

Yuriko Hase Kojima

" Listening to the Sound: Meanings in Making Music"

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# Listening to the Sound: Meanings in Making Music

Yuriko Hase KOJIMA

Shobi University, Saitama, Japan

## Introduction

Since the first half of the twentieth century, composers have become more and more interested in the concept of the inside of sound. Many composers started to employ non-pitched sounds of percussion instruments from all over the world, and those non-European instruments have become important members of the contemporary orchestra. It was perhaps the first time in the history of Western music that composers were faced with the difficulties of differentiating between musical tones and non-musical tones. Until that time, composers' interests were mostly oriented toward the organization of pitched materials. The history of Western music runs parallel to the history of pitch refinement in Western musical instruments. In 1948, when *musique concrète* was officially introduced to the world, the people at that time must have had difficulties understanding this completely new kind of music.

Meanwhile, in Japan, there is a long tradition of finding pleasure in listening to the sound of nature and the sound produced by traditional sound devices such as *furin*, *shishiodoshi*, and *suikinkutsu*. This unique sound culture may have originated in the cultural mindset toward nature and religious life based on Zen Buddhism, where the concept of silence plays an important role. Development of Japanese culture closely relates to the climate of the country and the resultant lifestyle that draws clear distinctions among the four seasons. It has enormously influenced the development of traditional music in the country as well. Combining concepts from Western music and Japanese traditional music, because of the enormous differences between them, the Japanese music scene has become highly unique and confused at the same time.

## 1. Aesthetic Background of Japanese Sound Culture

### 1. Characteristics of Traditional Japanese Music

Japan has a long and rich history of traditional music. There are many kinds of music both sacred and secular: *gagaku*, *nogaku*, *shakuhachi*, *koto*, *biwa*, and so on. Each has a different history but all have something in common. Most Japanese instruments are developed to produce noisy tones. For example, the goal for *shakuhachi* players is to produce a sound just like a wind blows in the bamboo woods. They have cultivated special techniques to produce various kinds of trill-like effects such as *korokoro* and *karakara*. For them, even multiphonics are not unusual.

Most Japanese instruments are associated with a particular religion. For some instruments, the performers need to endure long years of spiritual and physical training at temples in mountains before being acknowledged as performers of the instruments. For them, producing sound means to be spiritually related to Buddha. Furthermore, in the practice of some instruments, a performer is not required to play a specified pitch but he is expected to choose a pitch according to the performance condition such as the environment or the weather of the day of the performance. In such cases, pitch organization may be called *relative*—as opposed to *absolute*—in Western-music sense. This is the fundamental difference between Japanese music and Western music where pitches are mostly predetermined by composers.

In Japanese music, there is one other thing in common: freedom in meter, rhythm, and tempo. Nevertheless, the performers do not look at each other to synchronize during performance. They all sit on the stage facing the audience and listen to the sound played by the others. Once the first note has been played, the other players sense when to play the next notes. This freedom creates random moments of silence that is the well-known time concept called *ma*.

Zen has nourished the art of tea ceremony. A real tea ceremony starts with guests listening to the sound of the garden. In Japanese culture, silence or being silent is one of the most important aspects of life even in modern times.

### **1.2. Sound Culture of Japan**

In Japanese gardens, various sounds of nature can be heard: running water, rain, the leaves of the woods, pebbles, stones, insects, and carp in the pond. There are man-made traditional sound devices. Probably the best-known one is *shishiodoshi*. It is a device that is made of bamboo, stone, and water. Water is poured from above onto a piece of bamboo tube cut at an angle and balanced on a pivot. When it is filled with water, the bamboo tip flips upside-down and the water spills out of the tube. The tube quickly falls back to the first position to strike a stone beneath and it produces a beautiful wooden sound. It is often used with *tsukubai*, a carved stone basin to hold water. It is known with Isamu Noguchi's stone art works. For traditional *tsukubai*, in many cases water continuously poured from above with a slim bamboo tube called *kakehi* and we can hear the quiet sounds of water.

Another water device is called *suikinkutsu*, which can be translated as "water-harp-vase." A ceramic pot with a small hole on the bottom is placed in underground upside-down near a *tsukubai*. As water pours through the small hole and falls into the water inside of the pot, it produces harp-like sounds. However, the sound is not to be heard regularly. Even if the sound is heard, it is too subtle to catch. But it has a distinctive metallic quality unlike the ordinary sound of water.

The sound devices and traditional Japanese instruments all have non-pitched and noisy characteristics. Remember the shakuhachi whose goal is to produce a sound like a wind. This unique sound culture has led to a unique concept of hearing through silence. They all draw from Zen philosophy and its close connection with nature.

### **1.3. Westernization in Japanese Music**

It was in the Meiji period, around the end of the nineteenth century, that Japan accelerated Westernization into their culture including music. Since that time, non-traditional Japanese musicians have been mainly educated in Western classical music. Many Japanese people have not even had one chance to listen to their own traditional music live. They do not think it is a serious problem that they do not know their own traditions.

Just recently, the Government is changing the policy for pre-college music education in order to let children experience the performance of traditional music. However, we have had too long an absence of our own traditional music in general education. In the course of their professional careers, many Japanese composers face great difficulties in artistic identity. When they become aware of Japanese traditions

unconsciously thriving in their own music making, they are shocked, stunned, and feel lost. In fact, because of great distance between Western and Japanese music, they quickly realize that it is not easy to integrate both musical aesthetics in truly meaningful ways. Regarding Zen aesthetics, they are merged into people's life in Japan so naturally and deeply that the people do not even notice that they have such tradition in the first place.

## **2. Japanese Modern Music and Philosophy**

### **2.1. Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996): Musical Aesthetics**

Toru Takemitsu is probably the best known and the best loved Japanese composer in the world. He was one of the first few Japanese composers who went on to utilize *musique concrète* in Japan in the middle of the twentieth century.

Takemitsu writes in his book *Oto, Chinmoku to Hakariaeru hodon* (trans., *Sound: Confronting the Silence*), "One day in 1948, in a crowded metro train in Tokyo, an idea occurred to me to use noise embedded into music composed of well-tempered musical tones. To be more precise, I noticed that the meaning of composing is to give meaning to the 'river of sound' that penetrates the world around us."<sup>1</sup> He specifically uses the French word *signifié* to describe this concept. He also mentions, "In 1948, Pierre Shaeffer of France invented the method of *musique concrète* in a manner identical to the idea that I had. I was delighted to this coincidence. Music is changing anew. Although little by little, it is certainly changing." That was the year in which he was only 18 years old.<sup>2</sup>

In 1955, Takemitsu produced his first tape piece, *Relief Static*, with this new method. His last pure tape piece, *Wave Length II*, was created in 1987. His professional musical career began in film and radio and he later became a big figure in these fields as well. Since he always used environmental sound materials, numerous works of his film music may also be regarded as *musique concrète*.

Interestingly, in pieces such as *Water Music* and *Wave Length*, his continuous love for nature is especially obvious. In *Water Music*, he explores further: he planned the piece to be performed along with 2 flutes, alto flute, and Noh dance. Nowadays, we call this kind of art *multimedia*, but of course, in his time, this area of creation was rare and not yet categorized.

### **2.2 Zen Influence in Takemitsu's music**

Almost all of Takemitsu's instrumental music is written in a Western musical language. He used to call himself a Japanese composer creating music in a Western musical language; but his music was often regarded to be very "Japanese" by Western composers because of his use of intensely noisy sounds and reoccurring moments of silence.

He was interested in Zen all his life and influenced by the modern Zen philosopher Daisetsu Suzuki (1870-1966), who was the first Japanese Zen philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> Toru Takemitsu, *Oto, Chinmoku to Hakariaeru hodon* (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1971), 25. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

to recognize the difference between Western and Japanese concepts and introduced it to Western countries in English. Takemitsu himself was well known with his numerous philosophical writings. In his book *Oto, Chinmoku to Hakariaeru hodon*, he also writes, “The reality for a composer is the existence of sound itself. In order for a sound to be realized, the composer must be in unity with the sonority of the sound. In the name of composing, forming sound by mathematical manipulation does not mean anything to me. If that is the task of a composer, I would rather not be a composer. A musical system only gives us schematic information, but music should be there if a sound is truly there. That is why we feel the voice of a bird is beautiful and it is truly beautiful. I am not really interested in composing music by a system. I want to cut unneeded sounds down to the bone until I reach one real body of a sound.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Riverrun, Water Ways, and November Steps*, for example, non-pitched noisy sounds are played by pitched orchestral instruments, employing so-called extended techniques such as microtones, unstable pitches, harmonics, extreme registers, and changes of timbre. Without seeing the score, a listener may hear those sounds as *musique concrète* or even electronically created music. In reality, they are all pure instrumental music strictly written out on music paper. Takemitsu treated instrumental music and electroacoustic music in the same manner. Regardless of the different techniques in producing sounds, they both existed in real time and space.

### **2.3 One in All and All in One**

In another book *Watashitachi no Mimi wa Kikoeteiruka* (trans., *Are We Really Listening?*), Takemitsu also says, “In Japan, only one sound can make music. It connotes nature itself, and is only alive within time. Music cannot and should not exist apart from nature.”<sup>4</sup>

Takemitsu connects silence to death. He had fear for real silence. He always regarded music as a real-life experience. He wanted to grasp one real moment of sound out of the river that we live in. For him, to compose was equally meaningful and painful as it was to live.

In Zen philosophy, there is a central doctrine: One in all and all in one. Zen monks regard all sounds of this world as the voices of Buddha. No sound is specially made. Everything changes. Nothing is eternal. This incompleteness and helplessness makes all things equally true and beautiful in one moment of time.

In Western culture, when one wants to declare a belief or an idea, he or she has to explain logically with objective theory or data. But, in Zen, one’s experience is regarded as an absolute fact. It is stronger than anything with theoretical support.

Takemitsu also mentions that music is always incomplete and changeable and that is what makes music beautiful. In tape music, Takemitsu found his interests in its erasability. This whole idea can be explained by his interest in Japanese traditional music that finds beauty in moments of changes in timbre. Helplessness could also be found in Japanese music in its lack of meter or repeatable rhythm. Helplessness and incompleteness both come from the central idea of Zen philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>4</sup> Toru Takemitsu, *Watashitachi no Mimi wa Kikoeteiruka* (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Center, 2000), 16.

As a Japanese composer, Takemitsu had to struggle between completely different aesthetics of music. *Musique concrète* may have given him a freedom, yet it may also have given him agony because it is inherently fixed in time.

## **Final Thoughts**

Today, in the twenty-first century, we can easily take a look at a graphic figure of a sound or even an entire piece of music on a computer screen and analyze or modify it with little effort. Even a beginner musician can compose a piece of either instrumental or electroacoustic music using the most sophisticated musical applications. The easier composing has become, the more difficult it has become to have a real experience of music making.

The latest music technology lets us have more freedom in creating music than in the past decades. We can even control how the sound of music is projected in a certain way in a certain place, either intentionally or randomly, in real-time. Unfortunately, Takemitsu could not live long enough to experience this era in which such music technologies can reliably create both stability and instability of music in terms of timbre and time.

Another famous Zen-influenced composer was John Cage. Takemitsu and Cage were both deeply influenced by Zen philosophy and often expressed the importance of inner listening. With his piece of silence *4'33"*, Cage showed us that active listening is the only key to a real experience of music, not musical materials such as pitch, melody, harmony, or rhythm. In the twenty-first century, their profound thoughts make us think again about what music making means. Are sound materials what really matters? It is only clear that music making is not easy. With active listening, maybe we can find one clue to this unanswered question.