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Takemitsu – Vice of Japanese 20th Century Music

Who is Toru Takemitsu? He is a representative of Japanese twentieth century music. In 1950, 2つのレント-*Lento in Due Movimenti* was severely criticized as “the problem before music.” It was seven years later that his work 弦楽のためのレクイエム-*Requiem for String* made Stravinsky say “tough, it’s really tough. That such a small-sized man wrote this.” Championed by famed composer, Stravinsky, Toru Takemitsu became the first contemporary Japanese composer to be known in the West at 27 years old. After writing a great piece and being recognized by Stravinsky, Takemitsu continued composing music in many different styles with a great deal of variety. He created numerous master pieces in almost every field of music within his own world, *Takemitsu tone*. From his first work, he kept accomplishing remarkable feats until he passed away in 1996, by then a voice of Japanese musicians.

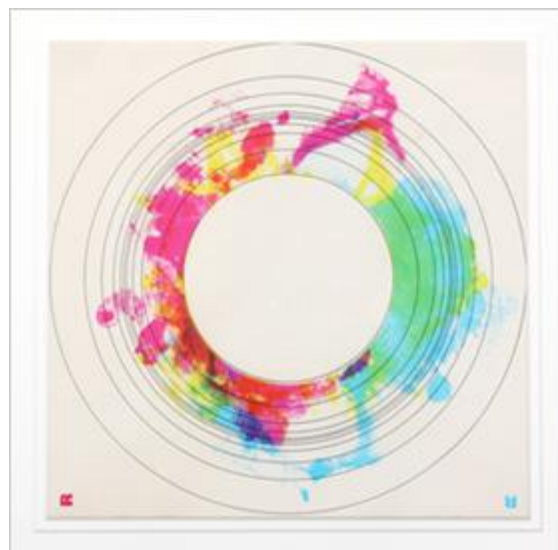
In the beginning of his music career, there was *Parlez-Moi D’amour*, the chanson sung by Lucienne Boyer. Takemitsu was really impressed by the new song which he had never heard until after the war. After hearing this song, he decided to be a composer himself. He spent most of his time studying by himself. One method of practicing was whenever he was walking around and heard someone playing piano he would ask them if he could play as well. Another way he would practice was playing on a cardboard box which he drew keys on. His reasons for doing these things were his financial problem; he was too poor to afford a piano. Another contemporary composer was Toshiro Mayuzumi, who came to know about Takemitsu’s struggle and lent him his piano to use, even though they did not know each other too well. Takemitsu spoke of that day, that time and said “one day in the morning, the one spinet piano had been carried to our house. When I knew it had been sent from Mr. Mayuzumi, I thought I had stepped into true colors of music work. I thought I must not compose loose work.”

He loved all kinds of music, and his earlier work seemed to be influenced by composers such as Debussy, Cage, and Messiaen.

Takemitsu said that he believed his teacher was Debussy. He was so influenced by Debussy, that he composed several pieces quoting Debussy’s music. そして、それが風であることを知った-*And then I knew ’twas Wind* was written in 1992 based on the same organization as Debussy’s *Sonate pour flute, alto et harpe*. Although Takemitsu’s title

had a curious appearance, it was poetic, and it was taken from the poetry of nineteenth century American poetess Emily Dickinson. Takemitsu himself hoped that this homage for Debussy was played in the same situation as Debussy's *Sonata*. The harmony reminiscent of Debussy is beautiful, and each instrument flows exquisitely. He tried to portray his own acoustic world different from Debussy's style, while still being influenced by him. The harp's introduction and sometimes the instruments' sounds seem not to be played in the way they are supposed to be. These make the music have an interesting variety. There is no melody to sing to, but it is the beauty and mixture of the phrases' pieces and timbres, which exactly describe Takemitsu's style. The themes are the breath and winds that humans feel insensibly. I am drawn into his world because of tension and comfortable dissonances.

Another composer who Takemitsu had been influenced by was Cage. Takemitsu came to use graphic notation in his work like Cage did. Graphic notation is a form of music notation which uses non-traditional symbols and text. Cage used that method for aleatoric music which left some element of composition to chance. Takemitsu implemented this notation into his own work. His 弦楽器のためのコロナ II-*Corona II for strings* is famous for using graphic notation. He



Score for Corona II

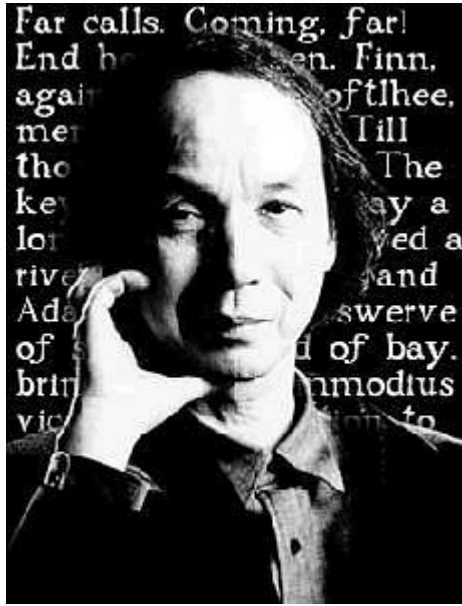
wanted the performers to feel the color of the score and express it. My honest impression is that it really looks like a sun's corona, and the score is hard to read. The performance is also hard to listen to because the sounds are always different from what one would expect.

Messiaen probably had the biggest impact on Takemitsu's writing style. Takemitsu's earlier study was about Messiaen. One day, Takemitsu heard about Messiaen's death while he was composing music in 1992. He completed his latest piece and named it 雨の樹素描 II オリヴィエ・メシヤンの追憶に-*Rain Tree Sketch II -In Memory of Olivier Messiaen*. His earlier work, 雨の樹素描 I-*Rain Tree Sketch I* in 1982, had an uneven and sparse sound. I imagined that there was rain falling as I heard the song. The notes in first several measures were connected to the next notes ceaselessly in haste. Without a pause, the notes seemed to be dribbling through a leaf like rain. However, it was a clear sound, not a sorrowful sound like the piece written for Messiaen.

This music in *Rain Tree Sketch II* gave me a completely different impression, even though the first note is the same as in *Rain Tree Sketch I*. The first note, which I thought was a rain drop, changes into one of the notes in a sad melody. Followed by other sounds, the first note makes a lamentable harmony. Rainy high-pitched sounds in this piece come after several measures, not like the beginning of his first work, as if the rain drops had hesitated to drop. It was built in classical form: A-B-A. I wonder if he was coming back to A from B after A showed the cycle of lament he could not get out of.

While he was studying Messiaen, he was also dealing with electronic music, especially with tape music. Because of his exceedingly strong passion for movies, he attempted using his electronic music in film with enthusiasm. His famous experiments, 怪談-*Kwaidan*, a ominous film of four horror stories released in 1965, is known as a great movie for which a renowned composer Lannise Xenakis praised Takemitsu highly for his work. Takemitsu was in charge of all of the music including sound effects. The first story, 黒髪-*Black Hair*, is my favorite. In it, the main character finds the remains of a body at the climax of the plot, and tries to escape from the house. After screaming out, various sound effects are completely cut and the music returns dramatically. There is no sound effect or noise for the main character's actions anymore. The music played by the prepared piano and Japanese traditional instruments sometimes conform to the sound effects which are supposed to play when he rushes into the walls or the ground. I recognize Takemitsu's work not as a couple of sound effects, but as tape music that symbolizes the story. That is why I am able to enjoy listening to this movie's soundtrack. The analog tape's own hissing noise makes itself be more eerie. I feel it is greater than today's technological music. Through this work, Takemitsu came to think of music as an element not only for musical notes but also for concrete sounds. It is certainly great work for *Musique Concrète*.

After several experiments in film, he brought Japanese instruments into his music. In 1967, he composed *November Steps* for orchestras including the Biwa and Shakuhachi. What is interesting to me is that he used English for the title of this piece while also using Japanese traditional instruments. When I listened to this song for the first time, I imagined it would be a Western sound because of the title, but was shocked by the sudden solo from the Japanese instruments. However, I had just embraced the illusion of beginning of another song when the orchestra started playing, and later, the Japanese solo cut off into the song again. After listening to this song, I was full with thoughts that led me to the mercy of *November Steps*, and then tried to listen to it again in order to catch what this music meant. Takemitsu said, "blending Japanese traditional instruments with an orchestra naturally must not be the craft of composers.



Biwa and Shakuhachi should stick out as a different nature in contrast to the orchestra.” He also said “Western sound walks horizontally, but Shakuhachi sounds vertical, like trees.” Indeed, all my confusion was right with his intention. According to Takemitsu, the Biwa is greatly different from Western musical instruments. It was different in its positive use of “noise”, which the Western had casted away in a process of modernization and mechanization. He uses “noise” as musical expressions. The beautiful noise has an inconsistent explanation, but the Biwa has the ability to make beautiful noise. He

calls it *sawari*. This sound, *sawari*, describes Japanese sensibilities. As a representative of Japanese music, he said “Music isn’t in a note. It exists between a note and a note.” He placed importance on “silence” between notes. This completely represents the Japanese style of music. It is called *Wabi-Sabi*, a stoic, and sad emotion. I can find this in *November Steps* as well.

His special craft, *Takemitsu tone* must not be forgotten. Using a pedal, he piled up several harmonies and created flows of phrases. He completely refined them thorough the rest of his life. Probably in order to retrieve honor from his first recording, which was criticized mercilessly, he recomposed it greatly by using his own tone. It was written in 1989, and was named リタニ-マイケル・ヴァイナーの追憶に- *Litany-In Memory of Michael Vyner*. This music in memory of his friend, Vyner, has the first three measures in splendid *Takemitsu tone*; impressive for producing two chords first, shows another chord and then plays a melody extending that chord with a pedal. Even though this is solemn music that is fringed with pictures of death, soft and warm harmonies sound here and there. Takemitsu’s acoustics synthesize a sense of color and create a vague echo that causes an effect of ambiguous terminations. The sensation, which is flickering freely between concordance and dissonance, leads me to a pleasant tension. I need to listen carefully to the delicate connection of melodies, the sounds of chords, and the passage of time.

Takemitsu liked to listen to Duke Ellington, the Beatles, and a Japanese music band named Southern All Stars. He was even jealous of their talents, especially mentioning the Beatles; there are several of their numbers arranged by Takemitsu. *Golden Slumbers* was arranged for Aki Takahashi’s piano recital, *Hyper-Beatles*, where

she asked many musical experimenters to arrange Beatles' songs for her. Some of them wrote new music with the inspiration that they had gotten by the songs rather than arranging them, therefore it was interesting to listen to because I can see each of the composers' own color. John Cage also composed *the Beatles 1962-1970* for her. It was a collage of music, with many impressive phrases from the Beatles songs, multi-recorded with six pianos. Listening to it while imagining New York's traffic jam is fun. Takemitsu also arranged their songs for the guitar. *Here There and Everywhere*, *Hey Jude*, *Yesterday*, and *Michelle* are played by Göran Söllscher, a Swedish award-winning classical guitarist. In being played with a classic guitar instead of an electric one, the Beatles songs come to be classic songs perfectly. They bring me peace and comfort, so I find myself listening to the song over and over again, while I am doing something else. They are ambient music for me. The songs arranged by Takemitsu show how special the Beatles were to him.

Takemitsu, who had equal experience with every kind of music, composed lots of songs to sing to. It is said of his songs are said that the difficulty to sing them increases inversely with the ease of listen to them. Since he had also wanted to be a poet, he wrote many lyrics by himself. It shows that he really was a versatile composer. Particularly, *小さな空*-*Small Sky* in 1962 is loved as a chorus song. This music was written for a mixed cappella chorus in four parts, and has a beautiful pop cantus. Together with the unique lyrics, they can be sung to after listening a few times. It is nearly impossible to imagine that this song was written by a man who had written many complicated and avant-grade songs.

Thus, Takemitsu had leaped across every genre of music. He had gone from writing to guitar, to piano, to singers, and even to orchestras. He was keen on further composing operas in his last year, but he unfortunately passed away without reaching the sunshine of his fame. Even so, his great work explored avant-grade techniques such as aleatoric music, graphic notation, and electric music. He combined them with traditional Japanese motives and instruments, for which he should be praised. In being Japanese like him, I am proud of his marvelous impact and emotions that he brought to the musical world.