

Aesthetic Meaning of Mixed-Media and Intercultural Composition: *Water Music* (1960) by Tôru Takemitsu and Hisao Kanze

Makoto Mikawa

Performance and Media Studies
Institut für Film, Theater und empirische Kulturwissenschaft
Johannes Gutenberg – Universität Mainz
mmikawa@alumni.uwo.ca

Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, electroacoustic music has played an important role in the innovation of compositional styles and forms. This innovation has included not only the incorporation of components of different art genres, but also the integration of the compositional and aesthetic principles of other cultures. The *other cultures*, in this context, refer to those foreign to the common practice of Western musical composition. As a result, a multimedia piece encompassing different disciplinary and cultural components is no longer unusual, perplexing or intrusive for today's audience, particularly due to advances in information and communication technology, and their wider application for personal use. However, to interpret this phenomenon as a loosening of cultural boundaries and artistic disciplines, perhaps the outcome of globalization, would be a generalization. In theoretical terms, electroacoustic music is perhaps more capable of facilitating an intercultural and interdisciplinary project than instrumental composition, but the completion of such a project does not necessarily indicate the unity of different cultural and disciplinary identities. Rather, the work can illuminate these differences as something to be appreciated, and not as a problem to be solved. What matters most is the underlying aesthetic principles of the creators, including their critical views about art, culture, and tradition.

One of the earliest examples of this kind of project emerged about a half century ago in Japan, at a time when the terms "mixed-media" and "interculturalism" were rarely used. The piece in question was *Water Music*, a work that combined electroacoustic music with the choreography of Noh Theater – a traditional Japanese performance art formed in the 14th century. The project was executed by the prominent postwar Japanese avant-garde composer Tôru Takemitsu (1930-1996) and the outstanding postwar Noh performer and theorist Hisao Kanze (1925-1978). They did not approach this unprecedented Noh-theatricalization of electroacoustic composition as a mere experimental attempt at collaboration. Instead, it was intended as a reflection of their thorough pursuit of artistic creativity and a reconsideration of cultural identity and the state of art in the context of a massive mixing of traditional and imported cultures in the postwar period.

Use of recorded sounds of Noh play and its problem

Before *Water Music*, there had been other examples of Noh-theater-related electroacoustic work, such as *Aoi-no-Ue* (1957) by Toshirô Mayuzumi (1929-1997), which used recorded sounds of Noh chanting as the primary compositional material¹. This was one of the approaches to the original compositional vocabulary that postwar Japanese composers eagerly sought with the aim of articulating their cultural identity. This aim arose as a reaction to Japan's excessive conformity to Western culture and products, which began in the late 19th century and accelerated after the end of the war. As traditional Japanese music was largely overshadowed by Western music, composers reacted with an almost inevitable attempt to restore national-cultural and artistic identity.

Spanning six hundred years of history, Noh theater was an ideal tradition from which composers could extract distinctive characteristics that might be used to emphasize cultural originality in their works. Moreover, the availability of recording, play back, and modification in electroacoustic composition made such a compositional plan more easily executable. However, an aesthetic issue underlies this approach. According to Emmanuelle Loubet, while pieces consisting of recorded sounds of Noh theater or other traditional performance art may intrigue non-Japanese listeners both in acoustic and historical terms, they are

less conscious of the impasses of this tradition, whose elements are employed in a rudimentary way – that is, without prior clarification as to their semantic and sociocultural connotation. The question that remains unanswered by the composer is whether the “raw” use of these traditional schemes is compatible with thought that is turned toward the future. This type of question does not even appear to be posed within the Japanese culture.²

Theoretically, the use of a recorded sound of traditional Japanese performance art or music as a compositional material is similar to the act of borrowing, which Western composers have long practiced. However, achieving cultural-artistic originality through borrowing may not be as simple as it seems. Those Japanese composers Loubet refers to might have aimed to represent the originality of their artistic culture, but after hearing such a piece a few times, perhaps only the superficiality remains. In this regard, Loubet's criticism of Mayuzumi's *Aoi-no-Ue* “as a simple electronic retranscription of a game from traditional Noh theater”³ is convincing.

Water Music and musique concrète

From both a theoretical and aesthetic perspective, Takemitsu's compositional approach to *Water Music* is distinct from electronic re-transcription. Having had no intention of using any recorded sound materials of a Noh performance, the autodidactic composer produced *Water Music* almost entirely with recorded sounds of water drops, as the title implies. The piece did

¹ In terms of composition that incorporates Noh theater, Joji Yuasa's 1955 string quartet piece for the modern Noh play *Aya-no-Tsuzumi*, whose text was written by Yukio Mishima, predates *Aoi-no-Ue*. According to Yuasa, he composed an electroacoustic piece using recorded voices of Kyôgen-performers – the Mannojô and Mansaku Nomura brothers – and recorded sounds of water drops for a radio play *Kimegafuchi*, produced at the Tokyo Broadcasting System in the late 1950s. See Jôji Yuasa, “Yuasa Jôji”, in *Nihon no Denshi-Ongaku [Japanese electronic Music]*, Kôji Kawasaki (ed.), Tokyo, Aikusha, 2009, p.184.

² Emmanuelle Loubet, “The Beginnings of Electronic Music in Japan, with a Focus on the NHK Studio: The 1950s and 1960s”, *Computer Music Journal*, 21(4), 1997, p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*

not incorporate electronic sound generated from a sine wave, although the composer had knowledge of the compositional principles and procedures of Cologne *elektronische Musik*. Takemitsu's preoccupation with the composition of recorded concrete sounds had distinct origins.

First, he contemplated injecting his composition with the noises of daily life. This idea had formed before he became familiar with the original Parisian *musique concrète*. Although Takemitsu also created instrumental pieces in his early career as a composer, he devalued them as too artificial, or fictitious⁴. The composer might have sensed that his lack of originality stemmed from the fact that his composition was no more than an imitation of Western compositional styles. As a result, young Takemitsu recognized the necessity for exploration of alternative non-instrumental sound sources he heard in the environment.

The composer also identified a similarity in the aesthetic principles of *musique concrète* and traditional Japanese art. In a 1961 conversation with the poet Shuntaro Tanikawa, Takemitsu explained this metaphorically:

In Europe, there are foundations, walls, divisions, and a frame, and within these one creates a space. In Japan, by contrast, the space is the central starting point; there is a garden and landscape outside of it, which have some sort of relationship with one another. I think *musique concrète* is positioned in this way, and this is what makes it different from European methods.⁵

Finally, Takemitsu was convinced that for him, *musique concrète* was “the best method of recognition” that enabled him to focus on “a spiritual movement”⁶. He anticipated having more freedom to represent his sound image. Instead of being bound by the restricted space and rules of a staff paper, he would be composing as an artist drawing a free design on a canvas without a frame. His musical thoughts tended to be oriented to the idea, principle, and process of visual-artistic creativity, rather than to the development of compositional method and theory. In referring to *musique concrète* as “the best method of recognition”, Takemitsu implied that his electroacoustic composition was conceptually interdisciplinary.

“Culture shock” and sound exploration

With these aesthetics, representing characteristics of traditional Japanese art through the use of recorded sound materials was out of the question for Takemitsu⁷. Having defined himself as a composer of Western music, he had intentionally neglected traditional music and art in the firm belief that they existed as what had to be denied. In other words, he had only placed artistic value on Western music and performance art. However, in the second half of the 1950s, he experienced a “culture shock” when he encountered the distinctive tone colors, non-metrical flow of time, and aesthetic concepts of traditional Japanese performance arts. This encounter began to influence his compositional vocabulary and style. While these experiences led Takemitsu to consider the meanings of cultural identity and tradition, his preoccupation

⁴ See Tôru Takemitsu, “Yôroppateki denai Myûjikkû Konkurêto [*Musique concrète* that is not conventional European],” in *Takemitsu Toru Zenshu* 5, Tokyo, Shôgakkû, 2010, p. 52. The conversation first appeared as “Tanikawa Shuntaro tonô Taidan [Conversation with Shuntaro Tanikawa],” *Yamaha News*, April 1961.

⁵ *Ibid.* Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁶ Tôru Takemitsu, “Watashi no Genjitsu [My Reality],” *The Ongaku-Geijutsu*, August 1959, pp. 36.

⁷ Takemitsu used recorded voices of traditional Japanese theater performers (presumably Noh or Kyôgen performers) in *Clap Vocalism* (1956). This piece was originally a part of the incidental music for the theater play *Eurydice* written by Jean Anouilh (1910-1987).

with the exploration of original tone colors and soundscapes remained as unshakable as his aesthetic belief in electroacoustic composition. At the same time, the composer's consciousness of the sonic and spatial characteristics of traditional art intensified his practice of listening to and concentrating on single sounds. As a result, according to Yôko Narazaki,

Materials that Takemitsu chose for his tape music served a common purpose, in that they invited the listener to listen carefully. Using echo-operation or modifying a recorded sound was akin to clearly describing a concealed and unnoticed sound. The materials that Takemitsu sought for tape music and traditional Japanese instruments were closely related.⁸

This suggests that his interest in traditional art and culture affected the aesthetic-conceptual aspect of his composition, rather than the compositional technique.

Of all Takemitsu's electroacoustic works, *Water Music* best demonstrates his careful listening to single sounds, further exploration of the sound spectrum, and attempt to create a unique time space. Inspired by the electronically modified water droplet sounds from his contemporary Jôji Yuasa's piece for a radio play (*Kimegafuchi*), Takemitsu conceptualized *Water Music* as a piece composed only of water drop sounds. The piece was initially conceived as a composition for Noh performance on stage. This project began with a personal agreement between Takemitsu and Kanze, and not with a commission from any concert agency or broadcasting firm. Although their artistic backgrounds were entirely distinct, they shared a specific aesthetic view – the reconsideration of culture and tradition in the context of the bicultural conflict and its effect on [postwar] Japan⁹. The composer and the Noh performer aimed neither to resurrect nor to reproduce the ancient forms and styles of Noh theater, but rather to conceptualize the simultaneous presentation of electroacoustic music and Noh performance art as “now” and “in reality”.

Noh Theater meets postwar avant-garde music

Born in 1925 as the eldest of three brothers in one of the most traditional Noh families, Hisao Kanze gained recognition in his youth as an outstandingly talented Noh performer. Despite his privileged background, at some point he came to believe that a strict adherence to the long-lasting tradition of the family-head system and its feudalistic structure would prevent Noh theater from developing further in postwar social and cultural conditions. While he eagerly studied the original theory and aesthetics of Noh, which were written in the 15th century by the inventor Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), Kanze felt it necessary to relate Noh not only to other genres of theater, but also to new music both in and out of Japan. Otherwise, he worried that both Noh theater and its performers would remain insular, with no prospect for development. Kanze's positive attitude towards involvement in interdisciplinary artistic activities was based on this belief: that experiencing other cultures and traditions would bring awareness to his own cultural identity, allowing him to better understand the true meaning of tradition.

To this end, Kanze sought to familiarize himself with new forms of art and culture. Kanze's first exposure to performance with Western new music came when he was involved in the

⁸ Yôko Narazaki, “Takemitsu Tôru to 1960-nendai: ‘November Steps’ (1967) ni itaru Hensen to Jidaijôkyô [Tôru Takemitsu and 1960s: His Stylistic Changes to *November Steps* (1967) and the Situation of the Period]”, *Bulletin, Faculty of Music, Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku*, 30, 2004, p. 86.

⁹ See Tôru Takemitsu, “‘Bi no Saiteigi’ e [To ‘The Redefinition of Beauty’],” in *Bi no Saiteigi*, Kenzaburô Ôe, Yûjirô Nakamura and Masao Yamaguchi (eds.), Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1982, p. 242.

1955 amphitheatrical production of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, produced and directed by the avant-garde theater producer and theorist Tetsuji Takechi (1912-1988). Artists with specialties in costume design, architecture, opera, lighting engineering, and visual art participated in this unprecedented project¹⁰. Before agreeing to the *Water Music* project, Kanze became more involved in contemporary Noh theater works and avant-garde music. In contrast, Takemitsu began to appreciate the significance of traditional Japanese art and music that he had previously disregarded. Their eventual collaboration was thus representative of the intersection point of their dual journeys towards tradition; Takemitsu, who had been preoccupied with Western music, discovered that traditional art and culture could provide an indispensable framework for his composition, while Kanze, who was raised in this traditional artistic culture, wanted to see its artistic essence evolve through contact with other disciplines and cultures.

Water Music as a representation of collision between different cultures

Though it was a joint project, the composer and the Noh performer created the electroacoustic music and the choreography independently without discussing their compositional concepts and plans. Takemitsu may have possessed a sound memory of Noh performance, but he did not intend to faithfully reproduce it. Rather, according to the composer, he “tried to create a piece that does not explicitly evoke Noh theater.”¹¹ Nevertheless, it is undeniable that his exposure to and appreciation of Noh performance impacted the composition of *Water Music*. The sound characteristics of Japanese percussive instrument and the irregular occurrence and duration of silence demonstrate this clearly. Recalling his collaborative work with Kanze, Takemitsu described the influence of Noh on him.

I don't think I was necessarily influenced by Noh as a whole. There are various elements that constitute Noh theater, and I believe I was only influenced by partial details of the elements. I was fascinated by the details Mr. Kanze spoke of. For me, an individual who was studying Western music at the time, [Noh] presented a totally different world. Moreover, I was very surprised that such an art form existed in Japan in which I lived. What Hisao [...] explained to me was so evocative that I felt afraid of knowing Noh further [...] I thought it would be problematic if Noh continued to occupy me anymore [...] Noh was intense for me.¹²

While working on *Water Music*'s sound production, Takemitsu never prepared any sketch or score for the piece. He intensively explored each sound characteristic under consideration, without applying a compositional-technical formula. Upon first hearing it, the piece may sound like an eclectic mix of sounds of Noh, water droplets, and abstract mechanical characteristics. However, what the mix of these sounds really connoted was the composer's view of the apparently irreconcilable differences between Western and Japanese art cultures.

Kanze did not listen to the music until the completion of Takemitsu's composition. Nor did the Noh performer have any idea what the music would sound like. Together with his younger brother, Hideo Kanze, who was also a Noh performer, Hisao Kanze created the choreography

¹⁰ Takemitsu assisted Japanese translation of the text.

¹¹ Shôhei Ôoka, “Taiwa: Takemitsu Toru + Ôoka Shôhei: Mizu, Ongaku, Kotoba”, in *Ôoka Shôhei Ongaku-Hyôronshû*, Tokyo, Shin'yasôshosha, 1989, p. 180. The article first appeared in *Episutêmê [Episteme]*, April 1976.

¹² Moriaki Watanabe, “Gendai-Ongaku to Noh [New Music and Noh]”, in *Yûgen: Kanze Hisao no Sekai*, Tokyo, Libro Port, 1980, pp. 120-122. This chapter is a discussion of Hideo Kanze, Jôji Yuasa, Tôru Takemitsu, Toshi Ichiyonagi and the moderator Watanabe.

by listening to the piece and looking at the graphic score that the composer sketched after its completion. Hisao's zest for this project was extraordinary. His performance of *Water Music* demonstrated "an extremely high degree of clearness and impressiveness"¹³, excluding the conventional lyricism of typical Noh theater. This exclusion allowed Kanze to focus on the unique tone colors and the soundscape of the piece that had no literary, poetic, or narrative implication. It is worth noting that Kanze acknowledged *Water Music* as a piece suitable only for contemporary Noh choreography. Even though the electronically produced music and the absence of musicians on stage were far removed from conventional Noh theater, he was convinced that this was an appropriate use and expression of modern technology, whose development was becoming inseparable from that of art.

The placidity of the tape music and the various movements of the Noh choreography created a distinctive visual-sound space. The musical-theatrical tension expressed through the piece was a product of the collision between different artistic disciplines and between different cultures. It was the outcome of Takemitsu and Kanze's belief that tradition did not have to represent a revival or strict inheritance of past systems, conventions, and regulations. Nor did they intend to rely on the latest trends of the postwar artistic scene. For them, the combination of electroacoustic music and Noh choreography was a means of conveying the spirit of tradition in the context of modern art and culture. Along with this aesthetic conception, the new tone-color spectrum of electroacoustic composition played an important role both in Takemitsu's exploration of original soundscape and in Kanze's novel approach to Noh theater. Through the production of *Water Music*, both artists pushed the boundaries of artistic tradition, proving that old and new forms need not be at odds.

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¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 111. Hideo Kanze's description.

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