

# CD Review - Thorsten Knaub's Listening Station: music for abandoned structures and shakuhachi

## by Joe Browning

If this issue of the ESS newsletter aims to explore the ‘The World of the Shakuhachi,’ then Thorsten Knaub’s album marks an unusual position in that landscape. The main dome of the former US Listening Station at Teufelsberg in Berlin is not a location readily associated with the shakuhachi. But Listening Station: music for abandoned structures and shakuhachi, plays its part in expanding the sites and sounds we connect with this instrument.

The station; part building, part technological device – was used to listen in on radio communications during the Cold War, and stands on a hill constructed from the rubble of WWII Berlin. As well as having a

remarkable history, the station also possesses a remarkable acoustic: single tones sing on indefinitely, breathy muraiki take on a harsh edge, sounds overlap and intertwine. The reverberation of the structure is not only powerful and long-lasting, it also heightens the contrast between a sound and its overtones, and sets them spinning around inside the dome.



So Listening Station is very audibly a site-specific recording. The first track, Improvisation I has a distinctly exploratory character. We hear Knaub testing the acoustic with single notes, allowing lots of space between sounds and gradually introducing more complex gestures. At one point, he sets up a chord-like texture, playing plain notes in regular succession so that harmonies pile up in ways that are seldom possible on a solo shakuhachi album. Occasionally, harsh percussive noises appear, which Knaub told me are the sounds of other people in the dome kicking tin cans. Improvisation II has a brighter quality, centered around the pentatonic of the shakuhachi’s open holes. Where the opening was relatively dark, with large melodic leaps and dissonances, here the mood is more extrovert, perhaps reflecting Knaub’s increasing familiarity with the space (the album corresponds largely to the order of his live performance).

At the centre-point of the album is its only honkyoku, Tamuke. While reminiscent of Riley Lee’s honkyoku recordings in the National Acoustics Laboratory in Sydney or the Jenolan caves, the station’s acoustic is harsher and more unpredictable. Knaub plays Tamuke with assurance and the piece’s familiar melodies are interestingly reshaped but still recognisable amidst the reverberation. It is tempting to hear this Tamuke as a requiem for the abandoned Listening Station or the Cold War conflict it represents. However, Knaub told me that, while remaining aware of the site’s layers of history, the recording was more a spontaneous engagement with the space, rather than an attempt to tell a particular story about it. For this reason, he places Tamuke as a transition between improvisations, rather than at the culmination of the album. This was a fruitful

choice as it provides the listener with a contrasting section in what would otherwise be unbroken improvisation. Reaching Improvisation III, we are ready for more as the shakuhachi is joined again by insistent percussive sounds, and then by the sound of a recorder, played by another musician visiting the Listening Station. The music takes on a more tense character as all these different sound-sources interact, with dramatic moments as explosive noises seem to trigger outbursts on the shakuhachi. A return to the opening mood in Improvisation IV brings a symmetry to the overall listening experience.

The danger in a recording like this is that the space could dominate, amplifying the performer's sense of their own power and reshaping the music so forcefully as to remove subtlety. Here, flurries of notes sometimes do get tangled together, and the improvisations occasionally struggle against the inevitable long fade of the dome. But to say that Knaub is not in complete control, that there are some gestures which do not work, is not to detract so much from the album. In fact, Knaub seems to embrace the exploratory nature of the situation, treating the arrival of another musician, explosive interruptions or the structure's unexpected interventions as opportunities for response. As he told me, playing in the space took on a 'narrative' quality, as he adapted to the acoustic. In all, Knaub proves a capable improviser and attentive listener, willing to leave space and step back in order to create a range of textures and moods. This is clear, for example, in Improvisation III, where his long, low-register shakuhachi notes invite the recorder to weave higher lines above.



It is important to remember, as the album cover reminds us, that Knaub is primarily an artist (this is his first shakuhachi recording). A striking black and white photo of the Listening Station, with the outskirts of Berlin in the distance, stretches across the outside of the album artwork, while the inside shows Knaub playing shakuhachi in front of walls thick with graffiti. Indeed, as participants at last year's Prague Shakuhachi Festival or guests at a more recent London screening will know, Knaub has also produced a film which combines this music with video footage of the site. As it is, the album provides just enough visual cues to stimulate the listener's imagination. Through a sensitive and multi-sensory engagement with this space, Knaub has created an album with a distinctly urban and contemporary character. In exploring these new sounds and sites, it is surely a welcome addition to 'The World of the Shakuhachi.'

[http://www.thorstenknaub.com/Listening\\_Station\\_CD.html](http://www.thorstenknaub.com/Listening_Station_CD.html)