



# Japanistan Trio

« Melodies between Japan and Afghanistan, and beyond... »

The sound of the *rubâb* still echoes in the heart of Afghans. Today the instrument is traveling to different horizons, revealing new ways to resonate, to exist...

In his solo album *Japanistan*, Kengo Saito successfully blended his Japanese heritage with Afghan melodies, which were described by one of the most acclaimed UK music reviews (*Songline*) as « *An example of fusion done properly with skill, nuance and good taste* ». Saito now comes back with a new repertoire including several original compositions and arrangements especially written for this Trio.

The Japanese traditional flute, *shakuhachi*, with its incredible range of tonal colours, and the majestic resonance of the Persian drums, *daf* and *tombak*, match amazingly well with the haunting sound of the Afghan *rubâb* and form an exquisite novel sound equilibrium.

Together they display an array of melodies and rhythms that seem to spread throughout Asia with unique expression.

Suizan Lagrost, *shakuhachi*

Ershad Tehrani, *tombak, daf*

Kengo Saito, *afghan rubâb, composition, arrangement*

## 1. Invocation (Suizan Lagrost)

In a way similar to a shintô ritual, to start the album, this invocation on the *shakuhachi* invites you into the realm of the *Japanistan Trio*.

## 2. Méristème (Kengo Saito)

Original composition with different influences. The first part in a 6-beat cycle is inspired by modern-era Japanese classical music, followed by improvisation based sections (10 beat and 6 beat cycles). The title refers to a botanical term of the cells within plants equipped with potential capacities to develop/transform into a currently unknown form.

## 3. Anar Anar (Afghan Trad.)

As a conclusion of the previous piece based on the same melodic mode, here is an arrangement of a famous old love song. *Anar* in farsi means a "pomegranate", a symbol of love, of life. Free improvisations add the particular flavour of *Japanistan* to this beloved Afghan song.

## 4. Fuyu No Hikari - reflet de neige (Kengo Saito)

Original scored composition in the style of Japanese classical music, *sankyoku*. It depicts the brightness of the sunlight reflecting off the snow, announcing the end of winter. The snow starts to melt and the drops falling from the icicles join the runoff.

## 5. Leili Libellule Fish In The Sky (Trad. Afghan & Japan)

A medley starting with an arrangement of another well-known Afghan song « *Leili Jan* », which is followed by a dynamic *daf* solo, marking a transition from a minor mode to a major mode. The *rubâb* lays out some Afghan folk tunes in *kelivali* style in *raag Pari* (or *Pahari* in India), and concludes with two Japanese folk lullabies « *Akatombo* » and « *Koinobori* ». All in a 7-beat rhythm cycle called *mogholi* in Afghanistan.



#### 6. Kora-Son (Kengo Saito)

Joyful and contemplative in character, with moments of exuberance, this piece is inspired by a magnificent *kora* player and friend Ballaké Sissoko, after collaborating on different projects in the past. In a way, the music is all about « *corazón* » (heart).

#### 7. Le Dernier Chant Des Oiseaux (Kengo Saito)

The *ostinato* riff on the *rubâb* accompanies the variations played by the *shakuhachi*, followed by the musicians' solo sections. The image of this composition is the singing of birds gradually becoming cries of warning (*shakuhachi* solo, then *tombak*), leading to what will become the end with the final *rubâb* solo. Somehow birds often evoke an apocalyptic feeling, perhaps due the threat of extinction.

#### 8. Beshnaw Az Nay (Afghan trad.)

This melody is traditionally sung with a poem by Mowlana, Jalal-al-Din « *Rumi* » (1207-1273), of the same title, meaning "Listen to the Nay (reed flute)". The particularity in this arrangement is the perfect match of the riffs from the precedent track « *Le Dernier Chant Des Oiseaux (The Last Song of the Birds)* », used here in a slower tempo to accompany this iconic song/melody. The *shakuhachi* sings out this lament in a splendid manner while the daf fills the space with subtle nuance.

#### 9. Fleuve Tranquille (Kengo Saito)

We conclude the two precedent pieces in a form of « suite », with another scored composition. After composing this piece, I felt some influence of Ryūichi Sakamoto with the soothing melodies from some of his beautiful compositions. Unconsciously I am inspired by some of the greats of the past and present. This piece conjures, I hope, the image of a river flowing ceaselessly, no matter what obstacle the current might meet on the way to tranquility.

#### 10. Douce Errance (Kengo Saito)

Free introduction by the *rubâb* followed by melodies in two sections. A significant place is given to improvisation in this piece, suffused with touches of expression and emotion. It flows like story-telling, adding a sweet atmosphere of wandering. This will be followed by the next piece, « *Malkauns* », which shows contrast in the dynamics and character.

#### 11. Malkauns (Kengo Saito)

In the form of *Hindustani* (North Indian) classical music, I composed the *gat* section in the fast 16 beat cycle *tintal*, where we return to the twelfth beat of the cycle after each improvisation. This pentatonic mode of *raag Malkauns* is used in Japan as well, thus just where it belongs in the repertoire of *Japanistan*.

#### 12. Polonaise (J.S. Bach)

*Polonaise & Double* from BWV1067 by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750) in our special arrangement. The *shakuhachi* introduction leads to the Polonaise (the surprise!) faithfully interpreted here, yet with unusual Eastern traditional instruments for Bach. This is followed by a *rubâb/tombak* improvisation section, then *Da capo* to the composition to finish. Voilà, this is what we can call *la Japanistanaise* !

\*World premiere with 5 holes shakuhachi, rubâb and tombak





## Kengo Saito

A rare musician based in France who is specialized in two distinguish instruments : The *sitar* of North India and the *rubâb* from Afghanistan. He began studying the *sitar* with Narendra Bataju and Michel Guay briefly in Paris before meeting Pandit Kushal Das, from whom he has been learning since 2003.

He started learning the Afghan rubâb by himself (self-taught), then studied with Ustad Daud Khan Sadozai till today. Devoted to the authenticity of the styles transmitted by his teachers, his music appeals not only to the connoisseurs of these traditions, but also to non-initiated audiences.

Either solo or with various ensembles, he has been performing widely in France and overseas, and multiplying his collaborations between World Music, Jazz, Western Classical, Electro-pop and different dance genres. He has written numbers of original compositions with influences from different musical traditions like India, Iran, Afghanistan and Japan. In his original project *Japanistan*, Kengo interprets Japanese folk melodies to reconnect with his roots.

[www.kengosaito-music.com](http://www.kengosaito-music.com)

**The Afghan rubâb** is a short-necked double chambered plucked lute. The lower chamber is covered with a goat skin belly. The body is made of a single piece of mulberry wood. There are three main melody strings (originally gut, today mostly nylon), 2 or 3 drone strings and a set of 13 to 15 sympathetic strings (bronze and steel) tuned to the melodic mode being played. It is originally an important regional instrument of the Pashtun people but considered today as Afghanistan's national instrument with the particularity that it is also used to interpret the Kaboul style of classical music based in the *Hindustani raag* system.



## Suizan Lagrost

Fench-born flutist Suizan J.-F. Lagrost studied concert flute in Mulhouse and Paris. Winner of several national and international competitions, he plays repertoires ranging from baroque to contemporary music, jazz and improvisation. He also studied Musicology in Sorbonne University, where he achieved a DEA in 20th century music.

He began *shakuhachi* in 2000 with Grand Master Sōzan Kariya (Tozan style). Mitsuko Nakao, the granddaughter of the founder of the school, awarded him in 2014 the title of *Dai-Shihan*. He has since completed his apprenticeship by meeting masters from different schools.

The diversity of his expertise results in him to appear in a variety of musical contexts : flute recitals, as a soloist with large classical ensembles as well as with the best traditional musicians on European stages and beyond.

Suizan teaches both concert flute and *shakuhachi* in the conservatories of Le Kremlin-Bicêtre and Gentilly near Paris. In 2013, he released a Japanese traditional music CD entitled « *Kyoku* » with *koto* player Miekko Miyazaki. Official representative of the ShinTozan-ryū school in France since 2023, he enjoys an international career in traditional, contemporary or mixed repertoires.

[www.flute-shakuhachi.com](http://www.flute-shakuhachi.com)

**The shakuhachi** is a 5-holed vertical bamboo flute either coated on the inside with lacquer (*jiari*) or left unvarnished (*jinashi*). The most common length, 54.5 cm, or 1 *shaku* and 8 *sun*, gave the instrument its name. « *Shakuhachi* » today is the generic name for instruments of all sizes, the most common ones measuring 1.8 *shaku*, 1.6 *shaku*, or 2.4 *shaku*. The successive opening of the 5 holes produces a pentatonic scale, the intermediary notes being obtained by partially closing the holes and by the characteristic *meri-kari* technique (varying the angle of attack). In the middle ages, it was played by wandering buddhist monks called *komusō*. After the abolition of this status by the Japanese government, the shakuhachi enjoyed widespread national and international popularity beginning in the Meiji era.





## Ershad Tehrani

Born in Tehran, Ershad Vaeztehrani trained in Persian classical music under masters such as Bahman Rajabi and Farbod Yadollahi for the *tombak*, Erfan Beomidehagh and Bijan Kamkar for the *daf*.

Graduating from the Faculty of Music at the Iran University of Art in Tehran with a degree in double bass, he continued his studies with Richard Myron and Guido Balestracci (baroque double bass and violone) in France at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris where he obtained his concert performer diploma in 2018. Alongside his performance studies, he earned a Master's degree in Musicology in 2020 from Sorbonne University.

Member of the Ensemble Baroque de Toulouse since 2017, he also performs in different ensembles such as La Fenice, Musica Vera, Musica Antiqua Mediterranea, Ludi Musici, in various prestigious venues. His passion for passing on his art brings him to teach Persian percussions at conservatories in the Paris region, and on stage he regularly plays with classical Iranian musicians in France and abroad.

The *daf* is a large frame drum with metal rings attached inside along the frame. Its imposing presence and versatility allow the player to vary the sounds, ranging from deep strikes to light vibrations of the metal rings. It traditionally belongs to the Persian Sufi music and in mystical ceremonies, it is considered as a sacred instrument capable of elevating the spirit through repeating hypnotic rhythmic patterns. Popular among various styles of Iranian music, today it is used as well in modern and contemporary music in different traditions.

The *tombak* is a goblet-shaped drum central in Persian classical music. Its playing surface is covered of goat or lambskin played with intricate finger techniques which create complex rhythms that are both subtle and expressive. The player uses every part of the hand to produce a wide range of sounds, from dry strikes to fluid rolls. The *tombak* often accompanies string or wind instruments in Persian ensembles, and its role is essential in structuring and embellishing the compositions.



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