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The Pattern and the Fabric: In Search of a Music, Profound and Meaningful

I began to study music at a very young age and music to me meant Western music. I started to play the piano when I was four years old and grew up in a very traditional Japanese family: my mother can play koto very well and my grandfather was a master of ikebana, the art of flower arrangement. In contemporary Japan, however, the study of music automatically implies the study of Western music. No one studies traditional Japanese music unless he has a particular interest in it.

The first time that I heard a live performance of Gagaku music was in Berlin, where I was a music student. A Japanese Gagaku ensemble had come to Berlin to participate in an ethnic music festival. Upon hearing live Gagaku for the first time, I was surprised at how fresh, rich and interesting it sounded. Of course, I had heard recordings of Gagaku music in Japan at special occasions such as weddings or New Year's festivities, but I had never experienced a live performance, nor did I even know what types of instruments were used in the performance of such music.

Nowadays, there are many Japanese studying music in Europe and Japanese musicians can be found in almost every German orchestra. It is my opinion that most of these Japanese musicians have no real knowledge of Gagaku, or for that matter, of traditional Japanese music in general. This is not because they are specialists in Western music; the average Japanese knows very little about Japan's traditional music.

If, on the other hand, you were to ask me if Japanese people were very well acquainted with Western music, I would have to say that their knowledge is very superficial. After 250 years of isolation, Japan resumed relations with the rest of the world 100 years ago during the Meiji Reformation. Ever since the Meiji period, Japan has striven to Westernize and modernize itself, adopting predominantly Western technology. In our haste to catch up with the West, we did not take the time to thoroughly study the cultural context that is the basis of the profound philosophy and history of the West. Japan has succeeded in its modernization and has become an economic power, nevertheless, there are many contradictions in the psychological and spiritual spheres.

Japan's composers have created the contemporary music of Japan against a background of rapid modernization and a melange of Western and Japanese traditions. Almost all Japanese compositions from 1900 up until World War II are imitations of Western music. Not until after the war did excellent Japanese composers emerge who created original pieces. A person who exemplifies this the best is a composer born in 1930: Toru Takemitsu.

Many younger Japanese composers born in the 1950's were influenced by Takemitsu's music. I too developed my own music under the influence of music written by Takemitsu for Western and Japanese instruments. I was also very strongly influenced by Isang Yun, having studied composition with him in Berlin.

I would like to explain how I, a Japanese composer born after the war and having grown up with the background that I described, have tried to work with ancient Japanese music and utilize it in my own creations.

First, I would like to refer to a flute solo from Mikagura, which is the oldest known example of Gagaku music. Mikagura music existed in Japan before Gagaku came to the country from China during the 7th Century. This music was performed at the court during ceremonies which lasted from 5 to 6 hours, and it is said that the flute's role was to purify the place where the ritual was to take place. This piece is called "Niwabi", a solo for the kagura-bue, a very simple flute with only six holes. This kind of music, which proceeds at such a slow tempo that it might appear monotonous, was performed for hours.

I like to think of the lines in Gagaku music in a visual manner, as something analogous to the art of Shodo or Sho, our traditional art of calligraphy. Sho is the Oriental art of writing on white paper with a brush steeped in India ink. Lines made by the brush strokes are not straight, but have delicate curves formed in different shades of ink.

One recalls the monodic lines of the flute in the "Niwabi": the lines of sound with the micro-tones and the delicate portamento. The sound is not homogeneous, but is composed of very complex sounds containing breath sounds and overtones. Because the kagura-bue is a very simple instrument, it cannot easily maintain a constant pitch, which is why it is used to produce complex sounds similar to natural noise. I once had an opportunity to learn about the art of Sho from a calligraphy master and was very impressed by what he told me. He said that before he begins to write, he first fixes a point in space, starts the brush stroke from that point, moves the brush as though he were creating a new world, writes on the white paper and then returns to the same point in space. The line that is visible on the paper is only a part of the total invisible line of movement. The visible line that remains on the paper is supported by an invisible world. The empty spaces between the lines give us clues to that world. This idea had a major impact on my music. If music can be described using the analogy of Sho, then the traces of sound that one hears are surely supported by the sounds one does not hear – the world of silence, of empty spaces.

With respect to the "Niwabi", I believe that the background for the flowing lines of the flute and the world between the sounds are not an empty void, but a fertile place that gives birth to the music.

The empty sound spaces are intervals that exist in other forms of Japanese music besides Gagaku. For example, in Nohgaku, which originated in Japan in the 15th Century, the tsuzumi player extends his right hand forward, forms a circle in the air, then produces a sound by striking the hand drum. The powerful tension of the sound is created by the tension of the interval before the audible sound is produced. In Nohgaku, the tsuzumi player utters a strange exclamation during the interval and this cry helps to heighten the tension. In this case, sound is not an element that is antagonistic to the empty space or silence, rather, it is connected in a discontinuous way to the silence. Sound is supported and given life by silence, just as the lines of Sho receive life from the empty world surrounding them.

With these ideas as a basis, and inspired by Pierre-Yves Artaud, I wrote a composition in 1984 for solo flute entitled "Sen" (in Japanese: Line). Each and every sound in this piece is intended to be drawn like the strokes of a calligraphy brush onto the canvas of musical time. "Sen" appears on a CD with Pierre-Yves Artaud, solo flute.

Next, I would like to discuss the ideas behind the ensemble in Gagaku music. The most typical or standard Gagaku ensemble consists of shô, hichiriki, o-teki, 3 percussion instruments, koto and biwa. The wind instruments become the leading force of the ensemble and also measure



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Foto Sascha Müller

time. I personally find the role of the *shô* in this ensemble especially intriguing. The *shô* is always resounding in the background and playing the simple theme melody while creating rich harmonies called *ai-take* in Gagaku. Because the *shô* can be played by inhaling as well as exhaling, it is over-present in the background as a persistent drone. In the foreground, the *hichiriki* and *oh-teki* resound like vigorous brush strokes, creating slight time lags between them. The omnipresent drone of the *shô* acts as a musical canvas for the other instruments and supports them. Sometimes the listener may forget that the *shô* is there at all. In the piece mentioned earlier, for *solô*, silence was the musical canvas, but in this case, the background is one that is completely filled with sound.

The musical canvas may be totally blank or it may be covered with sound, as in the piece for Gagaku ensemble entitled “*Shundei-ka*”, recorded for CD by Miyata Mayumi. Here, the *shô* is generally in the background, supporting the other instruments. Occasionally, however, it moves into the foreground in a crescendo as if to shed light on the others, subsequently disappearing again into the background. The space that serves as the musical canvas is a multi-layered structure comprised of silence, saturation of sounds, and lines of sound. These layers are connected to one another in a discontinuous manner, like Russian “*Berioshka*” dolls.

I think of this relationship between foreground and background, pattern and fabric in various metaphorical ways, such as the relationship between sound and silence, human beings and nature or the cosmos, life and death, this life and the next, dreams and reality. I believe that modern music has focused its attention on the patterns in the foreground at the expense of the

fabric of sound in the background. The pattern and the fabric are not antagonistically opposed to one another. The pattern can be itself, and it can also become the fabric. It is the medium that suggests the fabric. The fabric is the womb of the world as well as the patterned design of that world. It has many different meanings that I find fascinating, as in the case of the shô, whose sound can be like a silent background or a canvas saturated with sound.

A Japanese poet of the 17th Century, Bashô, wrote short poems called haiku to express the profound relationship between human beings and nature. One of his best known poems, in a translation by Yuzuru Miura, reads as follows:

Calm and serene
the sound of cicada
penetrates the rock

The people of Germany may be unfamiliar with the sound of the cicada. This insect produces a very loud sound which many people probably find noisy and disturbing. But one can also associate the sound with lazy summer afternoons bathed in bright sunlight. Bashô refers to the sound as calm and serene, associating the mid-summer sound of the cicada with the opposite concept of silence. Bashô must have sensed the multiple implications of that sound. The sound penetrates the rock and permeates the earth. The whole world and the whole universe have become the sound and the cosmic reverberation is contained in a silence of cosmic dimensions. In this haiku, the cicada's sound, which is the pattern of the world, is also perceived as the fabric. The boundary between pattern and fabric has disappeared, an intermediate domain fluctuating between the two has appeared and the reverberation becomes even more profound and meaningful.

In the traditional arts of Japan, such richness of meaning or ambiguity has always been very important. In the Noh theater, a form called Mugen-Noh is considered the highest form of the art. It is a musical drama expressing in music and song a world where dreams and reality, this world and the next, life and death, all and nothing, freely cross boundaries.

Listening to a solo performance of the shô, I sense the reverberation of an intermediate domain that transcends the boundary between pattern and fabric. The very simple melody is reinforced by overtones and difference tones which only the shô can produce and the original melody assumes so many multiple meanings that the pattern becomes indistinguishable from the fabric, as can be perceived in the solo piece for shô, "Choshi", performed by Mayumi Miyata.

In the same way, the sound that has transcended the boundary between pattern and fabric is constantly heard in the Gagaku ensemble. Gagaku is basically composed of a single melody played by different instruments in various ways. Minute differences in interval, range, and time transform the single melody into very rich music. The Japanese have found beauty in these subtle variations of time and melody. The foreground sound is absorbed into the background and the background sound traverses the foreground. I think that these movements are what make Gagaku interesting.

The musical philosophy of Gagaku served as the basis for the piece "Landscape", which I composed for the Arditti String Quartet and which was performed here in Darmstadt. In this piece, one listens leisurely to the landscape of each note. In the beginning, one can distinguish between the pattern and the fabric, but eventually, the fabric becomes saturated with sound and is indistinguishable from the pattern. This is the kind of musical landscape which I tried to create.

I spoke earlier about the relationship between Gagaku and calligraphy. There is another wonderful art in the East that uses India ink or China ink, and that is the art of ink-drawing. I am particularly fond of ink-drawings, which are influenced by Zen and are extremely abstract and minimalist. In the Sansui drawings, which are visual expressions of mountain landscapes that may come to one's mind, the sky in the background is frequently left blank to represent its infinite dimensions. The blank space speaks eloquently of many worlds. In order to achieve this and to maintain a balance between the drawing and the empty space, the drawing must be made with bold lines that delineate the world.

The interesting world of ink-drawings is created by the blotting effect. If you coat the surface of the paper lightly with water and draw on it with ink, smudges form that are dependent upon the properties of the water and the paper and not on the will of the artist. Thus, a mysterious world of fuzzy outlines is created by chance. The artists of the ink-drawings were suggesting the existence of an intermediate zone between pattern and fabric.

At this point, I would like to recall the relationship between the shô and the other instruments in Gagaku. The oh-teki and hichiriki "draw" musical lines against a background created by the shô. When the sounds meet, unexpected overtones and difference tones occur, not unlike the blotting effect of the ink-drawing. When one listens to live Gagaku music, one is amazed at the number of overtones and difference tones. These are not calculated: they are born independently of the will of human beings. Furthermore, because the music consists of rhythms and unisons slightly out of phase and within a very narrow pitch range, drones and difference tones are easily produced. The acoustics of the blotting effect could, in my opinion, be reviewed from a contemporary perspective and provide valuable hints for creating new music.

I believe that there are still many things that we do not know and could discover about how to make music and how to listen to music by studying our own traditions anew. Ancient music such as Gagaku may be able to reveal to us things we have long forgotten, such as music being a symbol of the universe and cosmology.

I believe that we Japanese should not limit ourselves to Japanese or Oriental music, but should continue to study all kinds of new and excellent music from all over the world. Up to now, our grasp of Occidental music has been too narrow and superficial; even in Tokyo, a metropolis that might appear to be the cutting edge in musical commercialism, Western music is treated in ways that would seem ridiculous to Europeans. We must study the West once again in greater depth in order to view ourselves objectively, in order to really come to know ourselves.

I wish to study anew the Occident as well as the Orient and the traditions that we have lost, and through such studies, I hope to create a new music and a new voice that has not yet been heard from Japan.