

*January 2010*

### *The Flute Playing Shrine (Fuefuki Jinja)*

*This Year marks the 1300th anniversary of Nara and the beginning of Japan as a nation. Many events have been scheduled and much effort is being put into spreading the appeal of Nara to the rest of Japan and the world. As can be seen in the Manyo'shu poems of the 8th century, Nara was not only the formation of Japanese culture as we know it today, but was also a hub of international activity. Although the times have greatly changed, I am glad to be a part of Nara's traditional culture as well as its international community. With the start of every New Year comes the ritual of visiting a shrine, ensuring another good year will come.*

*Fuefuki Shrine honors two gods in particular, the god of fire (火雷大神) and the god of music (天香山命). Therefore fire festivals and gatherings of the firemen as well as performances and offerings by western flutists, shakuhachi players, and gagaku flute players can be seen at this shrine.*

*Hatsumode, or visiting a shrine for the first time in the New Year, is a very old Shinto custom. Although most Japanese people claim to not be very religious, I would argue that certain spiritual beliefs and customs are so embedded within Japanese society and culture that most people do not realize how spiritual they really are.*

*I have an annual Hatsumode concert at a shrine in Katsuragi city called Fuefuki Jinja, a shrine dedicated to the gods of music and flute playing. It really is an honor to be able to offer songs here at such a special and unique place. It is not a shrine that falls along the main tourist path so there is not a very large crowd for the outside performance at the shrine. It is also in the dead of winter so not many people can take the cold. But so far the gods have been kind enough to grant a little sunlight and warmth while I am playing. Oddly enough, so far when I have performed there the wind has also calmed down, allowing the shakuhachi sounds to fill the air. I start this event after receiving a blessing from the Shinto priest and offer a traditional komuso meditation piece song in the shrine facing the altar. After the short ceremony, I face the crowd and play 3 or 4 songs.*

*I performed one of my original pieces that I wrote based on this shrine. Fuefuki Shrine is nestled in a small forest at the foot of the Katsuragi Mountains and was the inspiration for my song "Fuefuki no Fukai Mori" ("Flute Playing in the Deep Forest"). The Shinto priest assured me that even if we don't gather a large crowd the gods were definitely pleased to hear such emotional music and intention.*

*He told me that shrines are only as lively as the people who make them that way. People can feel the gods' presence when they take the time to pay attention.*