

MEI by Kazuo Fukushima:
A Performance Guide

by Jan Vinci

Over the years, every now and then, a performer will discover a gem. When played, it creates a special connection between musical sound and one's heart. As these pieces are encountered we must embrace them, and frequently perform them, for the sake of our listeners, and more important, for the sake of our own musical well-being.

During my early college days, Judith Bentley and Harvey Sollberger unveiled a jewel to me that continues to possess a special place in my heart - MEI by Kazuo Fukushima. Fukushima (b.1930), a resident of Tokyo, composed MEI in such a way that it beautifully transfers the sounds of traditional Japanese flutes, Nohkan and shakuhachi, into our modern flute.

The Nohkan flute, used in the *noh* drama, connects listeners to powerful aesthetics through minimum pitches and a vast array of timbres. These sounds have the ability to reach one's inner soul and, yes, even draw out previously untapped emotions. With meditative powers of its own, the shakuhachi flute utilizes intense breathy sounds, puissant expressive grace notes, and soul-altering pitch bends. Traditional Japanese flute music exhibits the POWER of ONE NOTE (SOUND) and the POWER of SILENCE. Fukushima expertly and ingeniously incorporates these two concepts in his composition for modern flute, MEI.

According to the inscription on the Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, "In Chinese ideology MEI means obscure, pale and intangible. This music was composed to comfort the soul of the late Dr. Wolfgang Steinecke of Darmstadt, who died in a tragic accident. According to ancient Japanese legend it is believed that the sound of the flute was able to reach the dead."

Italian flutist Severino Gazzelloni commissioned the work and premiered it on April 23, 1962 at the 25th Festival of Contemporary Music in Venice.

My journey into MEI led me to seek out unconventional embouchures and breath adjustments, and to become familiar with fingerings for multiphonics, portamento, attack clarification and other less traditional expressions. As a messenger of this powerful work one should go beyond my suggestions by tapping your own inner thoughts, emotions and talents. Experiment with sounds, vibrato, attacks, releases, timing and use of silence.

The structure of MEI is a simple A B A form. The phrases are clear and the intended emotions are obvious. The most important thing to remember is that the power of the overall structure of a phrase, a section, or the piece, is inherently dependent on the effect of the smallest elements. Always keep in mind the magnitude of the POWER of ONE NOTE and the POWER of SILENCE.

MEI is an excellent introduction to the avant-garde for an intermediate player and for an avant-garde-shy audience. I urge those who have not partaken of this masterful piece, to do so. Your musical language will gain in breadth and clarity, resulting in a more fulfilling artistic venture into all music. I hope that you will give this piece a chance to bring it's magic to you and your listeners!

PERFORMANCE SUGGESTIONS

FIRST SECTION

MEI begins with a section of long pitches. As they swell and dissipate in a hypnotic fashion, the overall energy increases to a climax in measure 11 and then finally winds down to silence.

Commence the first note from niente, without tonguing. Ease into a hollow breathy sound and enhance it with vibrato, if the tone warrants. Then subside to niente once again.

The second note introduces a powerful tool which Fukushima uses throughout the entire work. By entering pitches at different points before tying onto down beat, he creates various levels of intensity. To convey the intended animation and to create the most effective flow of energy from one idea to the next, enter precisely at the indicated time. Feel the subdivision of the portal note one beat before it is played. Be aware that entrance on a sixteenth note, triplet quarter or eighth note, warrant distinct styles of attacks and colors to portray their individual energy.

The dynamics are crucial to the development of phrases, sections and the entire work. Innovate sounds and vibrato to enhance the fortes and pianos. One way to support the dynamics through vibrato is: at the *a tempo* in measure 12 begin the B-flat with fast narrow vibrato and increase it to a frenzy. Then, abruptly stop it with the soft short ↑A. On the following A use a very, very slow waver in tone, producing it by alternating a small and large embouchure aperture.

Close the first section with a strong silence created by a carefully shaped and tapered C.

SECOND SECTION

At the end of the first section hold the silence long enough to be “heard” and “felt,” but short enough to maintain the intensity it has created. Then, EXPLODE into the second section! (At this point I cannot help thinking of the dedicatee’s tragic death which is mentioned in the introductory script.) Fukushima crafts this section so that the motives reflect many facets of the soul - depicting death and life, pain and ecstasy, earth and heaven, anger and love. He juxtaposes these emotions so profoundly, so brilliantly, and so effectively. As a messenger, we need to follow his lead and venture into our depths to convey the trauma.

Throughout this section Fukushima composes sudden outbursts (reflective of shakuhachi tradition). Because the composer clearly indicates the force of the articulations, the flutist must vary the force of the air stream and tongue for the different accents. The \wedge will require a sharper attack than \blacktriangleleft . The ∇ may be most effective by cutting it off with the tongue.

Dynamics in this section urge the flutist to go beyond the traditional approach of increasing and decreasing volume. Change color to increase intensity by using different fingerings. An example would be in measures 22 and 23. The first D after the E grace note can be played as a harmonic off of low D with no vibrato; for the second D use the same fingering but add vibrato; play the third D with vibrato and as a harmonic off low G (which adds more purity and power); for the fourth D use the regular fingering and use faster vibrato; and finally, play the last D with the regular fingering, but add a very sharp breath attack and “tut” for the ∇ accent.

Another example of using color to portray dynamic character is in measure 26. As you come off of the quasi multiphonic and the silence, produce a very breathy $\uparrow F$, only attacking it with air. Slur into an eerie, large, hollow, soft $F\#$. The long silence that follows can be effectively interrupted by deftly placing and accenting the *mp* $F\#$. You can even

over-blow it to the point of getting a multiphonic for more emotional impact. As you crescendo open the embouchure WIDE, increase the vibrato to a frenzied speed, roll out the headjoint to produce more air in the sound, and then, sharply attack the low C with a kick of the diaphragm. Quickly pull back the reins. Play a hollow F# and nudge it with your diaphragm for the tenuto effect. Abruptly slow down the air stream for the very soft low C; increase the dynamics with no vibrato; add a gradually accelerating vibrato while getting softer; end on the short D with a gentle “nanny goat” vibrato. This may seem like a lot of things to think about and execute. But, in fact, it all makes musical sense and is very natural to execute. This is a good example of how phrases in the second movement should be addressed.

THIRD SECTION

The *ppp* B of the second section should vanish slowly into thin air, leaving sense a continued accent. After it's long disappearance the third section is introduced by the same low E-flat which starts the piece. But this time it lingers longer, securely establishing the return of the initial affection. This section swiftly accelerates to the climax, and as it does, it reflects upon the energy of the second section by emulating the rhythms of bars 21 and 22. Finally, it stretches out the final G# to B to pronounce the concluding climax.

The subdued end requires 6 bars to wind down completely (2 bars longer than the first section's ending). To give it shape and to cast back on earlier moods, begin the A in measure 61 with a fast wide vibrato. As you slide up to the quarter tone ↑A narrow the vibrato and increase it's speed to a “nanny goat” vibrato while tapering. Then, use a pale straight tone on the following C and A. The E of measure 63 can introduce a bit of color with a slow vibrato that gradually becomes narrow and even slower. Slightly nudge the F-sharp grace note in 64 with hot straight air, falling lightly to a relaxed undulating low C. Breathe a natural breath. Softly and gently sigh on the last note. Hold it at least six counts

and taper imperceptibly. When the note leaves the flute, continue to hold the flute in playing position and breathe slowly. Let the silence be heard and felt. Then gradually lower your flute.