

Bangor University

On The Interpretation of "Vertical Song I"

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## **Research Prompt**

Toshio Hosokawa's compositional language is filled with sonic and notational idiosyncrasies that are unnatural for performers not already invested in contemporary music. By contextualizing "Vertical Song I" within the realm of Japanese aesthetics and Honkyoku, I believe that it will illuminate many of these aesthetic values inherent in his compositional language and allow for an easier entry into his flute literature.

## **Honkyoku**

Hosokawa's "Vertical Song I" was premiered in July 14th 1995 by the Italian flutist Roberto Fabbricani. It comes from a lineage of contemporary solo flute pieces which incorporate the sonic and aesthetic language of Honkyoku into a western musical idiom. Honkyoku is the body of pieces written the wandering Kumoso ("priests of nothingness") monks of the Fuke sect at the end of the 13th century. These pieces were created as a method of practicing Suizen, or "blowing zen." Like other forms of active Zen, it was meant to heighten the performer's awareness. Playing the shakuhachi demands intense focus on the breath, posture, and one's relationship to their sonic environment. Practicing Suizen allowed the performer to empty himself of his ego's desires and ground himself in the immediate natural world. All of the aspects of performing Shakuhachi have a spiritual dimension to them which cannot be extricated from Zen teachings.

## **Japanese aesthetics**

The Buddhist aphorism "emptiness is form and form is emptiness" is central to Japanese aesthetics. This paradoxical sentiment is in stark contrast to our western paradigm's

conception of absence. In western art prior to the 20th century, silence, negative space, rust, patina, and decay were considered inhibitory as they moved the art object further away from its platonic form. These elements were sometimes employed as novel rhetorical devices; however they were never given precedence. In Japanese aesthetics, wholeness as a singular entity is an illusory concept. Buddhism denies the principle of a singular self and opts for a series of complex relationships which are borne from emptiness. Takemitsu, a 20th century Japanese composer who preceded Hosokawa, writes "... 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." (Takemitsu, Toru, *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings* (New York, NY: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995) pg. 51) Thus, a linear progression of tones is not the primary interest in Japanese music. Sounds with a dynamic timbral uniqueness are preferred because of their ability to usurp silence's potency. Here the importance of these elusive thresholds between silence and sound, sound and silence comes to the forefront. Absence is not a lack of a quality; instead it is a generative space which gives birth to every aesthetic relationship in Japanese art.

### **Japanese Composers and Tradition**

The relationship between 20th century Japanese composers and traditional Japanese art forms is a complex issue. Many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese composers attempted to escape their heritage's sphere of influence. In his youth, Takemitsu was very sceptical of Japanese aesthetics, opting to write in a similar style to Olivier Messiaen. Influenced by John Cage's work with Zen, Takemitsu's flute work "Voice" (1971) experiments with Japanese concepts

of silence and negative space by using proportional notation to denote the temporal relationship between sounds. The notation gives a large amount of agency to the performer to determine the correct sonic placement of every gesture. To demonstrate this Takemitsu writes: "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). However, the resultant piece is not distinctly part of the Japanese tradition nor the European Avant-garde. It is a piece filled with tensions and contradictions left up to the performer to detangle or showcase.

However, Hosokawa does not seem to share these reservations with Japanese artistic traditions. In an interview Hosokawa writes "Maybe you know that in our (Japanese) culture we always seek the nature in all its forms and the relationship it has with human beings – the harmony they create together. This is the base of the whole Japanese culture. My music, consequently, comes from this tradition, which is very close to the nature." 'Vertical Song I' is not a piece rife with complex socio-political tensions and contradictions. Instead it is profoundly influenced by the concepts of Suizen. Hosokawa corroborates this by writing: "In my music breathing is very important – exhaling-inhaling. This is of the most significance in Zen meditation. You have to exhale very slowly and then inhale. So you go from nothing, from the zero point." This clear influence allows the historically informed performer to have an interpretative apparatus which allows for an ease of entry into Hosokawa's music.

## Materials for the Lecture

To demonstrate the similarities between Hosokawa's piece and Honkyoku I will provide excerpts from the score, perform segments of the piece and play clips of performances by professional Shakuhachi players. I will use two videos of Alcvin Ryūzen Ramos and Tadashi Tajima playing Honkyoku pieces. The first piece will demonstrate the basic timbral language of the shakuhachi including the spectrum between pure air tone and full tone, pitch bends and forced air accents. The listeners should hear how each phrase is structured around a single breath. The piece is fragmentary, yet retains some sense of organicism through the performer's musical sensitivity towards the silence between gestures. The second piece showcases the Shakuhachi's timbral extremes. In Japanese music, formal structure and harmony are less dynamic than a sound's complex interaction with silence. Thus, this piece is an excellent example of confronting Takemitsu's conception of Ma. Furthermore, Tajima uses throat flutter tongue to create a sonority similar to measure 17 in the Hosokawa.

While there are some components of Hosokawa's writing which are canonized (i.e., traditional meters and pitches), there are multiple problematizing elements for the performer to work through. Particularly the idiosyncratic extended techniques and silences. During my lecture I will present multiple score excerpts which present issues for the western interpreter. I will then attempt to use my previous discourse on Japanese aesthetics as an interpretive apparatus in order to maximize the musical impact of details in the score. For example, the first measure is simply a fermata with a slur connecting the Eb of the second measure to the rest. Within an older western musical paradigm having a note tied to a silence would be dumbfounding because it implies that the silence has substance. However, this detail gives credence to the fact that the first sound of the piece is literally borne of the

preceding silence. The various *senza tempo* measures give the performer agency to decide how long a sustained tone should be. This can be easily understood through the principles of *Suizen*. The performer is supposed, through a heightened awareness of the sonic environment while performing, to determine the organic length and speed of the decay of the tone.

## **Conclusion**

Hosokawa's 'Vertical Song I' is entrenched in the traditions of *Honkyoku* and Japanese Aesthetics. Understanding this tradition's metaphysical notion of silence is paramount in order to give musical deference to the complex aesthetic structures inherent in the piece. Furthermore, exploring the sonic worlds of the *Shakuhachi* will assist a new performer in shaping their own conception of what sound a specific compositional notation should represent. While the sounds played in *Honkyoku* are not literally reproducible on a modern flute it will give the performer some insight into the timbral richness necessary to make the piece succeed musically.

## Bibliography

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