Traditional Vocal And Instrumental Music (Japan) [1990]

1. Kumoi Jishi (shakuhachi) (5:36)
2. Ozatsuma (shamisen) (2:35)
3. Ogi no Mato ('The Folding Fan as a Target') (voice, biwa) (10:37)
4. Edo Lullaby (shakuhachi, shamisen, biwa, 2 kotos, betis) (3:40) play
5. Godanginuta (2 kotos) (11:53)
6. Esashi Oiwake ('Esashi Pack-horseman's Song') (shakuhachi) (2:32) play
7. Mushi no Aikata ('Insect Interlude') (shamisen) (2:23)
8. Azuma Jishi ('Azuma Lion Dance') (voice, shakuhachi, shamisen, koto) (5:09)

Although recorded more than two decades ago, this is an excellent album for any lover of classical Japanese music to have. In small chamber ensembles, the members of Ensemble Nipponia prove themselves true masters of their craft, and weave an intricate tapestry of sound for the listener.

Each piece is performed with exacting instrumental (and in one case vocal) technique combined with sensitive interpretation, making for a truly enjoyable musical experience. Drawn from the classical repertoire of both court and theater, the eight-piece program creates a good balance between the contemplative and the energetic, the gentle and the forceful. It also does a good job of representing a wide variety of traditional forms, while still maintaining a sense of continuity.

Two tracks in particular stand out (in my view) as gems -- "Ogi no Mato (Folding Fan as a Target)," a lengthy narrative for biwa (lute) and voice, and "Godanginuta" for koto duet. The first is a quite passionately rendered tale, at times half-spoken, using a variety of vocal techniques

unknown to Western audiences (and hence, perhaps, an acquired taste for some). "Godanginuta," in contrast, is a finely rendered musical scene, exuberant and yet refined... embodying the sounds of Japan perhaps most familiar to Western ears. Overall, I cannot recommend this album highly enough. Of the many "ongaku" (classical) albums in my personal collection, "Japan: Traditional Vocal & Instrumental Music" one remains my favorite. ---Marion Edwards

This really is one of the best CDs of Japanese music out there. The music is incredible, with virtuosi performances by the Ensemble Nipponia that are talented, inspired, authentic, and approachable. Every track is a wonder to hear. The music itself covers a broad range of different types and moods of Japanese music and features all four of the major musical instruments (clearly identified on the track list on the back), making this CD the perfect crash course in Japan's music for those just beginning to acquaint themselves with it--and of course it's a classic that bears repeated listenings over the years for those whose acquaintance is longer. ---Crazy Fox

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