

Juxtaposed Landscapes: An American Composer Journeys into Japan

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Konnichiwa! (Good afternoon!)

Thank you, Alice [President Ilchman], and many thanks to Tara Helen O'Connor, David Fedele and Edmund Niemann who so kindly agreed to perform *Tenzone* this afternoon.

Tenzone, for two flutes and piano, was written in 1975 as a response to the work of Toru Takemitsu, one of Japan's foremost composers with whom I had studied at Yale and to whom the piece is gratefully dedicated. A *tenzone* was a lyric Interchange in medieval Italy between two poets concerning new poetic techniques and themes of courtly love. In this instance, it is an interchange of musical ideas between East and West and represents my first expression inspired by things Japanese. It utilizes conventional as well as extended flute techniques inspired by the *shakuhachi* as well as the modern flute and blends traditional and proportional time systems, taking as its departure Takemitsu's *Masque*, for two flutes (1959).

As you entered you were listening to *Etenraku*, one of the most famous pieces of *gagaku*, or Imperial Court Music, which in Japan dates back to the eighth century. This was the popular music of the time, and the melody of *Etenraku* was one of the hit tunes, appropriate it seemed to me to set the celebratory atmosphere of our first coming together and even more appropriate for President Ilchman's regal entrance.

My introduction to Japanese music was about twenty-five years ago when I heard part of a work entitled *Arc*, for piano and orchestra, by Toru Takemitsu, performed by pianist Yogi Takehashi with Seiji Ozawa conducting the Chicago Symphony at its summer home at the Ravinia Festival. The experience was extraordinary. The music seemed otherworldly, dissonant, but still lyrical and dramatic. Shortly after, a friend gave me a recording of *A Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky (Koku-Reibo)*, performed by Goro Yamaguchi, still one of Japan's leading interpreters of music written for the *shakuhachi*, a seemingly simple, five-hole bamboo flute, looking as innocent as a recorder but, in fact, almost impossible to play unless you have the patience and discipline of a Zen Buddhist monk. Again, I was strongly impressed by the lyricism and the subtle nuance and power of the music.

None of this really prepared me for my experiences when I went to Japan in January of this year as a guest of The Japan Foundation that sends art abroad and sponsors artists who go to Japan to study its culture. I was fortunate to be one of the first composers they invited to study the traditional performing arts.


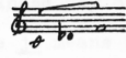
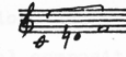

I arrived in Tokyo on the evening of January 7th with very few yen in my pocket, an overly pedantic project title – "Exploration of the contemporary and the traditional in Japanese musical forms and instruments" – and with virtually no concrete plan in mind. Like many immigrants who come to the United States and still believe that the streets will be paved with gold, I had equally naive ideas about what I would find in Japan. I expected limitless, spontaneous and wealthy support for a struggling composer. And I expected to feel very much the outsider, confronting a strange, even slightly hostile reception. In both expectations, I was dramatically wrong.

No one showered me with money, and I was overwhelmed by the graciousness of the Japanese people. What struck me immediately was their tremendous concern for detail. Let me give you an example. One day I bought a piece of inexpensive gift paper which was first wrapped around a white cardboard tube, then covered with a piece of paper of better quality than the one I bought, the whole package being inserted into a larger tube with wooden end pieces which was then placed in a long, plastic bag and tied with gold string.

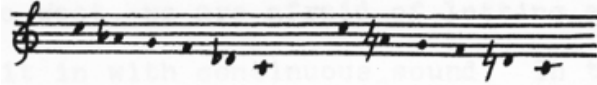
I wish that the nature of Japanese music could be as simply and neatly packaged. From listening to and reading about Japanese music, I felt that my music, since the writing of *Tenzone* in 1975, contained some of its strong characteristics: transparent textures and delicate nuances; sounds frozen in space; circular musical forms, a kind of mobile fixity where tensions expand and contrast against a background of stillness. In *At the Still Point*, for orchestra (1977), I was especially interested in the use of space - registral and physical - and how that generates the form of a work. I explored ideas of emptiness, an introverted sense of time, movement and space, the 'mobile fixity,' which I describe above expressed in the 'still point' where past and future meet. In *Mestiere*, for piano (1979), sounds are frozen in registral space and are displaced only when they naturally must move. In *Trasumanar*, for twelve percussionists and piano (1980), the sounds themselves, the interaction of the percussion and piano, and the dramatic tensions created by a music, which is at once static and highly dynamic, provide the structural framework. And in two of my recent works, *Traverso*, for flute and piano, from 1987, and *No Feeling is the Same as Before*, for soprano saxophone (1988), I tried to blend a 'Japanese landscape,' in the sense of stillness, with an 'open landscape,' in the sense of American harmonies of the 1930s and '40s. So, I expected this blending process to be present in the work of Japanese contemporary composers. I was mistaken. True, in some of their new music, ancient Japanese ideas and instruments are incorporated in modern textures, but the majority of composers seem more interested in things American, German or French than with mixing the new and the old present in their own culture.

What I was able to confirm, and I realize that this is a rather broad statement, was my belief that the traditional music of the Far East forms, in a sense, the basis for Western 20th Century music. In other words, what has been discovered and used in Western art music in this century was already developed to some extent in India, China, Korea and then in Japan hundred of years ago. The Austrian twelve-tone composer, Anton Webern, who lived during the first half of this century, used small melodic ideas reminiscent of Chinese and then Japanese scales. After World War II it was Webern's music with that of the French Impressionist Claude Debussy that most influenced the younger generation of Japanese composers. The cycle of influence continues.

Japanese traditional music is based on four tetrachords, or three-note groupings, which are often expanded to form or seven-note scales:

<u>minyō</u>	
<u>miyakobushi</u>	
<u>ritsu</u>	
<u>ryūku</u>	

If there are two scales that sound uniquely Japanese, they are the combinations of two *miyakobushi* or two *ritsu* tetrachords played in downward patterns (in this case they are called in *-sen*, or 'soft,' and *yo-sen*, or 'hard' scales).



I am sure that if you have ever heard Japanese music, these are familiar sounds to you.

And they were to me, and I expected them to be the basis of my studies with Takemitsu at Yale. I was wrong. Instead of talking about music, he talked about nature. He taught as if it were a Zen lesson. I would show him a work, and he would talk about a Japanese garden. He did not teach technique, but rather he talked about the relationship between humans and nature.

In Tokyo I discovered that timbre, or color, important both in contemporary Western and Eastern music, had been an essential part of Japanese tradition – from the breathy quality of the *shakuhachi* imitating sounds of nature to the *sawari*, or 'noise' (an almost electronic sound), produced by the *shamisen*, a three-string, plucked instrument made of dog or cat skin.

Important also are rhythmic structures that are at once flexible and asymmetrical, including the technique of *ashirai*, a type of phase shifting that certainly predates Western minimalists, like Philip Glass, by a few hundred years.

Fundamental to the Japanese way of life is the aesthetic theory of *jo-ha-kyu*, where *jo* means the introduction, *ha* the breaking apart or exposition, and *ku* the rushing to the finish or the denouement. Musical compositions, paintings, a performance of *kabuki*, the tea ceremony, the seasons themselves all reflect this three-part form.

But to me the most striking feature of their music is the concept of 'silence.' An absence of sound. I finally understood this by simply watching the way people converse in the West and in the East. In the West, we are afraid of letting a moment go by without filling it in with continuous sound. In the East, a momentary pause is an essential, respected part of a conversation.

Attractive as I found these concepts, when I began to pursue a more serious study of Japanese music, I ran into two solid obstacles. First, the traditional arts are 'frozen' in *kata* and in the *iemoto* system. *Kata* are patterns that are used in every discipline to teach how that art is created and how it will be recreated forever and ever. The *iemoto* system has at its top a *Sensei*, or master teacher, who presents these patterns to students. His instruction is for the most part secret as well as sacred. Students learn by rote, or *shoga*, not so much by theory. Often it seems that only form is taught with little or no concern for content or for the Zen nature of an art that was, in many cases, its original inspiration.

The second obstacle for the Western musician hoping to understand Japanese music concerns the very special instruments that are required to perform that music. Few Western musicians have the time or the patience to master those instruments, and, unhappily, the instruments themselves do not like to travel. They are strongly affected by changes of climate and atmosphere, and because of that very fragility we in the West have few opportunities to witness genuine traditional performances of this music.

Since both highly trained musicians in the traditional style and the instruments themselves (which are formidable to learn anyway) are difficult to find in the Western world, it may not be startling to discover that most of the younger composers that I met were creating music that sounded totally and perfectly like German music in the 1960s, John Cage or Debussy. Most often those composers who create for traditional ensembles necessarily write in very conservative form. There are rare exceptions, like Takemitsu, and you may certainly accuse me of partiality.

While the Japanese composers struggle with the choices that every composer has to face: tradition, minimalism, outside influences, to name a few, they have one stunning advantage over the composers of the West. They have the opportunity to write for film, T. V., commercials and theater while still being considered serious composers. In the States composers are more likely to be forced into slots, marked: 'popular,' 'romantic,' 'serious.' For those of us pushed into the 'serious' slot, it is difficult to find alternative outlets as can our Japanese counterparts, and we must face the fact that serious concert music no longer appears to be of primary importance in the performance world.

On a personal note, let me tell you about my study of the *shakuhachi*, which I chose because I felt it, represented the expressive, lyrical and breathy quality of Japanese music that I most admired. I was lucky enough to have lessons with Christopher Yohmei Blasdel, an American trombonist who twenty years ago fell in love with the bamboo flute, gave up John Philip Sousa, became a master of the *shakuhachi*, thus earning the title of *Yohmei*, and so impressing the Japanese that they insist that they cannot distinguish his playing from that of native-born musicians. As to my playing? I hoped it would improve my breathing and put me in contact with nature. In fact, it put me in contact with utter frustration and a feeling of inadequacy. But it was a very Zen experience for me. The sound is there and it is not there. That is all I can tell you about the *shakuhachi*.

Undiscouraged, I persisted in my studies. I looked at the *sho*, an ethereal-sounding mouth organ made of seventeen thin bamboo pipes, the *koto*, a 13- or 17- or 20-string zither which is probably Japan's most famous and functional instrument, and various, exotic string, wind and percussion instruments which I found in Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, museums, performing societies and musicians' homes.

I studied theory, form and aesthetics through books, journals, scores, recordings, videos and conversations with musicians.

I went to countless performances of *no*, *kyogen*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*, *honkyoku*, *sankyoku*, *reiraku*, *gagaku*, *bugaku*, *butoh*, *eurythmie*, Shinto and Buddhist ceremonies, *matsuri*, concerts of contemporary music, recording sessions, rehearsals, workshops and viewings of commercial and documentary films.

I traveled to as many cities as possible. I read history books, plays, short stories, novels – including the entire *Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*). I tried to grasp the poetic forms of *waka*, *renga*, *tanka* and *haiku*. I did a marathon visit of museums and rock gardens, thrust myself upon Japanese families and even took lessons in *sado* (the tea ceremony) and avant-garde *ikebana* (flower arrangement).

So my recent trip has made me very conscious of Japan. But in that I am not singular. Everyone is very aware of the Japanese presence, economically and culturally, and has an opinion on the subject. Inevitably, East is meeting West.

For instance, I was taking a walk near my apartment in Chelsea when I saw a group of Zen Buddhist monks from Japan, in black robes with shaved heads, leave a Blue Sky Tours bus and enter one of the most chic, upwardly mobile restaurants in New York called America. My great regret is that I did not enter the restaurant and witness that confrontation.

With another view, a July 22nd article in *The New York Times* carried a caption: "Japanese in the New York Region Begin to Feel the Sting of Prejudice." In the article it is reported that a Japanese woman is told: "Go back where you came from." Daniel Bob, the assistant director of the Japan Society, is quoted as saying: "It's similar to the American invasion of Europe in the 1960s. Initially, there was a great uproar over American investments and fear of an American takeover. It's a natural reaction to something that happens so quickly."

And for a more personal view, my advisor from The Japan Foundation, Emi Iwanaga, visited the United States to attend a theater seminar and told me later that she felt most of the Americans she met viewed Japan as a small, distant place. She was saddened by this lack of understanding. She was considering cutting back the support of exchange groups intended to bridge cultural gaps. The idea upset me, and I said: "It may be true that many foreigners are fearful of Japan's economic success and its power. If my months in Japan have taught me anything, it is that the concerns of commerce and politics must take second place to the concerns of the soul. Cultural exchange of artists and humanists is what will make the inner structure solid."

We can begin by debunking some of the myths that mask the reality of Japan. Myth: that the Japanese are mere mimics. When the truth is that everything they borrow becomes unmistakably Japanese because of the extraordinary geographical isolation of the country. Or the myth that Japan has become westernized. It has simply become modernized, taking the current aspects of Western culture and fusing them with the finest of its own traditions.

It is dangerous to perpetuate myths about Japan. Their myths about us are equally dangerous. We grab at stereotypes because we are ignorant of the culture we are confronting. It is difficult to understand places other than home. This is why we need education to confront other points of view and try to understand other cultures. That, for me, is a liberal education.

If I may end on a personal note, I would like to share with you an entry from my journal:

Friday, April 27, 1990 – Of a sudden, I realize that my calling here was not so much to experience, understand all about Japanese culture, but to see it in contrast to myself - putting myself in relief. My 'transparencies' are not those of the Japanese – they are simply a lighter hue of American culture. My 'mystical' is not connected to Zen or Buddhism, Eastern values or preoccupations. Our natures are different – but we *share* things. How to connect . . . I want to experiment in my teaching. Do I start in the present or the past? Does the perspective make a difference?

Domo arigato gozaimasu! (Thank you very much!)