

Waka Songs

On Love Poems of the
Hyakunin Isshu (2005)

for Soprano and Viola

Jon Jeffrey Grier

Hyakunin Isshu 百人一首

Hyakunin Isshu ("100 songs from 100 poets") is an anthology of Japanese *waka* (now called *tanka*). *Waka* are five-line poems of 31 syllables, arranged 5-7-5-7-7. The *waka* represented in *Hyakunin Isshu* were court poetry, which almost exclusively used the *waka* format from the earliest days of Japanese poetry until the seventeen-syllable *haiku* came into prominence in the seventeenth century. Most *waka* employed two poetic images, one of nature and another of personal reflection or meditation.

Hyakunin Isshu is said to have been compiled by the famous thirteenth-century critic and poet Fujiwara no Sadaie, though his son Fujiwara no Tameie may have had a hand in revising the collection. The poems are in rough chronological order beginning in the era of Emperor Tenji (626-71) and ending in the era of Emperor Juntoku (1197-1242), and display a sophistication that western literature would not achieve until long thereafter. These little gems are concerned with themes such as nature, the round of the seasons, the impermanence of life, and the vicissitudes of love. There are obvious Buddhist and Shinto influences throughout. The compilation reflects Sadaie's taste in its preponderance of poems about autumn and love. The *Hyakunin Isshu* became the basis for a popular card game, or *uta karuta*, played at New Year's since the early Edo period (1603-1867). As such, the 100 poets and their poems have since been familiar to most literate Japanese, and it not unusual, even today, to find people who have memorized all 100.

The Japanese text used for this translation is traditional. The romanized transliteration (Romaji) is taken from MacCauley (MacCauley, Clay. *Hyakunin-Isshu, Single Songs of a Hundred Poets*) and *Nori no Hatsue-Ne (The Dominant Note of the Law*, Yokohama: Kelly and Walsh, 1917), with silent changes by editors of the University of Virginia to bring it into conformity with modern principles of romanization. The woodcuts paired with each poem are by an anonymous 18th century Japanese illustrator, and were included in a 1909 translation into rhyming English by William Porter. Information was gleaned from various internet sources, though an e-text of the University of Virginia Library (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/hyakunin>) was especially helpful.

About the Songs, Poets, and Poems Selected

As befits the concise character of the poems, these songs are brief. The expressive range is deliberately narrow and restrained in hopes of complimenting the understated elegance of the poetry. Modes and pentatonic scales are used extensively as modest references to traditional sounds. Performances of *Waka Songs* will be most effective in intimate venues.

I. Meeting on the Path (#57): Lady Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 976 - ca. 1031)

Few details of the life of Lady Murasaki are known for certain, nor is her name. She was born into a lesser branch of the Fujiwara family; her father, Fujiwara Tamatoki, an official and poet, was at one time a provincial governor. Murasaki records in her diary that she was so quick to learn her lessons that her father regretted she was not a boy. Murasaki was married at about the age of 20, but her husband died soon after, leaving her with a daughter, authoress of poem #59. Murasaki's diary, written from 1008-1010, recounts her life in the court of Emperor Ichijo. She is best remembered for her book, *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first psychological novel and one of the longest and most distinguished masterpieces of Japanese literature.

Meguri aite
Mishi ya sore to mo
Wakanu ma ni
Kumo-gakure ni shi
Yowa no tsuki kana

Meeting on the path:
But I cannot clearly know
If it was he,
Because the midnight moon
In a cloud had disappeared.

紫式部

めぐり逢ひて
見しやそれとも
わかぬまに
雲隠れにし
夜半の月かな



This is the most playful, lively song of the set. It assumes a young, shy and tentative, infatuation-at-a-distance interpretation of the poem. A more somber slant (likely more faithful to the original intent) is taken in the slower middle section. The “half-spoken” phrases should be rendered in the manner of an actor speaking directly to the audience or camera; phrasing should be speech-like and pitches approximate. The “sss” sound is sustained in “disappeared,” not the vowel. The viola part should be colorful and animated in its frequent changes of character, like cartoon music.

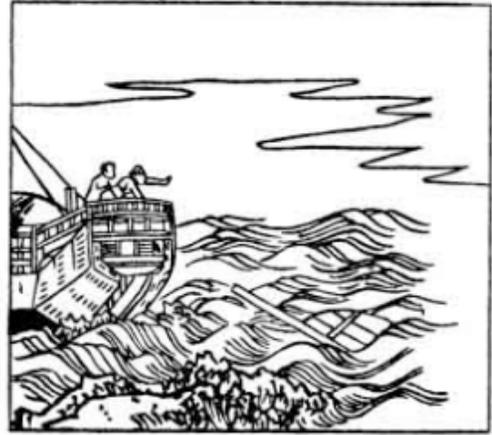
II. Like a Mariner (# 46): Sone no Yoshitada (10th-11th centuries)

Yoshitada, probably born shortly before 930 and dying early in the eleventh century, was active as a poet in the last quarter of the tenth century. He spent his career in provincial service, and in his lifetime was regarded as an inferior poet. In fact his style and conception were simply ahead of their time, and after his death his work became celebrated for its freshness and vitality and was increasingly represented in imperial anthologies.

Yura no to o
Wataru funabito
Kaji o tae
Yukue mo shiranu
Koi no michi kana

曾禰好忠
由良の門を
渡る舟人
かぢをたえ
ゆくへも知らぬ
恋の道かな

Like a mariner
Sailing over Yura's strait
With his rudder gone:
Where, over the deep of love,
The end lies, I do not know.



This song is restless and a little dark, reflecting the poet's uncertainty of love's destination. Seafaring sensations are represented by the up & down motions of the viola and the often syncopated, floating rhythms of the voice. The pulse is steady and relentless (though never rushed) until bar 38. The viola dynamics should be a bit wavy as are the contours of the lines; experiment, using the first three measures as a model.

III. Though We Are Parted (# 16): Ariwara no Yukihira (ca. 818 - ca.893)

Yukihira is chiefly remembered now for the fate that befell him rather than his poetic skills. Yukihira was a relatively successful courtier, holding a number of government positions and eventually rising to the rank of Middle Councillor (*chûnagon*). He ran afoul of the powerful Fujiwara family and was sentenced to exile in Suma, becoming the archetypal poetic exile.

Tachi wakare
Inaba no yama no
Mine ni oru
Matsu to shi kikaba
Ima kaeri kon

中納言行平
立ちわかれ
いなばの山の
峰に生ふる
まつとしきかば
今帰り来む

Though we are parted,
If on Mount Inaba's peak
I should hear the sound
Of the pine trees growing there
I'll come back again to you.



This music is designed to underscore the determination of the speaker to travel whatever distance is necessary (presumably Mount Inaba is not close by) to fulfill a vow of faithfulness. The forward motion is relentless but not agitated, suggesting a journey undeterred by obstacles encountered on the way. Both voice and viola should avoid rushing or excessive urgency, and the viola should allow all open strings to ring.

IV. It Is For Your Sake (#15): Koko Tenno (830-887)

Emperor Koko was the 58th imperial ruler of Japan from 884 to his death. He was elevated to the throne by the Fujiwara family when the mad Emperor Yozei was deposed. He is said to have composed this verse in honor of his grandmother.

Kimi ga tame
Haru no no ni idete
Wakana tsumu
Waga koromode ni
Yuki wa furi tsutsu

It is for your sake
That I walk the fields in spring,
Gathering green herbs,
While my garment's hanging sleeves
Are speckled with falling snow.

光孝天皇
君がため
春の野に出で
若菜摘む
我が衣手に
雪は降りつつ



Gathering herbs and snowflakes falling on draping sleeves suggest a profound sense of purpose and serenity in service to the loved one. The koto-like viola part quietly underscores this steady but barely spoken devotion; play the strummed chords quickly enough not to compromise the metric stability. A light, breathy voice will best speak these simple sentiments.

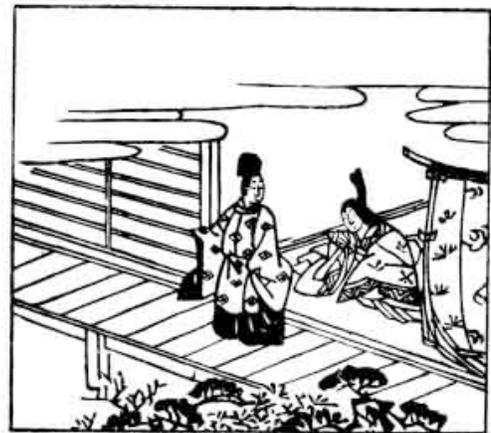
V. For Your Precious Sake (#50): Fujiwara no Yoshitaka (953-974)

Fujiwara Yoshitaka was the short-lived son of Kentoku-ko, another poet of the Hyakunin Isshu. Many of his poems are included in imperial anthologies and in collections of his own poetry. His son Fujiwara no Yukinari (972-1027) became a famous and influential calligrapher.

Kimi ga tame
Oshi karazarishi
Inochi sae
Nagaku mo gana to
Omoi keru kana

For your precious sake,
Once my eager life itself
Was not dear to me.
But now it is my heart's desire
It may long, long years endure.

藤原義孝
君がため
惜しからざりし
命さへ
長くもがなと
思ひけるかな



In contrast to the somewhat distant character of the previous song, this is direct and tender. Though still reserved and dignified, the song should be rendered with a quiet, heartfelt intensity. The music is very unhurried, and *rubato* and long *fermati* are encouraged. The soprano, in a gesture of dreamy affection, can apply a little *portamento* to downward stepwise movements, especially the downbeats of bars 4, 17, 25, and 26.

for Heather and John, 30 July 2005