mutual. Suzanne feels that Emilie is the ideal student. “She is very focussed at her lessons. She has a real desire to learn. In Japan, she would be considered a slightly above-average student of shamisen which is amazing for someone not steeped in the culture and history of the instrument.”

We are fortunate to have Suzanne Law in Ann Arbor passing on her knowledge and expertise to others. With Emilie, Suzanne is continuing a tradition of Japanese music at the University.
To disguise them from the women and children, the flutes were carefully wrapped in bamboo fronds before they were brought on board our vessel.

The flutes remained on board for five days. When we arrived in Madang, Jan Barter, our Cruise Director, told us we might be able to have them shipped back to the States by an Australian in town who was in the import–export business. He was known to occasionally help out tourists who found it necessary to ship rather than hand carry one or several purchases. (We had been advised at the beginning of the trip that shipping anything out of New Guinea would be exceptionally costly.)

In single file and with three feet between us, we carried the flutes over our shoulders into Madang, about a fifteen minute walk. Our first stop was at a hardware store where we purchased the only sensible type of packing available considering that the flutes were eight feet long—a water drain pipe.

From there we walked to the business establishment of the importers/exporter. I had made arrangements to have the tour bus pick me up and Helmut stayed behind to negotiate and expedite the shipping of the flutes. As it turned out, the exporter graciously declined to accommodate Helmut. The reason: with an item of cultural significance, such as the flutes, the Cultural Ministry would have to inspect and approve the export if his business handled it. The exporter suggested that Helmut take the flutes to the airport and make arrangements to ship them himself. Luckily, the man was kind enough to provide Helmut with a truck and driver. The airport was approximately half an hour from Madang, and it took at least another hour to have all the documentation accepted. They arrived in the States approximately six weeks later.

Upon their arrival, I was able to examine them, view the videotape, and see how they are played. There are no finger holes and the blow hole is very large. Index fingers are placed at the two sides of the mouth and the blow hole to create a steady air stream so that the fundamental and some overtones can be produced on each flute. By blowing both flutes in different rhythmic patterns, an interlocking, haunting sound is evoked.

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How Do I Get to The Stearns?

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ADMISSION: Free at all times.

EXHIBIT HOURS: Thurs., Fri., & Sat. 10–5.

GROUP VISITS AND TOURS: To arrange for group visits or guided tours by members of The Stearns Collection staff, please call (313) 763-4389.

PARKING: Metered parking is available south of the entrance doors.

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From this Stern’s report, you can see that being an active friend of The Stearns may be adventuresome as well as educationally meaningful. Fortunately, on becoming director of the collection, I bought a station wagon so when the flutes arrived, they were safely moved to the Stearns research area (Argus II Building). They now are catalogued, photographed, and studied but I haven’t gotten a good sound out of them yet. A Ph.D. doesn’t teach you everything, but we all are learning new things thanks to the Sterns and the Stearns.

Meanwhile in Wheaton, IL

New Guinea sacred flutes have been a desired Stearns Collection acquisition for decades. While the Helmut Stern giant pair was being studied in the Stearns research laboratory, the director was lecturing on a world view approach to music history teaching at Wheaton College in Illinois. Among the many outstanding features of this school was the ethnomusicology program directed by Vida Chenoweth, world famous marimba performer and researcher on the music of Papua New Guinea.

As noted earlier, Dr. Chenoweth gave us the handsome slit gong. Guess what she wished to add to the Stearns Collection this year? A pair of sacred flutes! They are older, shorter, and of very different design than the Stern pair. Thus we have added four such rare instruments in one season. The Gods work in mysterious ways their wonders to perform. We are blessed by friends who understand our needs.

Dr. Malm examines the sacred flutes donated by Vida Chenoweth