

July

Before closing my eyes I looked out into the forest and could see 5 deer off in the distance wandering around and eating what vegetation they can find. I pressed the bamboo to my chin and began to play the traditional piece "Cry of the Wild Deer." With the birds chirping my high tones filled the forest with more natural sounds. When I finished playing I opened my eyes and a little deeper into the woods was a lone deer dashing off through the shadows and beams of sunlight. No, I'm not describing an early morning in Nara Park where I sometimes play, which by the way is home to more than 1,200 wild deer. I am talking about a scene from the state park on Grand Island, NY, where my parents live. While home visiting for the summer I realized a connection with this small island in between Buffalo and Niagara Falls and the small island of Japan and Nara where I currently live. That would be the wild deer that live among us.

One of the greatest symbols of Nara is the deer that roam Nara Park. But where did all of these creatures come from and why are they isolated to Nara Park? Legend has it that a god of Kasuga Grand Shrine in Nara Park, called Takenomikazuchi-no-mikoto, visited here and the deer became a sacred animal called Shinroku (神鹿). Coming from Ibaraki pref. he appeared on Mt. Mikasa riding a white deer. After seeing this both Kasuga Shrine and Kofukuji saw the deer as being sacred and even up until 1637 the punishment for killing a deer was death. The deer in Nara have been referenced all the way back to time of the Manyoshu Poems (750).

The exact date of the shakuhachi piece "Cry of the Wild Deer" is however unknown. Many schools have similar versions, but most allow for a great deal of personal expression to be displayed in this piece. There are various images associated with the meaning of the piece, such as a male deer calling out to his mate and his mate responding. This piece is often performed as a duet with a musical structure of a kake-ai (or call and response). When playing solo though, as I will be in the upcoming Albright Knox Art Gallery concert on August 14th, images of the solitary male deer calling out to his mate in an autumnal forest, with nothing but the echo from the mountain across the valley will be conjured up. This song represents communication with people, nature, and the universe. The Seneca Indians never fully settled on Grand Island but they stayed for periods of time hunting the deer, wolf, and bear on the island. Even though they hunted these animals for survival the tribe maintained a deep spiritual relationship with animals. Native American lore has it that a white deer, or ghost deer, is considered to have spiritual significance and should be respected and protected. This same belief in Shinto that deer are the messengers of the gods is what has lead to the preservation of these animals. I wasn't lucky enough to have seen a white deer in forest on Grand Island, however I have spotted one in Nara park. It is because human beings have taken care of the deer throughout the ages in Nara Park that we have such a large number of them living freely there. As the piece "Cry of the Wild Deer" was influenced by nature, we can also learn directly about ourselves through music and nature.



Messenger of the gods

神鹿（しんろく）

770（宝亀1年5月11日）

伊予国、白鹿を奉獻（日本記略）