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Review/Music

Shakuhachi, From School In New York

The arcane, thousand-year-old art of the Japanese shakuhachi flute, steeped in the rituals of Zen Buddhism, might seem likely to flourish only in Japan; but over the last two decades Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin has succeeded in establishing a New York-based shakuhachi school called Ki-Sui-An ("Place of Blowing Nothingness"). On Saturday night, he gave a mesmerizing recital with three of his pupils and colleagues: James Schlefer, Jeffrey Lependorf and Bob Avstreich.

The program embraced both traditional shakuhachi repertory ("honkyoku") and pieces either composed or improvised by the players. At first, one was conscious less of individual styles than of the vastly distinctive sound of the shakuhachi itself: low, breathy tone; subtle microtonal shifts; explosive flurries of quavers and figures. But there were important differences to be discerned: Mr. Avstreich presented the ancient, slow, morosely contemplative "Kyorei," while Mr. Lependorf used a much wider array of resources in his original pieces "Hajime Wa" and "Night Pond." This last work, with its gurgling trills and overtone effects, presented a fascinating compromise between tradition and innovation.

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