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The Hopkins Review, Volume 9, Number 3, Summer 2016 (New Series) , pp. 405-414 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/thr.2016.0069](https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2016.0069)



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## Johanna Keller

### MUSIC FROM JAPAN FESTIVAL 2016: THE KOAN OF NEO-JAPONISM

Japan has suffered intermittent paroxysms of cultural self-examination ever since Commodore Perry sailed into the bay of Edo (now Tokyo) in 1853, attempting to establish trade relations and eventually bringing about the opening to the West known as the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Through foreign contact, the historically isolated island nation was flooded with new technology and industrialization that both threatened traditions as well as promised progress. Japanese culture mirrored this discord, becoming a space of adoption or resistance. When faced, for example, with the powerful orchestral music from Europe, Japanese composers veered from feelings of inferiority and wholesale appropriation of European traditions, to a rejection of Western music with attempts to define, and at times impose, Japanese identity.

Among the many glories of Japanese culture is its language, replete with untranslatable words whose subtle concepts have no exact correspondence in English. One such term is *kokutai*, which means something like national essence or identity, but implies far more. Dating back to the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), the word has had political, aesthetic and nationalistic implications. *Kokutai* became a governing philosophy during the rise of militaristic forces of the 1930s, coinciding with imperialism and widespread censorship on the home front. It culminated in the 1937 publication of the *Kokutai no Hongi*, a notorious pamphlet distributed in millions of copies that outlined the principles of Japanese identity; the publication was banned after World War II.

Japan's defeat is an unhealed wound made all the more complicated by the horrors of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States. There is relatively little discourse in Japan about its wartime period, and consequently there remains a persistent anxiety about cultural definition. The word *kokutai* is out of fashion, rarely used, almost verboten. Damned if you do, damned if you don't—how can you make Japanese art if the very concept is loaded with such unspoken history? Yet the idea of defining Japanese culture persists: What is Japanese?

This question became the dominant theme, asked repeatedly during Music From Japan's Festival 2016 in Manhattan's Scandinavia House in February. Marking its 40<sup>th</sup> season, Music From Japan is a cultural organization headed by the indomitable artistic director Naoyuki Miura and executive director Mari Ono. The couple has not only promoted, presented, and exported Japanese music, but also commissioned 79 works over the years by Japanese and American composers. The latest production was an enlightening weekend series of lectures, panel discussions, and concerts that introduced works by nine contemporary Japanese composers. Of the twelve works heard, all but one received American premieres, and one was a world premiere. This was indeed new music to the ears.

The composers Misato Mochizuki, Hiroyuki Yamamoto, and Haruyuki Suzuki were on hand to engage in discussions with American composers Carl Stone and Richard Teitelbaum, as well as with critics from the Music Critics Association of North America, including Nancy Malitz who helped organize the panels. The festival's intellectual linchpin was musicologist Yuji Numano, who curated one of the concerts and delivered "Toward the Neo-Japonism," a provocative lecture that—while it never mentioned the war years explicitly—attempted to define a new path forward. Several times Dr. Numano asked the question: What is Japanese?

Asked to name a Japanese composer, most American listeners summon up Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996), the only one whose music can be said to be known in America. Sometimes misidentified as the compos-

er for Akira Kurosawa's 30 films, Takemitsu in fact scored only two for Kurosawa (*Dodes'ka-den* and *Ran*). More sophisticated listeners might recall that Takemitsu wrote *November Steps*, the 1967 composition commissioned by the New York Philharmonic that is widely believed to have been the breakthrough music that first combined Western and Japanese instruments. This too is a common misapprehension; in fact, Makoto Moroi's 1964 *Shakuhachi Chikurai* had already done that, as Dr. Numano pointed out in his lecture. Actually, taking film music into account, Fumio Hayasaka had been writing orchestral scores that incorporated traditional instruments such as the *nohkan* flute at least a decade earlier, heard most notably in Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 movie *Ugetsu Monogatari*.

While this sounds like musicological quibbling, the choice of Western or Japanese instruments—or mixing them together—was just one of the hurdles for Japanese composers who have had to negotiate a political morass. Do you compose for the *koto* or for a Stradivarius violin? Can you write for both together? Do you use the traditional pentatonic (five tone) scale or the well-tempered scale of Bach? Or, more recently, employ Schoenberg's twelve tones, or total serialism? Whatever path a composer from Japan may choose, it is freighted with debates about history, authenticity, modernism, and national identity.

So before the festival began, I strolled over to Fifth Avenue to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to think about Japan's historical and contemporary aesthetics, in the visual arts at least. There, the exhibition "Discovering Japanese Art: American Collectors and the Met," on display through September, is highlighting that segment of the Met's permanent collection. Among the galleries of Japanese ceramics, sculpture, painting, calligraphy, screens, and couture frocks by designer Hanae Mori (as well as frequent reminders about the Western collectors who donated these works) is an unassuming passageway and *Water Stone* by the great artist, Isamu Noguchi.

*Water Stone* is a thigh-high block of basalt carved into irregular facets, some smooth, others rugged. Through a hollow core in the stone,

water rises and spreads over the flat polished top to fall evenly over the edges, like an infinity pool. It slides down in subtle scallops on the smooth sides, or ripples over the rough facets, trickling into the stones on which the block stands. This 1986 sculpture, one of Noguchi's last works (he died in 1988), was commissioned for the Met's Japan Galleries.

To experience *Water Stone*, it is necessary to spend time with it, perhaps sitting on one of the two nearby benches, contemplating the way the boulder has been cleaved, marveling at the perfect balance that allows the water to flow over all sides, noting the contrast of the gray and black basalt with the bed of white stones taken from the Isuzu River, near the most ancient Shinto shrine. This is a work of directness and subtlety, accident and intention, that references the craft of stone-cutting, the Shinto worship of nature, and the water feature ubiquitous in Japanese gardens.

It feels *echt*-Japanese, but is it really? Noguchi was born in Los Angeles of a white American mother and a Japanese father, a renowned poet who abandoned the family. When Noguchi traveled to Japan in the 1930s to find his father, he was confronted with a society growing more toxic with imperialistic ambitions, which his father shared. Partly in response to this, Noguchi sought out the traditional arts of Japan for the rest of his life, while becoming a global citizen. He learned to cut stone from Brancusi in Paris, and divided his time between New York and Japan. His sculptures, furniture, and stage sets for choreographer Martha Graham are exemplars of international modernism. Noguchi's work most often combines his awareness of the traditions of the arts and crafts of Japan and other cultures, with a thorough grounding in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whether we dub Noguchi Japanese-American or Japanese, if an artist has absorbed a culture and created something great from it, does the label matter?

What matters is the art itself. What does it give us? Turning the attention back to *Water Stone*, as the minutes pass the mind focuses on the ineffable sound of trickling water, to its colors and shifting tonal

patterns. At first, the sound defines its surrounding silence, and then it is layered by the swish of an opening elevator door, the laughter of children, a passing conversation, the whisper of a shoe sole on carpet. It becomes impossible not to mark how most visitors take in the sculpture at a glance and pass on, oblivious to the sound it makes and what it might offer, deaf to *Water Stone's* invitation to stop. And notice.

The same might be said of the music in the festival's first concert, "The Works of Misato Mochizuki," in its subtlety and the attention it requires from a listener. In its highly-refined craftsmanship, and shifting combination of tradition with experimentation, this is music that asks us to notice. And it repays our attention.

Like Noguchi, Mochizuki is an internationalist; she divides her time between Japan and Europe. Born in Tokyo, she studied at the Paris Conservatory as well as at IRCAM, the institute of electronic-music founded in 1977 by the late Pierre Boulez. Among her extra-musical interests are the writings of Roland Barthes, cosmology, biology, and genetics, and she writes about music in Japan's most widely circulated newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The first recipient of Music From Japan's new artist residency program, Mochizuki and her work are just becoming known in the United States.

While all composers loathe being labelled, Mochizuki's music broadly fits (by sound and by provenance) into the category of spectralism. This compositional technique was developed in the 1970s by French composers Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, who was Mochizuki's teacher. *Timbre* has always been a French fixation and, as the word implies, spectral music uses a sound's color as a point of departure. It often entails a computer analysis of the overtones of a sound, which show up as a pattern, a spectrum as it were, that maps pitch and timbre. While this description sounds rather dry, in practice most spectral music has an intrinsic sense of balance and consonance because it takes into account the harmonic series of overtones, the mathematical system that dates back to Pythagoras.

Spectralism has been an influential musical development in the past few decades. When Debussy wrote *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and employed those luscious instrumental tone colors as the thematic material that actually organized the music, it caused a revolution. We might call him the godfather of spectralism. Though their music does not sound like Debussy's, Varèse, Messiaen, and Stockhausen (sometimes) followed in his footsteps in terms of technique. Notable descendants today include Magnus Lindberg, Pascal Dusapin, and Kaija Saariaho.

The four Mochizuki works on the program included *Le Pas d'après* (Next step), a trio for guitar, flute, and violin commissioned by Music From Japan for its 2003 festival. Inspired by Paul Auster ("As I move forward, step by step, not only my body but my thinking advances as well"), the music's delicately falling scales were balanced by a driving dance-like rhythm, occasionally syncopated and often winsomely asymmetrical. The sonic inventiveness included flat-handed thwacks on the guitar's body, breathy trills on the flute (evoking the Japanese bamboo flute, the *shakuhachi*), and the subtle plucking of the violin's fingerboard, all expertly played by Oren Fader, Elizabeth Brown, and Eriko Sato, respectively.

Three Intermezzi were structured—or perhaps deranged—by Barthes's theory of "fragmented discourse." Intermezzi I (1998) for flute and piano comprised seven fragments with words taken from Barthes's texts breathed into the flute, or whispered by the pianist as she played on the keyboard, and leaned inside the lid to manipulate the strings with a mallet or the tube from a bicycle. With its emphasis on the half-heard or the barely overheard, the work brought to mind Luigi Nono's atmospheric murmurings. In Intermezzi II (2002), *koto*-player Masayo Ishigure, in a turquoise kimono, expertly exploited the timbres of the 13-string *koto*. The work began with the strings damped by a folded cloth as if the instrument were emerging from the past. Taking the form of a series of *haiku* (a poetic form called a *renga*), the music refreshed the catalogue of traditional *koto* techniques such

as bending pitches by depressing the strings or moving the bridges, strumming swirling glissandos, and scraping a whirring sound by running the plectrum along the string. An ordinary hair comb drawn across the strings brought the piece to a witty end.

The highlight was *Intermezzi V* (2012), the most recent and substantive work on the program and one that points to the possibility of Mochizuki's eventual development as an important composer in our time. A meditation on the "principle of the genesis of living things," it was given a virtuoso performance by violist Jocelin Pan and William Schimmel on the accordion, an instrument the composer connects to the ancient Asian mouth organ called the *sho*. As in the other compositions, this music ignores thematic development in the usual sense, but unfolds in time as the mind connects sequences of tone and timbre. While it is by no means a quiet work, silence is its essential element. Silence slides aside at the opening melody in the viola, silence alternates with dry taps on the viola's belly, silence is obliterated by the piled-on phrases that blur the difference between the two instruments, and it is pierced by chillingly high sustained notes on the accordion. Finally, it is silence that lingers after the recurring, ever-weakening exhalations of the accordion—astoundingly controlled by Schimmel—evoke last, dying breaths and bring the work to a shattering conclusion.

One of Japan's leading musicologists, Dr. Yuji Numano teaches at Toho Gakuen School of Music and has written about such issues as Japanese composers' penchant for titles evoking nature, as well as about Varèse, Berio, and Boulez. He was on hand in his role as curator of the second concert that, he said, would illustrate his concept of Neo-Japonism. He was quick to add that although he had not selected Mochizuki for the festival, he considered her music part of this movement.

In his keynote lecture, Numano outlined a brief history of Japan's isolation, restoration, and its after-effects in the musical realm. He recounted the founding of the Institute of Music by Shuji Isawa in 1879, and touched on major composers such as Hayasaka. The challenge



today, Numano said, includes overcoming Japan's "inferiority complex toward Europe," not falling into the trap of orientalism (citing Edward Said), or reducing the culture to its obvious signifiers or to kitsch (in one charmingly light moment, he admitted that, while he had never visited a geisha, he *had* seen Mount Fuji).

The music by Numano's eight hand-picked composers demonstrated most clearly—some more successfully than others—what he has in mind. His ideal of Neo-Japonism turns out to be music that draws on Japan's traditions confidently while freely incorporating musical concepts from the rest of the world. Put another way, Numano seems to be advocating an arena in which artists do not have to be either narrowly nationalistic or blandly transnational. Here in the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he perceives a rapprochement between the local and the global. It's an inspiringly positive message.

In the second, wildly varied concert, every work demonstrated a particularized approach that was explained in program notes by each composer. For Satoshi Minami, this came down to "quotation as one of the most important strategies of contemporary creation," and in his "Zigzag Bach" for solo piano every note came from the Baroque master. His intention, he wrote, was to arrange the material in the manner of *ikebana*. Here and there a recognizable theme emerged as a kind of bloom in this short, engaging work.

Quotation also structured Akiko Yamane's "Ambiguous garnet colored fragments," an homage built by deconstructing and reconstructing a piece by her husband, composer Motoharu Kawashima. Scored for flute, violin and piano, the three sections included delicate, almost quizzical articulations, glissandi and *tutti pizzicati*, giving them the faceted, crystalized quality implied by the title.

Sunao Isaji's "Falling Dance" for flute/piccolo, violin and piano took a narrative approach, retelling a traditional folk tale with chanting and thumping on the instruments, as well as the bending of pitches and breathy exhalations from Japanese flute-playing. "Shiba!" (Firewood!) the instrumentalists called out, and then the word was cut,

extended, its meaning altered through syllabic displacement—at least that was the stated intention, though it was impossible to appreciate the subtleties without surtitles.

A technique that could be called rhetorical mimesis resulted in “An Interview with L.B. Interpreted” by Yoshifumi Tanaka. From his series, “Speech Transplant Project,” this is a transcription (in pitch and rhythm) for piano and viola of a recorded conversation between Luciano Berio and a Japanese interviewer on the subject of the musicality of Umberto Eco—an intriguing concept. Unfortunately, while the patterns of conversation could be heard—asides, assertions, disputations—the composition became tiresome after a few minutes, having compromised the best qualities of sound and sense.

Works by Dai Fujikura and Hiroyuki Yamamoto were concerned with instrumentation, but from opposite points of view. Fujikura’s “Cutting Sky” is one of his series combining Japanese and Western instruments. Here, the *koto* was paired with the viola, which was plucked with the plectrum, extending the Japanese instrument to create what the composer called an imaginary “super-*koto*.” Traditional *koto* techniques exploited the limits and possibilities of both instruments. On the other hand, Yamamoto’s “New York Dance (2016)” was, according to the composer’s notes, written without concern for instrumentation at all. The result was a composition for violin, piano, piccolo, bass clarinet, and flugelhorn that kept them all, for the most part, playing in their mid-ranges, often in unison or in syncopated sections. After a while, despite the compelling rhythms, the piece grew predictable.

Surprise was the governing principle in Haruyuki Suzuki’s “Myoclony,” the title a medical term for spasmodic or uncontrolled jerking of the body. This delight for violin, cello, piano, trumpet, and oboe consisted of fragments so brief they never quite became melodies as they were tossed instrument to instrument. The musical lines seemed to chase one another, just as the ear chased a logical sequence, with the players called on to comment or make gestures that inter-

rupted the attention. Just as the composer intended, the piece was “not to intoxicate the audience, but to awaken them,” and it brought about the kind of laughter you get from hiccups—and from the unexpected.

The most impressive music came from Masahiro Miwa, who has studied and taught in Germany as well as Japan, and who is engaged in avant-garde projects that explore technology and art. His 2015 solo piano piece “Rainbow Machine Koan-001” is a virtuoso show-stopper that deserves wide attention and could become a standard for any pianist with musical curiosity and the chops to assay it. Clocking in at about thirteen minutes, this knuckle-breaking minimalistic cloud of repeated phrases shifts just as the mind begins to anticipate it, providing a satisfying sensation of change and progression. Occasionally the pianist (here, Stephen Gosling in a performance that seemed to push his technique to its limits) is called on to clap hands now and again, a droll reference to that most famous Zen *koan* of all: What is the sound of one hand clapping?

With outstanding performances throughout the weekend by some of New York’s best players, including violinist Eriko Sato and cellist Fred Sherry, Music From Japan Festival 2016 was a challenging and stimulating assemblage. Again and again, this festival provoked the question: What is Japanese music today? Like any good *koan*, that was both unanswerable and enlightening.