

ONE SOUND, ONE WORLD

World Shakuhachi Festival 2025 report by Thorsten Knaub

Most of us who experienced shakuhachi gatherings on local, European or global level, know that they are dense experiences, often boosting one's shakuhachi batteries for weeks, months, if not years to come. Texas 2025, after a gap of seven years (partly due to that pandemic), and with about 235 shakuhachi people attending, was clearly a long awaited moment for a renewed coming together.

WSF in Texas!

The WSF 2025 in Texas is the eighth major international shakuhachi festival to be held since the original 1994 WSF took place in Bisei, Okayama Prefecture, Japan.

Subsequently the World Shakuhachi Festival took place in Boulder, USA (1998), Tokyo, Japan (2002), New York, USA (2004), Sydney, Australia (2008), Kyoto, Japan (2012) and London (2018) and is now a major gathering of professional and amateur performers, scholars, and enthusiasts of the shakuhachi from around the globe and a sign of how much the shakuhachi has travelled around the world since.

When sometime in 2022 (after WSF2022 in China was cancelled), main organiser Marty Regan initially shared his thought with Tim McLaughlin (Dean of the College of Performance, Visualization and Fine Arts at Texas A&M University), to bring a WSF to the middle of Texas, and appreciating the recent previous locations: New York, Sydney, Kyoto, London... College Station... it did not feel like it was going to be an easy or even possible scenario.

Some more meetings, a lot of work in between and three years later, here we are, April 17~20, 2025, the WSF has arrived. 84 workshops and lectures, exhibitions, masterclasses, 10 afternoon and evening concerts, 3 open mic concerts, as well as 5 outreach concerts happening before and after WSF in major Texan cities, with 67 invited international guests [<https://wsf2025.com/invited-guests>] and about 165 shakuhachi participants are ready to share their shakuhachi knowledge and enthusiasm at the College Station campus.

[<https://wsf2025.com/welcome>]

College Station - Texas A&M University

If you are curious the A&M stands for Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, and it opened on Oct 4, 1876, as the state's first public institution of higher education. It is now one of the largest universities of the United States by student numbers. At College Station, the main campus, there are 72,560 students (autumn 2024) with about 4,320 faculty and staff.

Preparing for the WSF visit there were numerous visits to Google Streetview and attempts to visualize the huge and sprawling nature of the A&M campus, which covers an area of 21 km² (5,200 acres), but nothing prepared us for navigating it all in 30° C heat, plus arriving from a cool European April. Fortunately the official WSF partner hotels where almost all of us invitees as well as the participants were staying, were within manageable distance, with only one eight-lane road (ie a Texas 'local road') to cross.

The day before - Symposium

It was really useful to arrive a day earlier and deal with the main jet-lag, but more importantly have time to visit the WSF2025 Symposium too. Dr Kiku Day was in charge of the organisation and the selection was done by Drs Gunnar Jinmei Linder, Martha Fabrique, William Connor, Cory LeFevres, Matthew Campbell and Martin Regan. The ten chosen contributors, who could not all be present, left us with three remote contributions via Zoom. The room in the Melbern G. Glasscock Center was fairly full, maybe around 35 people.

The symposium was presented in the form of three panels, each panel comprising 3-4 speakers with a 30 minute slot each. (see full schedule here: [\[https://wsf2025.com/symposium\]](https://wsf2025.com/symposium) On Panel 1: *Shakuhachi Analysis* (of performance practices) we had Paul Engle, LeRon Harrison (via Zoom) and Bruno Deschênes (Zoom). After lunch there was Panel 2: *Diverse Roles of the Shakuhachi in Society and the Arts* with Koji Matsunobu, Philip Horan, Lauren Rubin and Lydia Snyder; and Panel 3: *Shakuhachi Composition*, presented by Jim Franklin (Zoom), Garrett Grosbeck and Daiwei Lu.

Just before lunch we had the Keynote Speaker Kanda Kayu with *The Dissemination of Traditional Shakuhachi Music Across Japan*. We travelled from the three-node *miyogiri* to the root end 7-node shakuhachi, via *borō* and *komusō*; we also met the *hōgechaku* of Kyushu Region, of 1 *shaku* 3 *sun* 8 *bu* length; and - maybe most fascinating - we listened to maybe the earliest recordings (1913) of *Koku* and *Tsuru no Sugomori* played by Higuchi Taizan (35th Kanshu of Myoan-ji). Kanda Kayu was very enthusiastic and clearly wanted to tell us more, but having already gone past his slotted time we had to stop.

As a non-ethnomusicologist mainly concerned with playing that shakuhachi thing, and therefore not primarily focusing on dissecting shakuhachi practice with all the academic tools at hand, this kind of conceptual analysis and contextual research is nevertheless important. Just listening in and picking up a few pointers here and there from the dedicated scholars, amateur and professional, sharing their passion and knowledge, certainly is a suitable introduction and priming for the following WSF itself.

Howdy ya'll!

Yes, indeed, but what did you say? "Howdy ya'll!" It echoed again through the Courtyard of the Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAAH) Building. This was agenda point 1 of the WSF - the welcome social. Of course we all did our homework and could reply with a perfect Texan Howdy!

Greetings out of the way, we had a series of introductions of the people who made this WSF happen. Marty Regan, executive director, welcomed the Texas WSF2025 Planning Committee members to the front: Martha Reika Fabrique, James Nyoraku Schlefer, Elliot Kanshin Kallen, Dale Kakuon Gutt, Alberto Gyōja Battaglino, Steven Kōchiku Casano, senior advisers Christopher Yohmei Blasdel and David Kansuke Wheeler. Not to start a rumour, but David as well as Marty may have used holographic doubles to be at so many places seemingly instantly, doing translation, driving, chatting, announcing and many other assistances over the next four festival days and beyond.

We met the JSPN who were doing the heavy lifting of navigating funding sources Japan-side. Represented here by Obama Akihito, Kōhei Matsumoto and Kizan Kawamura. Next up Peter Dayton, winner of the Composition Competition, whose new piece will be premiered on day 4, as well as Kōzan Shiba, creator of the group piece which all the participants and invitees will perform together (days 3 and 4.)

Also we met the interpreters, some being there as performers as well, (Sayuri Inoue, Etsuko Kondo, Emi Miyata, Rita Ueda, Aaro Haavisto, Garret Groesbeck, Kyle Helou and Sayō Zenyōji), who will be so essential and committed in the next days to make sure we all can follow the workshops in English, and some of the many student volunteers (59 altogether!), the red-shirts (ie wearing a red coloured version of the official WSF T-Shirt), who will be so helpful in the next days, be it as impromptu translators, information kiosks, lunch distributors or most importantly guiding the shakuhachi crowds through the college campus to keep us from getting lost.

After all the introductions and initial thank yous the WSF2025 in Texas was officially ready to start next morning. But before the shakuhachi sounds would take possession of LAAH and T&M in general, it was the university's premier steel-pan ensemble, Maroon Steel, who provided the live music for the welcome party. After it was time to head back to the hotels and after a quick visit to the hotel bar, trying to catch some jet-lagged sleep to be as fresh as possible for day 1.

WSFWWSFWSF!!!

Day 1 started early for me, 6h30-ish. The first rehearsal was set for 8 o'clock sharp at LAAH. On the schedule was the rehearsal for Fujiwara Dozan's composition *Chikusei Shōei* (*Bamboo Voice, Pine Tree Silhouette*), commissioned by JSPN in 2023.

And it did start at 8. Dozan took the conducting position and after a few initial explanatory comments the next 45 minutes were full of high concentration playing and taking in some more of his remarks. Usually 8 in the morning is not the time I take out the shakuhachi, I must admit, but now standing and playing next to Nakajima Kōzan and Japan's Living National Treasure of shakuhachi, Hōzan Nomura, somehow focused my mind... the performance was scheduled for the evening concert on Day 2. Good, one more rehearsal will be happening.

WSF2025 Howdy ya'll!



Clockwise from top left: A & M University Texas Campus; Lunchpacks are ready to be picked up; Social welcome – Marty Regan, Director WSF2025 introduces Planning Committee and Advisers: Elliot Kallen, David Wheeler, Martha Fabrique, Dale Gutt, Alberto Battaglino, Steven Casano, Christopher Blasdel and James Schlefer.; Lunchtime; WSF2025 Deco – Entrance hall of main location (LAAH); Morning ro-buki – WSF participants spreading out over the LAAH courtyard; Social welcome – WSF crowd mingling and queueing for welcome buffet.

Chikusei Shōei is a quartet for 3 x 1.8 shakuhachi and 1 x 2.4 shakuhachi, with each voice shared between JSPN members and non-Japanese players. So we were about 28 altogether, equally distributed across the 4 'voices' of the piece, with 16 players not Japanese and a JSPN contingent of 12 players.

And while we were rehearsing, the first general group *ro-buki* got under way starting from 8h15 at the LAAH courtyard and with it the WSF truly got going. This was followed by the 'official opening meeting' for everyone at 8h45, which after a few announcements was of course another rehearsal for the really big group piece for all the participants. Kōzan Shiba's WSF2025 commission *Jijimuge* got its first sounding. Kōzan conducted and did her best to tame 200+ shakuhachi, as more structure was revealed too. The first performance is set for Day 3 evening concert, so there is still time to polish a few things.

Afterwards the workshops and classes started, and with about 84 of them over the next four days it will obviously not be possible to mention and assess all of them here in this report, but I will have a subjective summary in some of the next paragraphs. For a quick overview probably best to visit the relevant page on the WSF2025 website [<https://wsf2025.com/workshops>]. As for the concerts there were the six afternoon concerts and the four main evening concerts. [<https://wsf2025.com/concerts>]

Concerts

Due to a change in the concert schedule the very first sound of the very first afternoon concert on Day 1 was not a shakuhachi... it was a metallic sounding burst when Emmanuelle Rouaud pressed the foot pedal to activate the live-electronic set-up to perform the world premiere of Henri Algadafe's 2025 composition *As It Rises, So It Falls*. The shakuhachi though came in soon after, and started building tone sequences and melodic patterns, sometimes seemingly denied by the electronic replies, other times leading and guiding the electronic echoes. A great start to the concert.

And this being the first of the afternoon concerts at the Black Box Theater at LAAH there was only standing room. Just after, the Wood Prophets Bass Shakuhachi Quartet - Cornelius Boots with Kevin Chen, John Garner and Alex Merck - riffing rhythmically on their long, wide *jinashi* shakuhachi, reminding me at moments of a steam engine, and each taking their solo turns, before returning into their rhythmic steam cloud.

As the concert proceeded we also stepped further back towards past compositions. One of them being Aoki Reibo II's *Mumyō No Kyoku* (Bright Dream, 1976) performed by Aoki Reibo III. The serenity of this modern honkyoku was beautifully rendered by Reibo III. No hurry, great phrasing. And as the Black Box Theater was not providing much of a supporting acoustic resonance, the shakuhachi performers, in particular solo performers, had to be on their best embouchure to carry and project the sound.

The remaining pieces were all solo performances *Mujū Shinkyoku* (Wandering Spirit) by Nyodo Jin (1937) performed by his grandson Ray Jin; *Mei* (Kazuo Fukushima 1962) performed by Kenichi Tajima; followed by *Prelude To Watermill* (Teiji Itō 1972) performed by Ralph Samuelson; and finally *Azuma No Kyoku* (Music of the East) a traditional honkyoku, performed by Jon Johnston, closed the very first concert. A great start to the WSF concerts.

One of the realities of a WSF is that it is impossible to visit and attend everything that happens and that one would like, and the second afternoon concert I missed due to being at some workshop. Reading again the concert programme I slightly regret my choice now. [<https://wsf2025.com/concerts> — afternoon concert B]

The Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAAH) Building being the main location for morning gathering, *ro-buki*, announcements, workshops and afternoon concerts, we now convened at a different campus location, The 700 seat Rudder Theater, for the first themed evening and official WSF2025 opening concert, "Shakuhachi Around The Globe". No parallel classes or workshops were happening at this time. We had, naturally, a sequence of fine speeches, reminding us from varying perspectives of the efforts, time and pleasure it is to have the WSF at College Station – Marty Regan, Executive Director of WSF2025 and Professor of Music Composition at T&M, was followed by Tim McLaughlin (Dean, College of Performance, Visualization, and Fine Arts) and completed by John Nichols, Mayor of College Station. This kind of ceremonial ornamentation also helps to frame the importance and uniqueness of a global shakuhachi gathering for me.

Nevertheless, it was time for the sound of the shakuhachi to fill the theater space. And what better start could we hope for than the traditional honkyoku *Reibo-Nagashi* (Yearning for the Bell) expertly rendered by Gunnar Jinmei Linder in Kinko-ryū style.

I will not be able to describe each piece from this and all the following concerts, so I'll give my subjective pick of what I like, found interesting and what I was most impressed with.

In the first evening concert I would like to mention *Tall Grasses* (Elizabeth Brown 2024). A quiet and precise composition beautifully brought to life by Ralph Samuelson, Hélène Seiyū Codjo, Kinya Sogawa, Akihito Obama, Ichirō Seki, Danilo Baikyō Tomic, Martha Reika Fabrique, Riley Lee, Suizan Lagrost, Hungwen Tsai, Steven Kōchiku Casano, Kyle Chōmei Helou and Christopher Foss with Elizabeth Brown herself conducting. After the quiet sounds of Brown I really enjoyed the exuberance and playfulness of *Silk Road Fantasy Suite, mvt. 5: Turtle Dance* (Jiping Zhao 2010) presented by Bowen Yang on shakuhachi, with Sayo Zenyōji accompanying on piano.

We also had the duet *Kochō* (Butterfly) a world premiere of Kōzan Shiba's 2025 composition, here performed by herself with Kōzan Nakajima. I think this was also new ground - besides experiencing a great performance we also had two high level Japanese female shakuhachi players playing a duet at a WSF and playing their own compositions.

On the second day it was very busy and I caught only a few performances of afternoon concert 'D' — having been present at rehearsals in France already for *Bingo Braz* (The Big Bagpipe) (Véronique Piron 2025), a duet performed by Véronique Piron and Teruo Furuya, it was great to hear the piece played out in a performance setting. Sometimes reminiscent of a march, the shakuhachi were playfully tapping along mimicking the bag pipes, infusing the shakuhachi with a Breton sensibility.

Also it was great to see the Tanabe brothers in action – Shōzan Tanabe and Retsuzan Tanabe performing *UkonTsurubami* (Saffron and Deep Gray) written by Shiroto Aizawa (1992) – another fantastic performance this afternoon.

Back at the evening concerts the second night was themed *Japanese Masters and Masterpieces* and was mainly a showcase of the JSPN (the Japanese Shakuhachi professional-Players Network). It was also, as already mentioned, the day of the performance of *Chikusei Shōei* (Bamboo Voice, Pine Tree Silhouette) by Dōzan Fujiwara 2023. The JSPN players – Daisuke Kaminaga, Kizan Kawamura, Akihisa Kominato, Kōzan Shiba, Kuniyoshi Sugawara, Kinya Sogawa, Ken-ichi Tajima, Retsuzan Tanabe, Kōzan Nakajima, Hōzan Nomura, Kōhei Matsumoto – took the first row seated with the rest of us – Steven Kōchiku Casano, Elliot Kanshin Kallen, Marek Kimej Matvija, Yang Bowen, Martha Reika Fabrique, James Nyoraku Schlefer, Dale Kakuon Gutt, Alberto Gyōja Battaglino, Adam Robinson, Thorsten Knaub, Zac Zinger, Kyle Chōmei Helou, Philip Horan, Cornelius Boots, Karl Young, Emmanuelle Rouaud – taking our position just behind, standing. In any case Dozan's quartet, with each voice supported by about six players sounded all good to me and it was a great experience. It was one of my personal highlights to contribute to that concert.

Afterwards we had one of my favourite traditional honkyoku pieces, *Ukigumo* (Floating Clouds), here beautifully performed by Toshimitsu Ishikawa, followed by a rather powerful *Shika No Tōne* `(Distant Cry of the Deer), the traditional Kinko-ryū honkyoku, brought here to the stage with all the nuances and energy by Jūmei Tokumaru and Tomoe Kaneko.

Still to mention are the group pieces by JSPN performers – *Inyōku* (Phrases of Shadow and Light) for shakuhachi ensemble (Hōzan Yamamoto I 1974) performed by Hōzan Nomura, Retsuzan Tanabe, Shōzan Tanabe, Dōzan Fujiwara, Kizan Kawamura, Kōzan Shiba, Daisuke Kaminaga and Kōzan Nakajima; and *Shadows, Shades, and Silhouettes* (Marty Regan 2024 - commissioned by JSPN) also played by an all-star ensemble and brilliantly performed by Kinya Sogawa, Toshimitsu Ishikawa, Kōhei Matsumoto, Ichirō Seki, Hiromu Motonaga, Kenichi Tajima, Akihisa Kominato and Akihito Obama.

The concert performance level at the WSF was simply amazing, just trying to pick highlights is almost impossible given the packed and varied programming. Last but not least on the second night there was also Fujiwara Dozan performing Dai Fujikura's *Korokoro* (2015). Dozan's control of the shakuhachi and its tone colour and volume is simply mesmerising.

The third evening concert themed Gala Concert with the title *Treasures of Shakuhachi Musical Heritage – From Then To Now* brought a change to the WSF proceedings as we travelled to the one-hour drive away small town (village) of Round Top (more about the trip in a separate paragraph).

The Gala Concert at the Round Top Concert Hall - a truly spectacular all wooden building, boasting excellent acoustics and an eccentric interior - already made clear that this would be a special evening and it was a spectacular concert. The programming was clever enough to build up a sequence of varied and different performances, contrasting with each other enough to celebrate the variety but also complementing each other to see a kind of trajectory of shakuhachi development from the past to the future.

Difficult to pick highlights here too: of course listening to my own teacher Teruo Furuya, performing the kind of WSF classic *Wadatsumi no Iroko no Miya* (A Story in Abyssal Palace) by Randō Fukuda 1928, with longtime shakuhachi companions Kaoru Kakizakai and Kazushi Matama, was always a moment to cherish. It is just such a powerful piece and played with that attention and experience it simply 'rocks'.

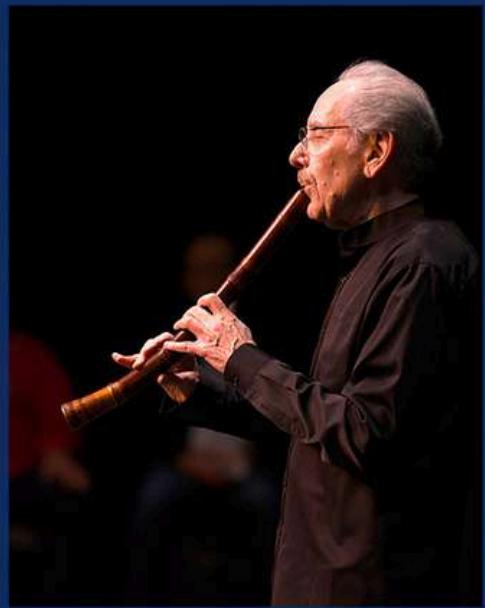
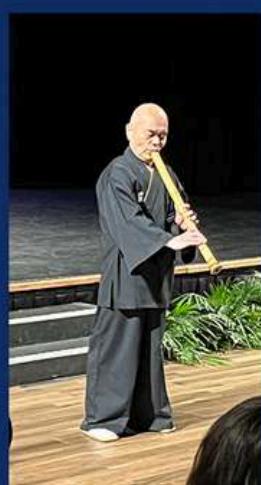
Stan Kakudō Richardson's austere, no-frills opener with *Renpo-ken Sugomori* (Nesting of the Cranes) from Renpo Temple set the mood for the more traditional first half, where we also had *Onoe no Matsu* (Pines on the Bluff) brought to us by the Japanese players Keisuke Zenyōji (shakuhachi), Akiko Fujimoto (voice/shamisen) and Yōko Hihara on the koto. A simply sublime performance, of three great musicians who are in full control of every detail and never in a hurry or doubt of where they are taking the song. They truly disappear in the sound and become the music.

And picking the highlights means picking everything at the Roundhouse Top concert hall this evening. Akihisa Kominato's soulful rendition of *Esashi Oiawake* (Esashi Herder Song), a Hokkaido folk (*minyō*) song, for me laid bare something about the universality expressed through folk music. Although far removed from 'country music' per se, it nevertheless felt oddly local and far at the same time. The first half came to a close with Japan's National Living Treasurer Hōzan Nomura playing *Kōgetsuchō* (Lament to the Moon), a piece composed by Tozan-ryū founder Tozan Nakao in 1904. Serene perfection.

Cornelius Boots opened the second half with *Black Earth*, his 2018 composition, riffing up and down the scale on his Taimu *jinashi*, pushing body posture to the limits, an effective use of circular breathing brought us right back into it. Also Boots was certainly best dressed performer here, echoing the brown hues of the wooden concert hall perfectly with his wild west wardrobe.

Following on we had a timely reminder of spring – *Haru No Umi* (The Sea in Spring), an 'evergreen' by Michio Miyagi from 1929 – flawlessly performed by Suizan Lagrost on shakuhachi and Yōko Hihara on koto. We almost jumped a century to Yoshimi Tsujimoto's 2024 composition *Gyō* (The Practice) utilising a looping pedal (and another piece in the festival exploring electronics) to build up beautiful melody phrases, looping them and ornamenting them further.

WSF2025 Opening, Evening & Afternoon Concerts



Clockwise from top left: Evening Concert day2: *Shika No Tōne* – Jūmei Tokumaru and Tomoe Kaneko; Opening Concert: *Tall Grasses* (Elizabeth Brown 2024) for performers see report; Opening Concert: *Kochō* (Kōzan Shiba 2025) – Kōzan Shiba, Kōzan Nakajima; Afternoon Concert: *Prelude to Watermill* (Teiji Itō 1972) – Ralph Samuelson; Afternoon Concert: *As it rises, so it falls* (Henri Algadafe 2025) – Emmanuelle Rouaud; Afternoon Concert: *Hifumi hachigaesi no shirabe* – Kohmei Mizuno; Evening Concert day2: *Ukigumo* – Toshimitsu Ishikawa

WSF2025 Gala Concert : Treasures of Shakuhachi Musical Heritage-From Then to Now



Next page: clockwise from top left: *Black Earth* (Cornelius Boots 2018) – **Cornelius Boots**
Haru no Umi (Michio Miyagi 1929) – **Suzan Lagrost**, **Yōko Hihara**: koto
Wadatsumi no Iroko no Miya (Randō Fukuda 1928) – **Teruo Furuya**, **Kaoru Kakizakai**, **Kazushi Matama**,
Gyō (Yoshimi Tsujimoto 2024) – **Yoshimi Tsujimoto**
Sarasāju (Akira Nishimura 2021 - commissioned by The Shakuhachi 5)
Akihito Obama, **Kenichi Tajima**, **Akihisa Kominato**, **Reison Kuroda**, **Kizan Kawamura**

WSF2025 Gala Concert :



WSF2025 Closing Concert : Transcending Time and Space – The Future of the Shakuhachi



Clockwise from top left: *Satoshi (Recollections)* (Yūji Takahashi 2007) **Zenpo Shimura**; *Haiku in Variation* (Zac Zinger 2020) **Zac Zinger** & the Apollo Chamber Players (violin, **Matthew J. Detrick**; violin, **Anabel Ramirez**; viola, **Tonya Burton**; cello, **Matthew Dudzik**); *Voice of the Rain* (Ross Edwards 2015) **Riley Lee** & the Apollo Chamber Players; *The Demonstration* (Peter Dayton 2025) with Soprano: **Rebecca Hays**, shakuhachi: **Dōzan Fujiwara**, koto: **Yoko Hihara**, violoncello: **Elizabeth Lee**; *Byoh* (The Boundless) (Ryōhei Hirose 1972) **Christopher Yohmei Blasdel**; *Bamboo Dances* (James Nyoraku Schlefer 2025) with **James Nyoraku Schlefer** & the Apollo Chamber Players; *Pentatonic Concerto* (Ichirō Seki 2023) with **John Kaizan Neptune**, **Kizan Kawamura**, **Akihito Obama**, **Ichirō Seki**, **Kinya Sogawa**; *Voyage* (Marty Regan 2008 - commissioned by WSF 2008, Sydney) **Shōzan Tanabe** & the Apollo Chamber Players;

Last but not least, maybe a peek into the future, as The Shakuhachi 5 took to the stage –Kenichi Tajima, Kizan Kawamura, Akihisa Kominato, Reison Kuroda standing in a semi circle with Akihito Obama taking center spot in front with a 2.4 shakuhachi. The piece *Sarasōju* (Sal Tree Grove) written by Akira Nishimura in 2021 and commissioned by The Shakuhachi 5. I think this performance was not only the highlight of the Gala concert it may have been the performance of the festival. Difficult to describe the sheer power and energy moved around by the five shakuhachi players. Pushing their shakuhachi to sonic limits but always in control of the proceedings and listening to each other, bouncing melodic lines and *muraiki* to each other, at times a roaring shakuhachi thunderstorm, and when finally sounds start to recede and fade out, we will have to wait for Akihito Obama, sitting in front in a meditative pose, channeling the last inaudible sounds, to move his flute away from his lips, to break finally into rapturous applause and indeed standing ovations. “Houston, Round Top here. The Shakuhachi 5 have landed.”

Workshops, Classes and Lectures

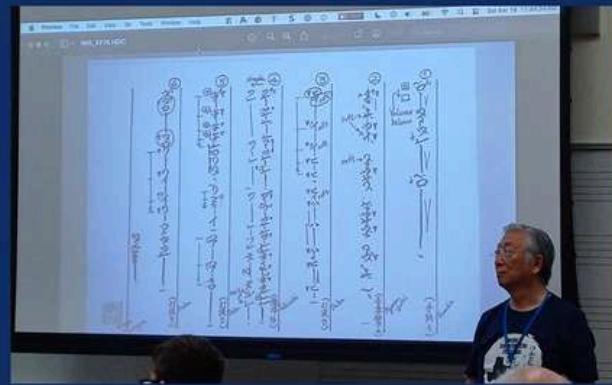
As mentioned in the introduction there were about 84 workshops, classes and lectures over the four days of the festival. 9h30 to 10h45 and 11h15 to 12h30, with the afternoon sessions at 13h30 to 14h45 and the final session from 15h15 to 16h30. I think these timings and durations worked well (Day 3 was different as we travelled to the concert hall in Fayette County, hence no afternoon sessions.)

Broadly speaking I would say there were maybe four different areas one could group the sessions — there were a number dealing with aspects of technique, playing/practicing tips, breathing and posture, eg Kenichi Tajima’s *Techniques for Producing Effortless and Loud Sounds*. Then there were the usual workshops on learning particular pieces (of course many different schools were present), eg Shōzan Tanabe’s session on *Kan Otsuby Hōzan Yamamoto I: Techniques Direct from the Composer*. Then a number of more lecture structured sessions about particular players and other historic events, eg Ray Jin on the *The Life of Nyodō Jin from his birth to his activities in the U.S.*, and finally sessions, maybe more ethnomusicologically oriented, about shakuhachi in various outside contexts, whether education, with other instruments, or observations about its internationality, eg Rita Ueda and Mark Armamini with *Shakuhachi in the Intercultural Ensemble*.

Definitely plenty to choose from, and in the nature of these kind of events one will miss something one wanted to hear/see too. My totally subjective selection (ie some of the ones I wanted and managed to attend): Dōzan Fujiwara’s class on *Efficient Sound Production: Breathing and Playing* was rather busy, and we saw another approach and thinking about breath control and shaping the sound, in particular analysing one’s embouchure as well as warm-up movements to relax body muscles.

Kuniyoshi Sugawara’s *Research Into the Performance Records of Hirosawa Seiki and Explanation of Playing Techniques by Okamoto Chikugai*. Very interesting and eye-opening. Seemingly endless variations on the fingering of the *tamane* (flutter tongue) sounds in the *Tsuru* pieces, perfectly brought to life by Kuniyoshi who demonstrated each fingering combination with easy precision.

WSF2025 Workshops, Classes & Lectures



Clockwise from top left: Kuniyoshi Sugawara's Research Into the Performance Records of Hirosawa Seiki and Explanation of Playing Techniques by Okamoto Chikugai; Kinya Sogawa's on How to Perform Watazumi Doso's Works and the Importance of Singing; Dōzan Fujiwara – Efficient Sound Production: Breathing and Playing; Teruo Furuya's How To Turn Honkyoku Melodies Into Song; WSF workshop: Aoki Reibo III's teaching of *Shika No Tōne*.

As mentioned another group of lessons were mainly about transmission of a piece in a particular school or style. Here I attended Aoki Reibo III's teaching of *Shika No Tone* (Distant Sounds of Deer). Being a classic piece of Kinko-ryū style and being myself used to the Kinko-ish KSK version of the piece, I was curious about the differences here. Aoki Reibo's version here felt closer to the source perhaps, as Yokoyama's version, not a big surprise, streamlined some ornamentation or phrases for increased fluidity of the whole (I would think). In any case fantastic playing and teaching by Aoki Reibo III.

Also very busy was Kinya Sogawa's on *How to Perform Watazumi Doso's Works and the Importance of Singing*. We were warned we all have to sing ... together ... where we went phrase by phrase through some transcription of Watazumi's *Chosi* and *Sanya* versions and Sogawa's comments about rise and fall of pitch and volume.

Of course it was a special pleasure to listen to my teacher Teruo Furuya, who in his session *How To Turn Honkyoku Melodies Into Song*, concentrated there on how to make the shakuhachi sing rather. Selecting and analysing key phrases of Yokoyama lineage/KSK honkyoku in *Tamuke*, *Azuma Jishi*, *Takiochi*, and *Daha* to demonstrate how breath and muscle control shapes the finer details of volume and colouring in the *honkyoku* phrasing. It is that control that turns the written score into music.

And many more. In general all the workshops seemed well presented and evenly attended. We had dedicated translation as needed and the rooms in general were planned out well enough to offer mostly enough space for everyone. Of course there are always a couple of super-popular sessions where the room bursts and seating is floor based for some.

My own humble contribution (although possible the longest workshop with its daily 9h30 to 17h00 running time), titled slightly tongue in cheek; *The Department of Moving Image Improvisation* was actually more a video installation* with an optional workshop element. The projection consisted out 25 movie clips from Japanese silent classics, via Texan set Westerns, to NASA's moon footage, with varying duration, fading into each other. The task was to get inspired to ornament the silent imagery (the occasional purposely left sound fragment notwithstanding) with shakuhachi improvisation. 'DIY soundtracks' in short. Some took up the challenge others took a kind of refuge in the silence of the projected image, maybe to recharge or simply flowing quietly with the imagery (*my thanks here to John D. Moeller from A&M, for setting-up the technical equipment needed).

Round Top Excursion

Four large buses pulled up at the hotels just after we collected our lunch packs. The logistic challenge was to bring about 235 shakuhachi people to a place about 90 minutes drive away, let them loose for two hours, and get (most of) them subsequently to the concert hall near by.

Fortunately the small town/village/cluster of houses, which counted about 87 inhabitants at the most recent census, is used to sudden population increases and once we arrived we were immediately greeted by the major Judith Vincent, who gave us a short rundown of the history of the place. Afterwards everyone dispersed to explore Round Top settlement for themselves. Basically little shops and cafes in cute wooden houses offering some Texan wares. And yes, there were one or two who returned later with a cowboy hat. Others found the Round Top Brewing & Kitchen and their Palomino, a Pre-Prohibition Style American Pilsner which seemed a fitting spot to stare over the bar veranda. A few tables were occupied by Japanese connoisseurs too.

Then the magic of getting everybody back into the four buses to drive the small distance to the actual Round Top Concert Hall for the Gala concert evening. The 1000-seater Concert Hall was built in the 70s and is a masterpiece of wooden beam structure. The metal framework is clad all in pine, a soft wood, with the exception of the dividers, which are poplar, a hard wood. The elaborate woodwork, such as the compass stars and the Gothic-inspired balcony fronts, adds more than visual appeal. A magnificent looking and sounding venue. After the excellent concert (see concert paragraph), we were again ushered into the buses and chauffeured to the evening meal.

The Gala evening buffet was at The Compound, an old barn like location ready to receive 200+ hungry shakuhachi people. In general it has to be said this as well as all the other catering at WSF was more than excellent. Being Texas there were of course always some serious barbecued meaty options, but vegetarians were well looked after too. Also being Texas there was plenty, and no one ended up hungry. This was true for the two inclusive buffet dinners as well as the four excellent lunch packs, delivered each day on time to the LAAH courtyard with distribution overseen by the 'red-shirt' volunteers.

Meanwhile back at the Compound, plates, bottles and glasses emptied and the laid out 8 seats at-a-table structure slowly but surely disintegrating as people mingled all over the place. Just as we immersed in the live country music provided by Ralphie and the RCs, there it was again. The sound of that bamboo flute. Only the necessity of the intake of fuel (food & drink) stopped it for while, but now it was back even more intense. There was John Neptune bluesing it out in country style, giving instruction to the country band, who with a friendly stoic nod indicated silently — "Sure, we'll follow..." Soon after there was a queue of shakuhachi improvisers with Ralphie and the RCs providing the rhythmic base ground for the shakuhachi to flourish and ultimately it was John Neptune again, this time bouncing solos off with Zac Zinger, who closed the session and let the RCs take back full control.

Thanks to our drivers and helpers again, everybody somehow got on the buses in the total darkness of late evening Fayette County Texas; and after the initial shock of having Keanu Reeves as *John Wick* pulping up some baddies on the bus's TV screens these went black and we could delve into our mind to process all the events of the day. It was a safe, albeit later than expected, arrival back at the hotels.

Round Top Excursion & Concert Hall



Clockwise from top left: Round Top: Our transport is waiting; Round Top: WSF crowd listening to the major Judith Vincent telling the history of the place; Round Top's pretty houses; Taking a break at the Round Top Brewing & Kitchen; Jamming – John Kaizan Neptune vs. Zac Zinger (i.e. madake vs aluminium?) with Ralphie and the RCs at The Compound, Fayette County Texas; Round Top Concert Hall, Intermission; Gala buffet dinner at The Compound, Fayette County Texas.

Jijimuge or Freedom from Worldly Obstacles

Kōzan Shiba's *Jijimuge* meaning 'Freedom from Worldly Obstacles' was the WSF2025 group piece commission. Group piece here meaning literally everybody, in particular the participants. This is a new-ish tradition — besides of course the group renderings of *Tamuke* — and in London 2018 we had the commission *A Thousand Bamboo in a Dancing Wind* by Verity Lane, which I remember also required certain choreographic elements to be mastered. But anyway, the 2025 commission strove towards a 'modern' *Tamuke*, encompassing all levels of player.

Altogether we had time slots for about five rehearsals, which seemed adequate as morning rehearsal communication to 200+ shakuhachi players has its own challenges and some instructions did get lost somewhere for sure. Kōzan Shiba who was conducting her piece, was also patient in explaining its overall structure. There were two voices of shakuhachi. First one dedicated to 1.8 and the second to any length really (but it was mostly 2.4s). The score showed some helpful lettering from A through to G as well as written instructions like "Inhale over four beats" ... "Freely with the indicated notes" ... "Gradually louder" ... "Repeat 2 or 3 times". Main patterns going up and down the natural scale of the shakuhachi, with the 2.4s (or any non 1.8) doing the second voice, being mainly an open hi, or just wind noises. As you see it was pretty free, hence also it was important to get those few crucial moments of unison right.

The first public performance was scheduled for none other than the Gala Concert at the Roundhouse Top Concert Hall. The plan was for the participants to scatter as much as possible among the still unaware audience. Then, after the greetings and welcome part, on the cue of Kozan's handbell being rung, draw their shakuhachi and start their windy sounds, quietly building up to the first crescendo. A hand gesture of Kozan would then abruptly silence the thunderous noise pool of 200 shakuhachi, before guiding the crowd with another gesture into the simple, but effective melodic patterns. The final part saw us then again slowly fading out with pattern and wind noises side by side, before disappearing altogether and a final handbell rung to denote the end.

Well done everybody, that's for sure! Also, it's hard to overstate the importance of these group experiences where the boundaries between audience, performer and participant cease to exist and the communal aspect of playing and experiencing the shakuhachi together moves to the front. It is also a mighty sound to have that amount of shakuhachi at one place at one time.

There was another *Jijimuge* performance on Day 4 at the Closing Concert and as everybody was so confident that it would be fine, it was decided to skip the planned rehearsal in the venue itself. And dare I say, the performance on that evening at the Rudder Theater may have been the most moving and effective of the two *Jijimuge* performances. Maybe there was already a sense of farewell, which mixed in a feeling of melancholy among the participants. [<https://youtu.be/Am7kLtzqbzxk?feature=shared>]

Katsuya Yokoyama Tribute

Day 4. The last day. Really!? Actually, in my experience it is around midday day 2 when suddenly time seems to begin to accelerate, like a roller coaster reaching full speed, the ride is unstoppable then. But there was still a full day ahead, and reaching the final morning of the final day of WSF2025 it was time to look back and honour the great Katsuya Yokoyama (1934-2010), who not only founded the Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshūkan (KSK) with the intention to make the shakuhachi a global instrument, but also initiated the very first International or World Shakuhachi Festival in Bisei, Okoyama Prefecture in 1994.

His idea to have a meeting of shakuhachi players beyond the constraints of their particular school or style became the blueprint of the subsequent World Shakuhachi Festivals (and also of course we the ESS took inspiration here to create our annual mixed Summer Schools in Europe).

Now in 2025 we had the senior Japanese KSK players – Teruo Furuya, Kazushi Matama, Kaoru Kakizakai, Toshimitsu Ishikawa, Kinya Sogawa – leading a special ro-buki session outside right at Century Square located in the middle of cafe shops and the Texan public. And as it is also traditional at these occasions, they swapped their 1.8s for the monumental looking bamboo beasts of 3.6 length (also in D). The deeper octave D adding some low humming sounds to the proceedings. And eventually out of this ocean of mournful ROs, we will slip into a glacial slow rendition of *Tamuke*. It was a very moving experience.

WSF2025 Composition Competition aka Friends of Chamber Music BCS (Bryan/College Station) Texas World Cultural Heritage Chamber Music Composition Competition for Shakuhachi

It is a long name for a competition but having received 91 anonymous applications from 24 countries, it was clear that this, the first composition commission at a WSF, was a hugely popular move, and with that amount of applications the decision process was highly competitive and demanded a lot of work. The selection committee, headed by New York based composer Elizabeth Brown and Japanese composer Ichirō Seki, was so impressed with the high quality of submissions across the board and thanked all of the participating composers for their contributions.

Ultimately the commission was awarded to Peter Dayton, described as a “composer whose heart and care are palpable,” who writes lyrical and powerful vocal, solo, and chamber music, with recent nominations for Critic’s Choice by Opera News, which praised Dayton’s “fresh and interesting sounds.”

Indeed, Peter Dayton’s commission *The Demonstration* was a refreshing new addition to contemporary repertoire for shakuhachi, inspired by the American poet Cid Corman’s poem and his time in Japan. Soprano Rebecca Hays’ powerful voice brought the text of the poem to fife, with Dozan Fujiwara’s shakuhachi providing complementary interweaving melodic lines, played with all the precision and expressiveness Fujiwara is known for. The chamber quartet was completed by Yoko Hihara on the koto and Elizabeth Lee on the violoncello. Bravo! We should look forward to Dayton’s future work incorporating the shakuhachi.

Ichirō

Tribute, Celebration & Farewell



Clockwise from top left: Katsuya Yokoyama Tribute: after ro-buki WSF group plays *Tamuke*; WSF group says hello!; Good-bye social at the George Hotel: Final Announcements by Marty Regan; Shakuhachi Playing Competition: Christopher Blasdel announcing the winners: third place Takeuchi, Kazuhiro, second Sarah Umezono and number one spot Toyama Masahiro, Japan (in center); WSF organisers of past and present and future: Riley Lee, Matama Kazushi, David Wheeler, Christopher Blasdel, Danilo Baikyō Tomic (Sao Paulo), Teruo Furuya, Kakizakai Kaoru, Kiku Day, Marty Regan, Kurahashi Yōdō, Thorsten Knaub; Riley Lee and Teruo Furuya with 3.6 shakuhachi.

Shakuhachi Performers Competition

Besides the Composition Competition this WSF also had a Shakuhachi Performance Competition. From the initial 17 submissions there were 10 finalists convening at the last day at Rudder Forum to battle it out. The shakuhachi competition usually requires the contestant to play one of the required pieces (*Vista* by Elizabeth Brown, *A Capricious Angel* by Ichiro Seki) and then the free chosen piece. It was then strictly ten minutes performance time, stop-watch at the ready by the overseer Elliot Kanshin Kallen, and Christopher Yohmei Blasdel doing the introductions:

The ten finalists and their chosen pieces were Zhang Zonghao (China), *Vista*, *Chidori no Kyoku Kaede*; ZhaoHaoyu (China), *Vista*, *Koden Sugomori*; Fujikawa Touma (Japan), *A Capricious Angel*, *Kan Otsu*; Umezono Sarah (USA), *Vista*, *Hachigaeshi*; Itō Kenzan (Japan), *Vista*, *Kogarashi*; Kandō, Aidan (USA), *Vista*, *Hōshun*; Zhou Wei (China), *Vista*, *Ajikan*; Ling, Brian Hok Kan (Hong Kong), *A Capricious Angel*, *Shika no Toone*; Takeuchi Kazuhiro (Japan), *Vista*, *San'an* and Toyama Masahiro (Japan), *A Capricious Angel*, *Shikyoku*.

The judges overseeing the competition concert were Dozan Fujiwara, Akihito Obama, Kaneko Tomoe, Hélène Codjo, Yang Bowen, Zac Zinger and Stan Richardson.

It was evident that all the finalists were all extremely well prepared and taking this moment as serious as it gets. It really felt like each performer gave a very personal interpretation of the pieces, the technical level in general was also high. But of course in the end, in the nature of competitions, fine details or particularly impressive playing puts some people apart. Ultimately, after lengthy deliberation and discussion, three winners were announced. In third place Takeuchi, Kazuhiro (Japan), second was Sarah Umezono (USA) and the number one spot went to Toyama, Masahiro (Japan). Yeah, well done!

WSF Shop

Rooooooo, Tsuuuuuuu, Reeeeeee, Chiiiiiiiiiii.....Chi-re-chi-reeee... Korokorokoro....Chi-re-chi-reeeee..... on about a dozen of shakuhachi or so, mixed with lively chatter and negotiating talk, that was the constant background sound in the WSF Shop. We had about 20 vendors offering all a shakuhachi player's heart desires—old and new *jiari*, *ji-mori*, *ji-nashi* shakuhachi, from simple PVC shakuhachi to highly engineered aluminium tubes. CDs, books and all kind of accessories and bamboo craft in general.

This WSF opted for a shop only open in the breaks — so we had the morning break (10:45-11:15), lunch break (12:30-13:30), afternoon break (14:45-15:15) and the pre-dinner break (16:30-17:00) — which made sense as not to overlap with the workshops and concerts, but it also created a constant sense of rush-hour business when open... Rooooooo, Tsuuuuuuu, Reeeeeeee, Chiiiiiiiiiii...Chi-re-chi-ree ... Korokorokorokorokoro...Chiiiiiiiiiii.....Chiiiiiiiiiii.... I think in the end, some payment mechanisms delays notwithstanding, it was a great WSF shop and I think most vendors did fine too. Also again, a big thanks to the red-shirts volunteers and other T&M staff for managing the crowds and check-out process and keeping a cool head in the busy room. Tsuuuu Reeeee Chiiiiiii.....Chi-re-chi-reeeeTsuuu.

Open Mic Concerts

There were three Open Mic Concerts at the Texan WSF. The process was simple — each morning (except for excursion day 3) there was a list to sign up for the evening. In charge of managing the process and to compère during the performances was Elliot Kashin Kallen, the President of the International Shakuhachi Society. Each evening also brought a new location and a new acoustic environment. It is of course a special challenge to play Open Mic at the WSF, stepping in front of a shakuhachi playing and knowing audience is no small step (a giant leap for some). But then again the WSF crowd is also goodnatured and supportive of each other at this event.

The first venue was maybe the most taxing as it was outside, Century Square, in the bar/restaurant area, even with amplification, there was still a bit of wind to negotiate on that evening. The seven 'samurai' who were brave enough to venture out were Danny Allen *Sanya*, Takeuchi Kazuhiro *Nana-dan Tsuru no Sugomori*, Tyler Schlegel *Kinpu-ryū Shirabe*, Toji Kaido Perlman *Jinbo Sanya*, Vincent W.J. van Gerven *Dako no Kyoku*, Nimoto Hiroaki *Sagariha* and Toyama Masahiro with *Makiri*.

The second night was at Benjamin Knox Gallery and Wine Bar. The gallery part was showing paintings in a style of their own — Neo-realist Texan or T&M focused illustration celebrating the local spirit and resilience of Aggieland (the local name of A&M Texas with its agricultural roots) — but anyway we were here for the open mic and tasting the local wine. This longish wooden bar/restaurant actually had a good acoustic. Proceedings opened with Kurahashi Yōdō and Mujuan students playing *Kyorei*, Haoyu Zhao *Kudariba & Improvisation*, Tony Clark *El cant dels Ocells*, Itō Kenzan *Kogarashi*, Sam Chaney *Kuroda Bushi*, Tyler Schlegel *Seien-ryū Sanya*, Curtis Brandt *Choshi*, Marek Kimei Matvija *Verses and Words*, Toyama Masahiro *Daha*, Eli Kohlenberg *Kumoi Jishi*, Marco Karaku Burmester *Jinbo Sanya* and the Fujikawa brothers playing *Shuki no Shirabe*.

The third and last open mic was also the last of the WSF, this time we gathered at The Canteen, which was the bar part of the Cavalry Hotel. Being the last evening, it was the last chance to mingle in spite of everybody needing to get up early next day. The acoustic worked well with slight amplification keeping a good balance with the general noise floor of people talking and drinking.

The Meian Group players opened with another version of *Choshi*, followed by a special performance of Mika Kimura solo singing, then Nancy Beckman & Tom Bickley *Two for T* (Pauline Oliveros), Adam Robinson & Marek Kimei Matvija *Shika no Tōne*, Philip Horan Irish Dance, Mike Rosenlof *Kumoi Jishi*, Ryan and Aaron Knoll *Nesting of the Cranes* (Chikuho); and Peter Irish's juggling act (accompanied by John Neptune's improvisation) closed the night and the official programme of WSF2025. Everybody applauded each other, deservedly.

Good-bye social, good-bye College Station and the announcement

The last of the celebrations with buffet table dinner was at the George Hotel, one of the official WSF accommodation venues, and a great farewell it was. There was a tangible sense of satisfaction and excitement in the air after those four intense days of learning, playing and performing together. As Marty Regan and David Wheeler were wrapping up WSF 2025 Texas, there was no doubt that the festival in the heartland of Texas acknowledged and celebrated the fact that North America is a firmly established territory for the shakuhachi with a substantial representation of various schools, styles and approaches to the instrument and its repertoire. Also it was felt that the gathering at A & M university will leave a lasting impression on College Station, Texas, the US shakuhachi groups and the wider global shakuhachi community.

What was left were the last remaining agenda points: There was the official announcements of the Shakuhachi Performance Competition where Takeuchi Kazuhiro (Japan) third position, Sarah Umezono (USA) second - and the winner, Toyama Masahiro (Japan) - got their due acknowledgements, applause, their respective cheques (\$200, \$800, and \$1500) and a WSF certificate to hold dear.

Then we seamlessly moved into raffle mode and an eclectic mix of 'prizes' was handed out — from Texas themed ties, shawls — with some initial items it was not immediately clear if indeed the winner was indeed the lucky one — to prints of maps and illustrations, building up to an actual bamboo 1.6 shakuhachi! Far from everybody of course went home with a raffle prize, but the enjoyment was still universal.

Next up was nothing less than the announcement of the WSF to come ... cue many impressions of drum rolls and shakuhachi trills... no, not yet, first was the Parade of past shakuhachi WSFs with their respective organisers and advisers who were present in Texas - Christopher Blasdel (adviser on many WSF including Texas); David Wheeler, Texas adviser and organiser of Boulder (1998); a special mention to the three KSK senior masters as the representatives of the very first WSF in Bisei 1994 (and advisors on all other WSFs) - Teruo Furuya, Kaoru Kakizakai, Kazushi Matama; then Riley Lee (Sydney 2008); Kurahashi Yōdō (Kyoto 2012); and finally myself and Kiku Day from the WSF executive committee of London 2018. That little ceremony was completed with Danilo Baikyō Tomic announcing the next WSF destination...

Hello São Paulo!

For the ESS Newsletter Danilo Baikyō Tomic has sent us the following message: *"We are very happy to announce to the international shakuhachi community our intention to hold the next WSF in São Paulo, Brazil. After being present at all WSF editions since 2004 (NY), I was very honoured and flattered to have been nominated to be the executive director of what will be the first WSF in Latin America.*

It seems to us that the right year to hold it would be in 2028 (July), when the 120th anniversary of Japanese immigration to Brazil will be celebrated. It will be an opportunity to integrate the event with a series of others that will take place, which can help us to obtain support and sponsorship. The size of the event will depend on how much we can raise. I kindly ask anyone who can help us gather the financial conditions to make it possible to contact me so that we can form an international cooperation network.

Since 1908, the Japanese presence in Brazil has been established in various fields of culture and in various places in the country, especially in São Paulo. It seems very significant to us that it will happen here. But the main thing is that we can make the sound of the shakuhachi echo as a message of peace and world integration."

Sejam todos muito bem vindos a São Paulo!
(Welcome everyone to São Paulo!)
(みなさん、サンパウロへようこそ！)

Coda

Leaving for Houston on Monday was hard. Although it was only five days we have been at College Station, a WSF is so full of events and intense experiences that the mind clearly believes we have been there for weeks. So finding oneself in the deserted streets of downtown Houston seemed far removed from the friendly, and lively college campus of A&M University.

Fortunately there was still one WSF outreach concert scheduled while being in Houston: Wednesday evening at the Asia Society Texas Center. It was just a pleasure after a couple of days being transported back into that WSF feeling and witness that Über-Concert of Hozan Nōmura, National Living Treasure of the shakuhachi, Zenyoji Keisuke, Akiko Fujimoto and Yōko Hihara. Mesmerising performances of *Onoe no Matsu*, *Iwashimizu*, *Echigo Sanya*, *Zangetsu* and (encore) *Haru no Umi*. The spirited opening *Shika No Tone* was performed by Zenyoji Keisuke and David Kansuke Wheeler on this occasion.

Afterwards, a last goodbye to the performers and Marty and David, and all that was left was taking the flight back next day to Europe with pockets full of memories. ☺