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Wood God Blues

Cornelius Boots

Taimu, shakuhachi, compositions & transcriptions

with special guest

Kevin Chen

Taimu & shakuhachi

Sunday, November 14, 2021 at 4 PM

Old First Church

1751 Sacramento St. at Van Ness Ave.

San Francisco, CA 94109

(415) 474-1608 www.oldfirstconcerts.org

Old First Concerts' piano is a New York Steinway D model, circa 1980, with Hamburg action. It was donated by The Stanley Ibler Fund, and is maintained by David Love Piano Service and Restoration.

ABOUT OLD FIRST CONCERTS

- Great venue for music with beautiful acoustics and amazing Steinway concert grand piano.
- Primarily local emerging and mid-career professional musicians presenting innovative programs.
- Every concert offers new insights and virtuosic performances.
- Complimentary refreshments served at intermission or after the concert.
- An independent 501(c)3 non-profit organization devoted to presenting music at affordable prices, especially for low-income seniors and students.
- Solo, chamber music, and world music concerts year-round since 1970.

DONATING TO OLD FIRST CONCERTS

Ticket sales provide about 38 percent of our operating revenue each year. In addition, we rely on support from private foundations and Grants for the Arts from the city of San Francisco. Our generous individual donors complete the picture. We invite you to join us in our mission to connect audiences and local musicians and build up the classical music and world music scene in San Francisco. Donations are tax-deductible and donating on our website is easy and secure: www.oldfirstconcerts.org/give/, or checks can be mailed to: Old First Concerts, 1751 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, CA 94109. Thank you!

COVID-19 RESPONSE: RETURNING TO THE MUSIC

Old First Concerts is committed to the health and safety of our audiences, performers and staff. We look forward to having all audiences back in our space when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, we are happy to be able to continue presenting artists of the highest caliber to our audience in the Bay Area—and beyond—via livestreamed events. We are following city guidelines and safety protocols to help ensure the safest possible environment for our performers and staff.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Following us on **Facebook** is a great way to keep informed about the latest concert information. While you are there, don't forget to **share** events with your friends and hit the "Like" button liberally. [facebook.com/oldfirstconcerts/](https://www.facebook.com/oldfirstconcerts/)

You can also find us on **Instagram @oldfirstconcerts** with information about upcoming events plus photos and videos from our concerts.

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COMING UP AT OLD FIRST CONCERTS

Friday, November 19 at 8 pm—Utsav Lal, piano, with special guest Manik Khan, sarod

“Raga & Jazz pianist” Utsav Lal returns to Old First Concerts to present a unique Piano-Sarod jugalbandi duet concert of Indian Classical Music, along with sarod maestro Manik Khan, the youngest son of the legendary Ustad Ali Akbar Khan.

Friday, December 3 at 8 pm—Holiday Guitars

Larry Ferrara & Zachary Donaldson, guitars; Sandra Betti, flute; and the guitar ensemble Guitars à la mode

A special program celebrating the yuletide season with the music of J. S. Bach, John Dowland, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. Performances will include guitar, guitar and flute, guitar and harp, as well as festive holiday music for guitar orchestra directed by Larry Ferrara.

Saturday, December 4 at 8 pm

San Francisco Yiddish Combo

SFYC is embarked on a journey around the world to present their own unique blend of everything that is Klezmer, mixed with years of experience in the jazz, blues, folk, and even hip-hop world.

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PROGRAM

Cornelius Boots (b. 1974)

Root Doctor (2021)

(live premiere)

Cornelius Boots

Wood God Blues (2020)

(world premiere)

Cornelius Boots

Wood Prophet (2021)

(live premiere)

Cornelius Boots

Underground Sun (2019)

Intermission

Cornelius Boots

AH & OM Take the Stage (2009)

Ekoh 回向

traditional monastic Zen honkyoku

John Coltrane (1926–1967) transcribed by C. Boots

Psalms (part 4 of *A Love Supreme*) (1964)

(premiere of transcription)

Nomura Seiho (b. 1927)

Kagaribi 篝火 (1970)

ABOUT THE MUSIC

There's always plenty of ideas, stories, philosophies and musical details constellating in the background of my compositions—but in general I intend for them each to have complete value in-and-of-themselves. In other words, these non-verbal, language-free formulas are not serving any master other than themselves. Open your heartmind and experience their texture-structures directly.

Here's a few details just the same:

Cornelius Boots (b. 1974)

Root Doctor (2021)

(live premiere)

2.74 Taimu shakuhachi

In the old days, folk medicine was thriving and effective. Root doctors were practicing all over this continent, some of colonial descent and many of Indigenous and African cultures. The life force of plants and herbs is deeply interconnected to the health and wellbeing of humans. The spirit of the root doctors is alive in this riff-based, tone-grounding piece, a new addition to the growing catalog of solo forest hymns in the “bamboo gospel” style. The music and structure are catalysts for nature reverence and expressive timbral exploration: heavy on pulse and textures, light on cerebral cleverness. Our root-end bamboo flutes themselves are root doctors, in many ways.

Cornelius Boots

Wood God Blues (2020)

(world premiere)

2.74 Taimu shakuhachi

According to Howlin' Wolf, everybody has had the blues at some point – you know internally what it is. And, like my Western lineage ancestors before me—Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane—as a deep jazz woodwinder, my true home planet is actually The Blues.

The Old Gods of the Woods have always been ready and willing to collaborate. Even back when the first slavemasters of the proto-

Kevin Chen's relationship to music is deeply rooted in his experience as a first-generation American of East Asian heritage. He recognizes and appreciates the central role music plays in helping to build, shape, restore, and heal communities of color. As a taiko percussionist, Kevin has contributed to the Asian American and Buddhist communities by giving countless workshops, teaching at conferences (including TechnoBuddha and the Intercollegiate Taiko Conference), performing at various festivals (including San Jose Obon, Yerba Buena Gardens Festival, San Francisco Japantown Cherry Blossom Festival, etc.), and piloting UC Berkeley's first course on taiko as art, as community, and as cultural movement.

Currently a PhD student at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health, he has a window into the statistical lives of various communities through his work in epidemiology, including how environmental and psychological factors directly impact quality of life and longevity. Starting clarinet lessons with Boots way back in 2004, his ongoing reed and flute musicianship and polystylism keep him musically challenged while grounding him in the breath practices these instruments require. For Kevin, shakuhachi and Taimu have constituted an important part of his spiritual practice. However, he is extremely excited to pivot towards performance under the leadership of Cornelius Boots as a member of the Wood Prophets (Heavy Roots Shakuhachi Ensemble) and Assistant Director of the Black Earth Shakuhachi School.

A licensed shakuhachi master and prize-winning composer, he is now integrating the lineages of Watazumido, Eric Dolphy and Son House on jinashi (all-natural) and Taimu (bass) shakuhachi. Boots has generated and released a catalog of new songs and compositions for these large, raw and rare bamboo flutes of Japanese Zen Buddhist origin: *mukyoku* (27 pieces for Taimu) and *Shakuhachi Unleashed* (48 virtuosic songs of rock, Zen, blues, metal and more).

A three-time graduate of the renowned Jacobs School of Music (BM Classical Clarinet '97, BS Audio Recording '97, MM Jazz Studies '99), Boots' training and work experience is deep and diverse: jazz saxophonist, swing clarinetist, symphony bass clarinetist, funk and progressive rock bandleader and founder/composer of the world's only composing bass clarinet quartet, Edmund Welles. A Performer's Certificate Awardee from David N. Baker's seminal Jazz Studies program at Indiana University, Cornelius is the first student of Grandmaster Michael Chikuzen Gould to have earned a Shihan (master teaching license) in 2013 and was given the shakuhachi name 深禅 "Shinzen" (depth Zen or deep Zen). In addition to teaching, Cornelius has recorded and written, in shakuhachi calligraphic notation, a series of études for Taimu shakuhachi.

First-prize winner of the 2013 International Clarinet Composition Competition, Boots has also received commissions and awards from Chamber Music America, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Areon Flutes, International Songwriting Competition and Meet the Composer. Boots has recorded and released 13 albums as a leader (Edmund Welles, Sabbaticus Rex, Cornelius Boots) and played on albums by The Kehoe Nation, Faun Fables, Jorge Liderman and Aaron Novik. In 2016, he had a nature-conversion, sold all of his Western woodwind instruments, and now exclusively plays natural bamboo flutes with no keys, parts or mechanisms. <https://corneliusboots.com/>

American South were cooking up disaster-level brews of toxic Nature/Human karma by having the kidnapped forced-labor Africans deforest huge tracts of land to make way for King Cotton and other agricultural profiteering plans. Deep rural blues grew and fruited later on those same lands from the descendants of all of those people.

Actually, forests are the key to everything. Dr. Suzanne Simard and many others are scrubbing the ignorance from the eyes of "science" even as we speak to reveal that the truths of intelligence, communication and sentience known by the First Peoples all over the world are in fact—even scientifically—true.

Musically, this 12-minute solo sojourn has two main influences: the eloquently distilled Coltrane blues *Equinox*, and the deliciously slow, 20-minute masterpiece *Son's Blues*, played by Son House himself in his own house in Rochester, New York on September 24, 1969. At this point in his long life, I would describe House's approach as pure music power; blues-fueled and gospel-drenched: unrefined emanations directly from the underbelly of his own soul.

Cornelius Boots

Wood Prophet (2021)

(live premiere)

2.74 Taimu shakuhachi

Conceived as a ritual incantation to the elements, and especially the element of Wood (which, along with Metal, is its own element in the Chinese system), this new tune cycles through a handful of different approaches to pulse, rhythm and pacing from both East and West. This incantation confirms my intention of championing symbiosis as a primary approach.

A Wood Prophet believes in the power and majesty of the element of wood and understands and demonstrates the wisdom of symbiosis. Specifically, collaboration between a human musician and the element of Wood; the benefit of forming a personal, expressive voice through woodwinding. Backed by the power of the deep past, a Wood Prophet is the bridge between many styles

of music, and the intelligence of living Nature. Masters of respiromancy and proponents of natural music, a Wood Prophet's mission is to provide the soundtrack to a profound shift in the human/Nature relationship.

Cornelius Boots

Underground Sun (2019)

1.8 jinashi shakuhachi

Underground is full of life and relationship and interaction. As mentioned before: read Suzanne Simard. The Sun, on the other hand, is the source. Photosynthesis, green miracle that it is, sits right in the middle of these two realms. Hence one of our primary Taoist mantras: connecting heaven and earth. Written while revisiting the most excellent and athletic solo woodwinding of former Bay Area colleague and fellow circular breathing phenom Colin Stetson, this piece is likely the most virtuosic and demanding of all my small flute "shakuhachi unleashed" solo repertoire. Tom Waits and the opening track of his groundbreaking *Swordfishtrumpets* album, *Underground*, is also hovering as a background influence on this piece, or at least on the title.

Intermission

Cornelius Boots

AH & OM Take the Stage (2009)

2.75 Taimu shakuhachi

with Kevin Chen, *2.76 Taimu shakuhachi*

I wrote this piece in late 2009, after returning from my first trip to Japan and in the middle of my 27 composition Mukyoku project—pieces written for training, meditation and performance on Taimu shakuhachi. These flutes are wider, girther and heftier than any other flute I have encountered, yet they retain total expressive fluidity, maximum resonance and timbral possibilities and can float or root to equal effect.

On our trip we visited the famous giant Buddha statue in Nara, and I met these two guardian statues at the gates to Todaiji, the

the ground. To keep the inner bore natural is called "jinashi" and to use a wider, thicker piece of bamboo is called "hocchiku."

San Francisco renegade flutemaker Ken Mujitsu LaCosse created the Taimu in the early 2000's by modifying jinashi, hocchiku versions of shakuhachi so that they had a bigger, "fog-horn glow" to their tone. Taimu means "the big nothing" and it is considered the full-throated, baritone or bass variant of shakuhachi: the Barry White, the redwood tree — the Bigfoot of all flutes. So rare, it almost didn't exist at all, but thankfully, here we are. Thank you Brother Ken (1960–2019).

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Composer/performer **Cornelius Boots** is a woodwind animist who has forged his own unique path as a professional musician since 1989. Known internationally as a style sorcerer and deeply innovative bass clarinetist and shakuhachi player, Boots has a long history of creating new repertoire by evolving the low-end capabilities of his instruments and artfully weaving deep blues and heavy rock threads into solo and small group compositions. His upcoming book *Root Woodwinding: The Way of Depth for Flute and Reed Musicians* illuminates the granular details of his method and philosophy, and his latest group, The Wood Prophets (previously known as the Heavy Roots Shakuhachi Ensemble), is an apotheosis of the past 25 years of musical and spiritual explorations.

The video for his composition "[Green Swampy Water](#)" won Best Music Video in the Tokyo International Short Film Festival in January 2021. In 2019, Boots founded the Black Earth Shakuhachi School, an East-West music school of international scope for wide and low, pure bamboo flutes (jinashi & Taimu shakuhachi), honkyoku (本曲 solo Zen Buddhist repertoire), blues and new music. In 2018, he was a finalist in the World Shakuhachi Competition, a featured performer for Sony PlayStation's E3 press conference (LA) and a featured performer/lecturer at both the World Bamboo Congress (Xalapa, Mexico) and the World Shakuhachi Festival (London).

(Rahsaan, Eric or Trane) had lived into their late 40's (where I am at right now) they would certainly have begun to forge a nature spirituality woodwinding path that included or featured shakuhachi, as I now find myself doing. This is my postulate, and it is an important musical/spiritual backbone to our Black Earth Shakuhachi School.

Playing this transcription asks for more of my emotion, presence, humility and vitality to show up and work with the breath/sound than any other piece I play, so far. It can be a challenge emotionally to get through it. Playing it "live" for the first time to only spirits in the venue and those at-a-distance digitally felt like the best way to attempt this transcription premiere. May the Holy Ghost enter and be with us.

Nomura Seiho (b. 1927)

Kagaribi 篝火 (1970)

1.8 jinashi shakuhachi

with Kevin Chen, *1.8 jinashi shakuhachi*

Originally written for shakuhachi (or flute) and two koto (Japanese table harp zither), I have practiced this as a two shakuhachi duet for many years, even transnotating it for flute and clarinet students back in the day. Today, I will be playing the koto part(s) and Kevin will be sailing along on the original shakuhachi/flute part. This was written to celebrate the 1970 Osaka World Exposition and it expresses hope for the future of mankind. The title translates to "bonfire." Feels like pagan party music to me; it is both challenging and joyful to play this piece.

ABOUT THE TAIMU

"Shakuhachi" is a vertical, end-blown flute made of root-end bamboo that emerged from Japanese Zen Buddhism back in the old feudal/samurai times. The design is painfully basic—no parts, no mouthpiece, no keys, only 5 finger holes and a blowing edge at the very end of the tube (no whistle design as in recorders, we need a flute-like embouchure)—and the instrument appears as a cured and cleaned up version of exactly what it was when it grew from

temple. Here is the original description I wrote about the piece in 2009:

"In the Fall of 2009, in the middle of my year-long mukyoku composition work, Chikuzen Sensei led a trip of 6 shakuhachi students and some of their pals/spouses to Japan. We went to the choicest Temples in and around Kyoto and Nara; stayed for 2 days in Mineyama with Taniguchi Sensei for a shakuhachi intensive; played with Chieko, sankyoku masters and students; visited multiple hot springs and baths, and ate amazing food made by monks, nuns (at Sanzen-in), and a young master chef (at Café Millet). This piece is inspired by the pair of huge wooden statues, Niou Temple Guardians, Agyo and Ungyo, guarding the entrance to Todaiji in Nara. They represent the primordial syllables AH and OM: yin and yang; inhale and exhale; birth and death. Known as Kongorishiki, Niou, or Vajrapani, they are two wrath-filled and muscular guardians of the Buddha, in the form of frightening wrestler-like statues. These are some of the finest wooden sculptures in Japan from the 13th century, carved by Unkei in 1203. In this duet, they come to life and encounter each other on stage.

Musical Details: The creation of each of the three mukyoku duets utilized a different compositional approach. This piece is the only duet to have no phrases borrowed from the solo mukyoku in it: it was composed completely as its own piece. This is a programmatic piece: it is a sound illustration of the statues/deities coming to life and interacting on a big stage (everything in Todaiji is huge). Naturally, a duet for Taimu needed to be inspired by giants and not by cranes, deer, frogs or crickets. As huge statues standing still for centuries, it takes them awhile to get moving: the first ten lines are the introduction. After they are in sync, there is a kind of cosmic sumo dance before they settle back into their own frozen positions for another 1000 years."

Final Note: I had created this in the hopes of performing it one day with my teacher. That has not happened yet, but I am overjoyed to be finally giving this piece its Taimu debut with my own protégé Kevin Chen, a dedicated practitioner, holistic musician and

esteemed friend. We met back in 2004 when he was a youngling and have had a long master-apprentice connection that is now morphing into a colleague-collaborator relationship.

Ekoh 回向

traditional monastic Zen honkyoku

3.2 *Taimu shakuhachi*

Our beloved Taimu shakuhachi craftsman Ken Mujitsu LaCrosse expired suddenly in June of 2019, only two months after a concert which featured both this new giant Taimu and a guest appearance by Ken himself in what was to be the proto-formation of the Heavy Roots Shakuhachi Ensemble (now named The Wood Prophets), which coalesced more formally later that year. At that concert I played one of our most standard pieces, *Honshirabe* 本調 on this lovely, graceful beast. Today, I will be playing an equally foundational contemplative Zen Honkyoku that is more rare in performance, yet it is also typical of our monastic repertoire in terms of tonality, pacing and mood. Think of it as long-meter chant with a deep woodwind voice; the voice of Wood. This is the description my teacher Michael Chikuzen Gould wrote about this piece back in the year 2001:

"This song was transmitted from Ichigetsuji, a temple in the Kanto region of Japan. *Ekoh's* meaning may be found in Buddhist concepts such as kusho, tamuke, fuse and kishi. All of these ideas pertain to offering prayers or chanting sutras for the benefit of souls who have passed from this world (shujo ekoh) as well as for one's own personal benefit (bodai ekoh). One should play this piece with an appropriate attitude of purity of intention."

John Coltrane (1926–1967) transcribed by C. Boots

Psalm (part 4 of *A Love Supreme*) (1964)

(premiere of transcription)

2.74 *Taimu shakuhachi*

This iconic, devotional piece intimidated and attracted me in equal measure. In spite of the commonly held reverence that pretty much everyone shares for this jewel of an album/composition, I believe that this final movement is far more radical—spiritually—than is

generally acknowledged. Trane here is actually praying, with: a text (his written prayer of *A Love Supreme* which accompanies the album), his saxophone, his ensemble, and a fluid combination of composition and improvisation. To call this work intentional and devotional would be both accurate and a severe understatement. He has positioned himself at an overlap between meditation, chant, gospel, blues and jazz that only he could feel and see in this way. It feels strangely similar to where I find myself, with the Zen Honkyoku tradition providing the core keystone to understanding how this overlap of musical realms forms an organic unity rather than a *mélange*.

To transcribe this recorded piece and then treat it as a to-the-detail written composition—a living magic formula—fits exactly the approach we have with honkyoku. The chant influence is there, the scale is exactly the same as my flute likes to play (in Western pieces of mine, not in the Japanese tonalities), and the phenomenal synchronicity is this: his recording fits exactly the range of my 2.74 Taimu *in the same key*. It is hard to overstate the unlikelihood of any piece fitting exactly—in resonance, intrinsic tonality and actual range—any specific shakuhachi flute, let alone such a famous and *in-of-itself unlikely* composition or recording fitting exactly my main flute! To further impress you with this point, let me say that the high notes are a bit of a reach (to play lyrically) for Trane on his tenor (a decision of his that I feel to be absolutely intentional), but comfortable on my Taimu, though still near the top of my common range, whereas the lowest note of his recording is *over a perfect 5th higher than the lowest note on his horn*. He intentionally centered this tune to the middle/top of his tenor, and we can only speculate why, but as I reach across time and space, I thank him for making this piece so suited to my main flute, almost more than to the instrument he was playing on: muchas gracias Brother Coltrane!

Also, it should be noted that Trane's final big tour was in Japan. There are photos of him playing shakuhachi on this tour, as well as practicing on his departed friend Eric Dolphy's flute on the trips in between concerts. As I have said before: it is my personally held speculative belief that if any of the aforementioned trifecta