



Delicate Paths - Music for Shō

たおやかな歩み 笙の音

Sarah Peebles with Evan Parker, Nilan Perera, Suba Sankaran [unsounds 42U](#)

Foreword (from [unsounds 42U](#))

In the 80s, while I was studying music composition in Japan, I was intrigued by the seemingly esoteric role some traditional musics played in contemporary Japanese society. I was given the opportunity to study the shō—the mouth-organ used in *gagaku*, ancient Japanese court orchestral music and dances—at a small Tokyo shrine, Sendagaya Ward's Hatonomori Hachiman Jinja. Via this shrine I became familiar with basic gagaku repertoire and played for Shinto ceremonies, weddings and related functions, and also learned how to tune and repair the instrument. From that time onward I've explored improvising with, writing for and toying with the acoustic, amplified and reproduced sound of the shō. I've often wondered who thought up this remarkable work of nature-meets-technology—this instrument, so elegant and deceptively simple-looking, which sounds so ethereal. The answer, of course, isn't really *who*, but by which paths the shō has come into being.

The shō, a free-reed instrument, was introduced to Japan from China between 710-794 AD, and is one of a large family of Asian mouth-organs developed before and since that period. It has traditionally been played in Japan as a part of *gagaku* for court, temple and shrine functions. Contemporary compositions and improvisation have become a part of its repertoire since the 1960s, and its arresting pipe-organ sound has drawn fans from around the world. Asian mouth-organs likely originated in what is now Laos more than 3,000 years ago. They reflect an intriguing, synergistic relationship between human beings and the habitats surrounding us. Since ancient times, mouth-organs have utilized the nest materials of wild stingless honey bees (such as genus *Tetrigona* in Laos): honey-making bees in tropical regions that are cousins of stinging honey bees (genus *Apis*).



The stingless bees that forest peoples of the tropics have used throughout the world are social bees that gather plant resins and produce mixtures of secreted wax and these collected resins (as well as plant gums, oils and other substances), which the bees combine equally and use within their nest as construction material. Indigenous peoples have gathered these materials from wild nests for millennia—often boiling down components and mixing them in specific proportions—and applied them to mouth-organs in many ways, as well as to many other cultural items.



Ecology and human culture intersected in new ways as bee husbandry and agriculture progressed in ancient Asia. The mouth organ that became the shō utilized wax from managed bees—eventually from Japanese honey bees, *Apis cerana japonica*, a subspecies of the Asiatic honey bee—along with human-gathered resin, ground malachite, lead, bronze, lacquered wood, buffalo horn, silver, and smoke-cured bamboo from the hearths of old houses. It has changed little since arriving in Japan, except for the occasional experiment.'

—Sarah Peebles, Toronto, 2014

**Shō reeds and pipes and stingless bees
contined next page.**

(Shō photos pp 1-3: Robert Cruickshank)

Shô reeds and pipes



The essential element: shô reeds. The shô's unique timbre (and response) is created by its reeds in combination with its smoked bamboo pipes. The bronze reed in each pipe sits atop a lacquered wood insert. Reeds are coated with ground malachite, for humidity control, and are adhered with a beeswax-resin mixture. A denser beeswax-resin drop containing fine lead pellets aids in tuning. Managed honey bees (genus *Apis*) and human-gathered resin are used today. This is an evolution from earlier mouth-organs which made use of the wax-resin *cerumin*, gathered from stingless bee nests (as described in the CD foreword). Cerumin, which is only produced by stingless bees, is still used on some mouth-organs and is known in Laos as *maeng kisoot*.



Inside the hive of stingless bees:

gathered plant resins, filaments of *cerumen* — resins mixed in equal portions with secreted wax— and brood cells with workers in the background; species *Frieseomelitta varia* Belterra, Pará, Brazil (left). Stingless bees of collect resin from a live log in a flooded forest near Belém, Brazil; genus *Trigona* (below).



***Delicate Paths* Cd details and video are at Unsounds here: [unsounds 42U](https://unsounds.com/42U). Biographies next page.**

(Stingless bees and bee nest photos: Giorgio Venturieri)

BIOGRAPHIES

Sarah Peebles is a Toronto-based American composer, improviser and installation artist. She gathers and transforms environmental and found sound for live performance, radio and multi-channel contexts, performs the shō (the Japanese mouth-organ), and creates habitat installations which prominently feature sound. Her distinctive approaches to shō improvisation and composition, which include acoustic and digitally processed performance, draw from *gagaku* (Japanese court orchestra music), microtonality and psychoacoustic phenomena of this unusual instrument. Peebles' installation practice focuses on BioArt which explores the lives of native wild bees, pollination ecology and biodiversity. Her activities span Europe, North America, Asia, New Zealand, and Australia and include collaborations with a wide variety of musicians, writers and artists. [More about Sarah](#) and [Sarah's blog](#)

Evan Parker is widely acknowledged as "one of the music's greatest living instrumentalists" (The Times), "one of the world's finest ensemble improvisers" (Chicago Reader) and "one of the modern era's most original voices" (The Wire). "Free improvised music has accounted for most of Parker's activities over the last forty years, whether playing solo or in groups, but both jazz and art music composers have also deployed the arresting physicality of his sound as a contrasting and energising element." (Steve Lake). [More about Evan Parker](#)

Nilan Perera has been a part of the improvised and art music community since the mid '80s starting as the guitarist of choice for the punkfunk/No Wave scene that then infected Toronto. He has performed and recorded with Evan Parker, Jandek, Mary Margaret O'Hara, John Oswald, David Toop, Eddie Prevost, Rainer Wiens and Michael Ondaatje among many others. His award winning work with multidisciplinary artist Susanna Hood has placed him in the vanguard of experimental sound artists working in performance.

Suba Sankaran career began at an early age while studying South Indian classical singing and percussion with her father, master drummer Trichy Sankaran. She has effortlessly combined musical worlds, performing across North America, Europe, Asia and Africa with Autorickshaw, Trichy Sankaran, FreePlay Duo (with Dylan Bell) and Retrocity (80s a cappella revue), and has performed on numerous recordings and film soundtracks. Sankaran has performed for Peter Gabriel, Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu, and with vocal sensations Bobby McFerrin and the Swingle Singers. Suba has composed and produced music for theatre, film, radio and dance. [More about Suba Sankaran](#)

