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EMS08 - EMSAN Track Session

Electroacoustic Music Studies Network International Conference

3-7 juin 2008 (Paris) - INA-GRM et Université Paris-Sorbonne (MINT-OMF)

3-7 June 2008 (Paris) - INA-GRM and University Paris-Sorbonne (MINT-OMF)

<http://www.ems-network.org>

Japanese electronic music *denshi-ongaku* (電子音楽): Its music and terminology, definition and confusion

Hiromi Ishii

1. *Denshi-ongaku* (電子音楽)

This presentation examines a Japanese term, *Denshi-ongaku* and some terms related to it.

Denshi-ongaku suggested at first only German *elektronische Musik* which started in the 1950s. Since the term's introduction, it has been modified to include other genres composed using electronic devices, such as *musique concrète* and computer music as a wide definition. Although the term *musique électronique* was soon coined in France for a wide definition to distinguish it from narrow electronic music, the Japanese translation of this term *denshi-onkyo-ongaku* (電子音響音楽) did not take root, and *denshi-ongaku* has been used as both a narrow as well as wide definition.

Two music encyclopedias in Japan, one published by Heibonsha (平凡社) in 1981 and the other by Ongakunotomosha (音楽之友社) in 1991, have *denshi-ongaku* as an entry, but no entries for *denshi-onkyo-ongaku*. The Heibonsha encyclopedia explains the term *denshi-ongaku* as follows:

As a wide definition it generally suggests the music in which electronic devices are used for generation, transformation, synthesis and spatialisation of sound material. There is a tendency in European and American countries to include also *musique concrète* in it. In the case of a wide definition, the music played by the electric instruments, such as the electric guitar, the Hammond organ, is not included. Furthermore, in principle, the music which uses synthesisers is perfectly included, but live performances played by ensembles consisting of synthesisers and acoustic instruments, and so-called techno-pops are generally not called as electronic music.

Ongakunotomosha explains it as follows:

1. As a wide definition the music which applies any electroacoustic equipment is called *denshi-ongaku*, generally. In this case *musique concrète* and computer music are included.
2. As a narrow definition it suggests the music that was started in Germany since 1950. In other words, the music in which the electric sounds generated by an oscillator are used as material, completed as music pieces by processing, transforming and editing using electroacoustic equipments, and are then fixed on magnetic tapes. The music which is performed 'live' using audio equipments, without being fixed on magnetic tapes, is called live electronic music.

In 1993 the Japanese version of the first edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* was published. The first edition of *New Grove* was originally published in 1980, but the Japanese version of it was first published in 1993. Till now this is the most extensive music encyclopedia written in Japanese and the most used. The *New Grove* first edition has electronic music as an entry with a wide definition which includes electronic music of a narrow definition in it. It explains electronic music as follows:

Music which is produced or modified by electronic devices so that electronic equipment is required for it to be heard.

The most recent translation is *Das Grosse Metzler Lexikon* published in 2006 as DVD.

However, the original version is published in 1996 and it has only *elektronische Musik* as an entry. The description is rather chronological and the explanation about the term electroacoustic music is not found.

The term *denshi-ongaku* appeared as the title of a book in 2001. This massive book, *Denshi-ongaku in Japan* written by Yuji Tanaka (田中雄二) was revised and published in 2004. It became popular and sold well.

It begins the chronology of electronic music in Japan by introducing activities of Japanese *avant garde* composers of Western style music in the middle of the 20th Century. However, the focus sweeps to pop electronic music in the middle of chronology and there are no descriptions of art electronic music later than 80s. In fact, this book treats electronic music from the viewpoint of musical culture relating to pop electronic music, as the author Tanaka is neither musicologist, nor composer, but a journalist. This kind of description is seen in other Japanese books and articles written about electronic music in Japan. It may have caused a stagnation of art electronic music and may have seemed that there was nothing to be noted as a social influence, whereas pop style has thrived and been more meaningful for musical culture.

Another book published in 2004, titled *Nippon no denshi-ongaku* (日本の電子音楽) [Japanese electronic music], deals only with the stream of art electronic music in Japan. However, more than half of the contents consists of interviews with composers of early electronic music and therefore is not satisfactory as a reference. This may be because the authors are not specialists.

As for the term *denshi-ongaku*, it has generally been used to suggest art electronic music. The wide definition in the encyclopedias mentioned discuss whether *musique concrète* and computer music are to be included. Although other genres were basically not excluded, there are no mentions of popular music, such as techno. Electronica has not emerged yet. However, through the influence of the good selling book *Denshi-ongaku in Japan* mentioned, the definition of *denshi-ongaku* now seems to have been modified to include all genres of music based on electronic technology and it seems to have taken root. Tanaka might have interpreted the explanation of New Grove's first edition, or Ongakunotomosha encyclopedia and interpreted it widely, or he might have considered the recent pop music scene and intended to modify the definition. Thus, it includes now any musics that use whatever electronic devices. Not only techno and electronica, but commercial based synthesiser music including even *karaoke music*, and electronic organ music whose musical character is not necessarily experimental, or sound-based. The term *denshi-ongaku* has no longer any significant meaning to define the character of the music.

2. denshi-onkyo-ongaku (電子音響音楽)

Denshi-onkyo-ongaku, the translation of electroacoustic music in relation to *denshi-ongaku* is also to be examined. Nowadays composers of art electroacoustic music generally use this term to suggest their sound-based music.

Librairie Larrouse, published in 1982 and translated into Japanese in 1989, has both entries for *musique électronique* and *musique électroacoustique*. However, the explanation is based on the music at that stage which applied analog tapes, and therefore its definition is not quite

current with today's usage.

The New Grove second edition published in 2001 no longer has the term electronic music as an entry, but rather is redirected to 'electroacoustic music'. It is included in electroacoustic music as one of the styles. There is found a significant development in definition between the articles on electronic music as wide definition in the first edition and electroacoustic music in the second edition of the New Grove. The second edition explains electroacoustic music as follows:

Music in which electronic technology, now primarily computer-based, is used to access, generate, explore and configure sound materials, and in which loudspeakers are the prime medium of transmission.

It classifies the music in two genres, acousmatic music and live electronic music, and explains the following eight sub-titles:

1. Nature of the medium
2. Terminology
3. Acousmatic music
4. Live electronic and real-time applications
5. Performance interfaces
6. Listening and loudspeakers
7. The studio
8. Electro-acoustic sounds and other genres

This entry written by Simon Emmerson and Denis Smalley has a clear explanation and is closest to what composers of art electroacoustic music nowadays suggest. It concludes as follows:

It has become increasingly difficult to maintain clear distinction between electro-acoustic 'art' music and vernacular musics that embrace electro-acoustic attitudes. This blurring of differentiation among genres, and sharing of practice across genres, is inevitable as common electro-acoustic means become cheaper and more readily available to individuals.

The second edition of New Grove became available for online access in 2002. The online access of Japanese version was also started in 2002. However, its content is 1993 version, which is based on the first edition of 1980 and it does not have an entry for electroacoustic music. In other words, the most recent definition for electroacoustic music has not appeared in Japanese yet.

Many academic references to electronic music have been published in the world during the past half Century, with quite a few being translated into Japanese. One example is *The Computer music tutorial* by Curtis Roads. This book has not been translated by musicologists, but a team consists of researchers of information technology, who are especially keen on computer music. Other books written by Japanese authors in this field are mostly focused on technological issues. The following episode describes this research situation of poor references. A young lecturer who is teaching 20th Century music at universities confessed in his blog as follows:

There was a student interested in electroacoustic music and intended to research it. But I found the fact that there are no Japanese references that explain electroacoustic music thoroughly. I was surprised! On the other hand, the massive *Denshi-ongaku in Japan*

has been published. This should be due to so-called scholars' negligence, which has been talked about since I was still an undergraduate student.

As for the usage of the term *denshi-onkyo-ongaku*, it seems to be quickly spreading and taking root among academic institutes of this field. This would mainly be the electroacoustic music composers' contribution who are mostly at teaching posts. On the other hand, the term *denshi-onkyo-ongaku* is also in a crisis of a blurring definition. Nowadays, pop musicians are starting to apply it to their music, too. As there is no appearance in Japanese for the definition of *denshi-onkyo-ongaku*, except Larrouse as already mentioned, the term is often used just as a new catchy word instead of the original intention, without any sense of sound-based character. The confusion of translation is also seen. Both electronic music and electroacoustic music are translated as *denshi-ongaku*, on the other hand, electronic music is translated *denshi-onkyo-ongaku*. Also many lecturers at universities, who teach modern music of 20th century, are now taking the modified definition for *denshi-ongaku*, which includes techno, electronica and other musics such as game music.

An Internet Search for the term electroacoustic music in English yields mostly academic institutes' sites, which use this term for art electroacoustic music in their top pages. However, a search for the Japanese term *denshi-onkyo-ongaku* resulted in mostly personal sites and even very strange usages are found.

- We arrange any classic music as electroacoustic music-like and deliver them everywhere in Japan;
- The electroacoustic sounds produced by three magic plants (hasheesh, peyote and magic mushroom) and their climatic circumstances...

3. denshi-onkyo (電子音響)

There is another term, *denshi-onkyo*, which translates into English as electronic sounds or electroacoustic. Both electroacoustic and electronic sounds neither suggest any structured or organised sound, nor music. *Denshi-onkyo* suggests only that the sounds are produced by using electronic devices. However, there are composers of art music who prefer to call their compositions using this term. These composers might have begun to use this term at first in order to distinguish it from 'structured' electronic music, specifically music based on total serialism, as the early Japanese electronic music was closely combined with this precisely determined music. On the other hand, the term *denshi-onkyo* is also used in a chaotic way. Because of its ambiguous definition, it is used to suggest sound designer's works, sound effects of theatre pieces or animations. Like *denshi-ongaku* and *deshi-onkyo-ongaku*, this term also has a blurred definition, or even worse, as it includes neither meaning of art nor music.

4. Summary

Thus, in Japan, there is an extreme blurring differentiation of genres and the confused usage of terms is accelerating it. The fact that the Japanese industry of audio technology and synthesiser makers such as Roland, Korg, Yamaha, etc. have a significant role in the history of *denshi-ongaku*; the fact that electronic organs produced by these makers has developed into a unique music society; the fact that Japan is the Mecca of *karaoke*, animations and computer games all contribute to this acceleration.

On the contrary, art electronic music is frail and small. One of the difficulties in Japan is

that there are still many conservative composers who will not recognise the music based on any electronic instruments as art music. These anti-electronic composers are still dominant and at significant posts of Japanese music society. There are also musicologists who do not think it is worthy to make any effort for electronic technology-based music, as they believe it is not art music. Furthermore, there are composers and musicologists who have taken important roles in the early electronic music era, but will not contribute to it now, just criticising that recent digital technology-based music is neither experimental, nor artistic and not interesting as much as their electronic music was.

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