

The Gift to Urashima Tarō

By Jay Reise

The Gift to Urashima Tarō, a dance piece with a libretto by the composer, was commissioned by the Newburyport Chamber Music Festival and premiered by Exit Dance in August 2015. The story recounts a Japanese folk tale about Urashima Taro, a fisherman, who rescues a turtle, who then transports him to the underwater kingdom of the Princess of the Sea. Urashima stays with the princess for a time and upon his return to his village for a visit, finds himself many years in the future. The music is scored for shakuhachi (Japanese flute) and string trio. Performers included renowned shakuhachi master James Noryaku Schlefer. The director and choreographer was Stephen Haley.

The name Urashima Tarō first appears in the 15th century in illustrated popular fiction; however, the story itself seems to be much older, dating back as early as the 8th century.

The tale bears a similarity to those of other cultures such as Pandora's Box, Rip Van Winkle, and *Alice in Wonderland*. Like *Faust*, it has been told, retold, altered and amended to the point where it is difficult to assign a definitive or original version. Many modern master storytellers including Ursula LeGuin and Osamu Dazai have created their own versions, Dazai even stepping out from behind the curtain during his charming philosophical retelling to comment on other renditions.

In my version, Urashima, rather than dying, undergoes a transformation into what I describe as the Princess of the Sea's gift of 'oblivion' – suggesting something beyond conscious life but short of death, a fantastic state we cannot say does not exist, and a place from where the princess may possibly bring Urashima back into her timeless and eternal domain – the sea.

The Gift to Urashima Tarō lasts about 20 minutes.

SYNOPSIS

Part I

Urashima plants a tree sprig with his parents and friends before going to fish. He bids them farewell and sets out to his boat. On the way, he spots a group of children torturing a turtle. The turtle is sacred to the Princess of the Sea, so Urashima chases the children away and sets it free.

The turtle, however, does not crawl away, but rather turns to Urashima, thanks him for saving his life, and offers to take him to meet the Princess of the Sea.

Urashima jumps on the turtle's back and they plunge into the waves. After a long journey they come to a bumpy halt.

Urashima hears the distant sounds of a shakuhachi (Japanese flute), and floating with the current moves towards the music. Then, like an apparition, the figure of a lovely woman comes into view. It is the Princess. She takes his hand and Urashima instantly falls in love.

Part II

After a long period of happiness, Urashima asks the Princess to let him go home for a little while to visit his parents.

She pleads with him to remain with her, but eventually reluctantly agrees. She gives him a parting gift, a small box. She tells him he must always keep the box with him and only open it if he has nowhere to go and no hope for the future. Urashima solemnly promises.

Urashima returns to his village but sees that everything is changed. People pass him by as if he were a complete stranger. He goes to his home but other people live there.

He wanders into the town graveyard and is shocked to see the ghosts of his parents and friends. Alongside his parents' graves he discovers a marker declaring 'Urashima Taro—a famous fisherman - hooked a turtle, was dragged down into the sea, and never came back. On a moonlit night, he and the turtle can still be seen riding on the waves.'

He returns to where he had planted the sapling but finds a gigantic tree in its place. Very frightened he now desperately and vainly seeks to communicate with the Princess. He has nowhere to go and only one hope. Remembering the little box, he takes it from around his neck and holds it in front of him. He calls the Princess. Again and again. There is no answer. His faith and hope are gone.

He opens the box. Suddenly an icy chill shoots through all his blood: his teeth fall out, his face shrivels, his hair turns white as snow, his legs become rooted to the spot, and his limbs wither. But as they shrivel they become brittle like tree branches. Urashima Taro has in fact been transformed into a tree. The Princess of the Sea had indeed given him a great gift: *Oblivion to this world - and an entrance to another?*

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Jay Reise (b. 1950, New York City) wrote both the music and libretto for his opera *Rasputin* commissioned by the late Beverly Sills and the New York City Opera, and premiered in 1988. The work was described in *The Washington Times* as “a spellbinding, challenging and profoundly beautiful creation.” *Rasputin* was given its Russian premiere in Moscow in 2008 by the Helikon Opera and is now a staple of their repertory. It has also been presented in Paris and Estonia.

The music of Jay Reise has been performed extensively in the United States and abroad by the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Philharmonia Orchestra among others. Recent performances of Reise's chamber music have taken place in Cuba and on tour in the United Arab Republic. Awards and fellowships include the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. Reise is Professor of Music Composition at the University of Pennsylvania.