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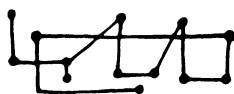
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CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IN JAPAN*



TŌRU TAKEMITSU

IN THIS AGE we face problems which are both political and economic in nature. To free ourselves from such problems I think the most important thing is the ability to understand each other deeply through cultural exchange. It is very important for us to study and to understand the essential meanings of culture. However, in doing so, we must try to avoid becoming entangled in the barriers to cultural understanding that are put up by issues of nationalism. As an individual, I hate nationalistic chauvinism in all of its forms, for it is such nationalism which leads countries to develop fascistic tendencies. Each country must take care to avoid concealing itself within its own shell.

*A lecture delivered to The Japan Society as part of the First New York International Festival of the Arts, 6 July 1988; Peter Grilli, interpreter. Text adapted for publication by Hilary Tann.

I believe that cultures do converge and gradually form themselves into a cluster. Furthermore, that very often what occurs in the fusion of cultures goes beyond what can be predicted from cultural influences flowing back and forth. What we see today is a Japan deeply influenced by the West, by Europe and the United States, and we see increasing numbers of Westerners who are deeply impressed by Eastern cultures. More and more, East and West are being evaluated on equal terms. But we're not there yet: fundamental differences still remain.

Take, for example, the case of John Cage, who is known for introducing the principles of chance, of randomness, into his music. To me, if this process is taken to its extreme, randomness becomes just the opposite—it seems terribly logical. To the Japanese listener the principle becomes rather tiresome (not in the case of Cage, but in extreme cases). However, I must express my deep and sincere gratitude to John Cage. The reason for this is that in my own life, in my own development, for a long period I struggled to avoid being “Japanese,” to avoid “Japanese” qualities. It was largely through my contact with John Cage that I came to recognize the value of my own tradition. In his own way, John Cage was influenced by Zen through his encounters with the Zen master Daisetsu Suzuki. It doesn't really matter what came first or who was influenced by whom. What is important in the long run is that it is possible for us to understand each other. Recently I talked with John Cage about just this point and we were in complete agreement.

Now I would like to tell you a bit about my own personal development as a composer. As I expect you know, throughout World War II nearly all Western music was prohibited in Japan. Except for the music of the Axis countries, we had no chance at all to hear other forms of Western music. Toward the end of the war, as the American forces were preparing to invade Japan, the Japanese military constructed bases deep in the mountains. I was fourteen years old at the time, and was conscripted to work at one of these mountain bases. It was far from Tokyo and all the young conscripts like myself lived in a kind of rough barracks. For me the experience was an extremely bitter one. We were not real soldiers, and the soldiers treated us very harshly. Not all of them, of course; there were a few exceptions.

One day, one of the military officers took a number of us to the very back of the barracks where he had a record player and a number of records. There was no needle to play the records, but this officer had carefully sharpened a piece of bamboo, and using it as a needle he was able to play the records for us. One of the first records that he put on was the French chanson, “Parlez-moi de l'amour.” For me, hearing that music came as an enormous shock. I was stunned, and for the first time I suddenly realized the splendid quality of Western music. Later, after the war, when the Americans arrived

in Japan, they soon established a radio station for the American troops. At that time I was sick and had to spend every day in bed. With my ears turned to the radio I spent all my time listening to music on the U.S. Armed Forces Network.

From the time I was very young my entire family were great movie fans; we particularly loved seeing American movies. During that dark era before Japan and the United States finally went to war, when we could still see American movies, it was our greatest pleasure to see films like those of Frank Capra and others—*It Happened One Night*, for example, and *High Hat*. It was while viewing these films that I came to recognize the great differences that existed between the culture of my own country and that of America. America appeared like a great, shining dream. For example, I remember watching American women brushing their hair in the films—luxuriant, glowing hair, brushed with a hairbrush. At that time Japanese women did not use hairbrushes; they only combed their hair. It was a very striking image: a brush being pulled through the hair. Or another memory was seeing curtains hung on American windows—the two layers of draperies, one layer being a very rich fabric, and then, behind it, a lovely, filmy, lacy curtain blowing in the wind—which, of course, we never saw in Japan.

It has always seemed to me that the invention and the development of photography and film have very much changed human culture. This is not the time nor the place to go into this subject in great depth, so I'll leave it at that. But I think the kind of communication that is possible through photography has enabled us, people everywhere together, to hatch something which has been called the "universal egg."

Going back to those days at the end of the war, when I heard that French chanson at a time when all examples of Western culture had been shut out from our lives, this experience released in me enormous energy. Energy really exploded within me, and it's interesting that, at that time, the object of my attention was not Japanese but Western. Right after the war, as I said, I listened constantly to American music over the Armed Forces Radio. I also went very, very frequently to the library of the Civil Information and Education branch of the U.S. Occupation government. There I also sought out American music. Through hearing the music of Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and such great American composers, I was introduced to an unknown world, and I gradually began to develop a sense of my own musical taste. For me, after having tasted the bitter, miserable experiences of the war years, this music seemed full of hope.

When I was a child I lived in Tokyo with my aunt, a koto teacher. I heard traditional classical Japanese music around me all the time. For some reason, it never really appealed to me, never moved me. Later, hearing traditional classical Japanese music always recalled the bitter memories of war.

In time I began to try composing myself, working on my own music, little by little, step by step. At first my music was not particularly well received in Japan, and perhaps, looking back, that was only right and natural. But one day, my music came to the attention of Igor Stravinsky when he was visiting Japan, and he praised it very highly. When Stravinsky praised my music the Japanese critics suddenly began to pay attention to what I was doing. Naturally, for me, to have Stravinsky praise my music was a matter of great pride—although it doesn't seem to reflect well on the Japanese music critics who had ignored me until then. Of course, this was an ideal instance of a seed of mutual understanding taking sprout naturally, spontaneously, on its own, transcending any human preconception or intent.

For a long while, I permitted myself to gaze only into the mirror of Western music and Western art. However, one day I chanced to see a performance of the Bunraku puppet theater and was very surprised by it. It was in the tone quality, the timbre, of the *futazao* shamisen, the wide-necked shamisen used in Bunraku, that I first recognized the splendor of traditional Japanese music. I was very moved by it and I wondered why my attention had never been captured before by this Japanese music. I wondered, perhaps, if it wasn't precisely the fact that I had studied Western music so deeply that enabled me later to be so moved by the Bunraku music that I heard. Had I never been under the sway of Western music I know my appreciation of Japanese music would have been very different. I think this is an extremely important point. From that time on I devoted a great deal of energy—as much as possible—to studying Japanese musical traditions, with particular attention to the differences between Japanese music and Western music. With great diligence I tried to bring forth the sensibilities of Japanese music that had always been within me.

It was in 1967 that I received a commission for a new work from the New York Philharmonic. What I tried to do was to create a piece for Western orchestra playing together with biwa and shakuhachi. I called it *November Steps*. I owe a great debt here to Leonard Bernstein, for, more than anything else, this came about through his deep and very sincere appreciation of Japanese music, of Japanese culture as a whole. For me, it was a challenging and terribly difficult task that I was given. The attempt to bring together Japanese instruments with a Western orchestra was so difficult that many times along the way I felt like giving up. To try and blend the two drastically different forms of music seemed virtually impossible; I myself doubted very strongly whether I could accomplish the task. Eventually I think that we did manage to succeed in bringing together the two, but doing so was a terrible trial for me. However, difficult though it was, I think that making the attempt was very worthwhile because what resulted

somehow liberated music from a certain stagnation and brought to music something distinctly new and different.

For the première of *November Steps* two great Japanese musicians came to New York to play the biwa and shakuhachi parts. At the first rehearsal, when Seiji Ozawa raised his baton and began to rehearse them, the Philharmonic members just burst into laughter. I was shocked, and found it so painful that we had to call a halt to the rehearsal. I was miserable and felt totally at a loss. I told Ozawa that perhaps we should cancel the whole performance, that this simply was not going to work. But Ozawa turned to me and said, "Wait a minute, the orchestra is behaving very well today. This is not bad at all. I remember the time when Lukas Foss was introducing a new piece—the entire orchestra simply walked off the stage and left the rehearsal!" Then Ozawa called the orchestra together again and asked them simply to listen to the two solo biwa and shakuhachi parts. The orchestra became quieter and quieter and paid closer and closer attention as the two Japanese performers played. By the end, the orchestra had become completely silent. No one was laughing any more. Instead, they all burst into applause. At that point I realised how diligently the orchestra had been paying attention to the music.

Today, of course, no one in the West laughs at hearing biwa and shakuhachi sounds. However, looking back, it no longer seems so irresponsible for the New York Philharmonic members to burst into laughter the very first time they heard these sounds. What was happening there was a sudden meeting of two cultures that created a depth of understanding that went way beyond anything we had thought about ahead of time. For humankind like us, leaving aside all of the abstract meanings of "human-kind," I think this is an example of what Buckminster Fuller meant when he talked about the "universal egg of humanity"—"giving birth to a universal egg." When you see the swollen stomach of a pregnant woman, it seems at once both very serious, of course, and yet somehow humorous. So perhaps it wasn't irresponsible of the New York Philharmonic members to burst into laughter at this birth. I think, as human beings, we must all strive to bring the unique characteristics of our separate cultures together into something called the "universal egg." It's not easy, and it takes a long time, but we all must be patient and make the effort. This process of consummation deserves our greatest attention; although, in some sense, we have to stand back with our arms folded and wait for it to develop naturally.

It has now been more than a century since Western music was introduced into Japan. We've moved beyond the infancy period of the time, say, before and during the war, to a time when Japanese composers have deepened their roots and are creating in a genuine, authentic musical language of their own. For example, the composers Yoritsune Matsudaira, Yasuji

Kiyose, Saburō Moroi, Tomojirō Ikenouchi, Fumio Hayasaka, and Akira Ifukube are all composers of this period of great personal creativity. Among these composers I'd particularly like to mention Yoritsune Matsudaira, a man of great, keen aesthetic sensibility. Matsudaira very consciously and objectively stood back from his own work in Japanese music and struggled hard to avoid the kind of sentimentality that Japanese music often falls into, in order to create a cool, very clear sense of form in his music. It is Matsudaira who developed a genuine, new musical language which called on inspiration from ancient Japanese musical forms, such as Gagaku, but reinterpreted these in a modern sensibility in his own personal, authentic style.

Other composers, myself included, are what you might call the children, or the grandchildren, of Matsudaira. I have in mind, especially, music by very close associates of mine, composers whose work is in the repertory of Sound Space ARK, the group that has come to New York with me. The composers represented in these concerts include Yoshio Hachimura, Toshi Ichianagi, Maki Ishii, Sesshū Kai, Michio Kitazume, Jō Kondō, Yoriaki Matsudaira, Krodo Mohri, Sōmei Sato, Yuji Takahashi, and Jōji Yuasa. Mention should also be made of other composers whose music is not in the repertory of Sound Space ARK—distinguished composers such as Akira Miyoshi, Teizō Matsumura, and Michio Mamiya, to name just three. I don't know yet whether we've succeeded in our music—that's for other people to decide. What I *can* say is that all of us have been striving to stretch the possibilities of music, and our own abilities in creating music; striving to express ourselves through creating an authentic and universal musical language. All of us have been deeply influenced by the traditions of Japanese classical music, but I think we've each transcended these traditions in finding new and personally unique forms of expression—forms that are now reaching a global level of appreciation, a music that can communicate to people everywhere.

I wouldn't want you to think that this music is "Japanesey" in any way. The instruments are not traditional Japanese instruments by any stretch of the imagination. Yet I can be equally definite in saying that all the pieces in the repertory of Sound Space ARK are based on, influenced by, immersed in the Japanese musical tradition. Again, what I and my fellow composers are *not* doing is simply, in a facile way, adapting Japanese tradition to Western form. What we're trying to do is to study very deeply, and very carefully, the essence of traditional music, to explore unknown worlds, and to recreate, or reelucidate, in new, modern forms, what we've learned from our traditions.

In the essence of our music I think there are things which are perhaps very different from Western music—a sense of time, a sense of space, and a

sensitivity to color and tone. But I don't want to say that as Orientals, or as Japanese, we have any particular monopoly on these qualities in music. There are gaps, certainly, in the traditions of the West and of the East, but in studying each other's music and learning from each other's music we are, together, beginning to fashion a "universal egg" of communication between cultures.

In our present world severe demands are made on the artist and the creator. Some artists have succumbed to the contradictions, the problems, of national systems and nationalism. But, as we all strive for an ideal world, what we must do is find what is genuine in ourselves, the unique qualities in ourselves, and affirm these in a universal fashion. We must all share this common goal. The role of the artist is to serve as a bridge for all men to accomplish this and the artist must be fully and completely aware of this task. For Japanese to be learning from the West, and for Westerners—Europeans and Americans—to be deepening their appreciation of Oriental culture, is a difficult undertaking, a very serious one that we must all confront. I'm not sure that our mutual intercultural understanding is complete or has reached an ideal state yet. There are still problems that separate us: senses of differences of race and color. These are the things which we must strive to transcend.