

Notes on Takemitsu and the Notion of *Ma*

The early influences on the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu were the French composer Olivier Messiaen, to whom he owes much of his harmonic language and compositional technique, and the avant-garde composer John Cage. Ironically, it was Cage's Buddhist-inflected aesthetics that gave Takemitsu permission to explore traditional Japanese music and allow its sounds and rhythms to coexist in a profound tension with Western compositional techniques. One of Cage's most important treatises was entitled *Silence*, and his most famous composition consisted of 4'33" of silence from the performer (amid sounds from the environment). Cage's explorations led to Takemitsu's rediscovery of singularly Japanese notions of silence.

In Takemitsu's music, silence can be of a greater importance than sound. This elevation of silence as a formal principle is grounded in Japanese aesthetics, particular the concept of *ma*, the Japanese word for space or gap or interval. As Takemitsu argues, "... this *ma*, this powerful silence, is what gives life to the sound and removes it from its position of primacy. So it is that sound, confronting the silence of *ma*, yields in supremacy in the final expression." (51, Takemitsu).

The concept of *ma* is central to traditional Japanese aesthetics. Chinese and Japanese landscape painting embody emptiness--its presence is palpable, as figures of mountains and trees emerge from empty space as if from mist or clouds. This aesthetic practice in turn arises from Buddhist metaphysics. In Buddhist traditions, emptiness is form, and form is emptiness. Buddhism also emphasizes a "cleansing" of the grasping mind that withdraws from the things of the world. This paradox is exhibited in countless Asian art works in which empty space allows objects to emerge in meaningful relationships. Finally, a thing's essence paradoxically cannot be extricated from the ground of emptiness. It cannot be severed from its enveloping silence.

In his aesthetics, Takemitsu embodies fundamental ideas derived from the Buddhist tradition. First, the autonomous self is an illusion; in reality, there are a series of intertwined relationships, originating in silence, that transcend self: "In the flow of Japanese music, for example, short fragmented connections of sounds are complete in themselves. Those different sound events are related by silences that aim at creating a harmony of events. Those pauses are left to the performer's discretion. In this way there is a dynamic change in the sounds as they are constantly reborn in new relationships" (84, Takemitsu). In fact, Takemitsu took great care in situating sound spatially in a processual way as a walk in a garden or as layers of sound that remind one of delicate ink washes that provide the illusion of depth. Sound participates in the natural world, which is a harmonious balance between forces, between *yin* and *yang* in the Taoist tradition.

Finally, Takemitsu believes that the self, attempting to establish permanence instead of submitting to the flux of existence, is a source of error and suffering. The Western Romantic notion of the creative self is a source of error. The composer's task—as well as the performer's

duty—is fundamentally to listen to nature in a renunciation of the self and an embrace of silence. In a final paradox, Takemitsu affirms that organizing “fragments” of sound are a means of capturing wholeness, of the eternity of silence.

On a theoretical level, Takemitsu echoes Cage's aesthetics. Yet the structure of Takemitsu's music embodies these ideas in divergent ways. First, long silences surround individual clusters or “musical cell” of sound. The beauty of Japanese music is not created by the associations of pitches in a line, but the quality of the sound's interaction with *ma*. By looking at a Takemitsu score, this becomes obvious. Each cluster seems to express its own nature without relating structurally to other elements. They are self-contained passages that, paradoxically, establish the harmony of the whole. Secondly, he emphasizes the individual timbre of sounds, as sound is valued for its particularity and uniqueness rather than an abstract idea of “purity.” This is related to his emphasis on the growth and decay of sound through choice of instrument, slow tempos and periods of silence. Finally, the composer creates complex rhythmic structures that create a pattern of individual cells, each with its own inherent rhythm.

The music of Takemitsu derives its power from paradox. His originality paradoxically arises from his distrust of the self; the harmony of his compositions depend upon “fragmentary” clusters of sound; and his avant-garde musical ideas were grounded in traditional Japanese instrumentation. While both Cage and Takemitsu were influenced by Buddhism, their embodiment of ideas differed radically. Cage's work explored chance operations and often echoed Satie or broken music boxes, while Takemitsu's compositions have a gravity and richness of sound far beyond Cage's Dadaist experiments.