Simplicity as complexity - technicalities and aesthetics of Japanese musical instruments and music

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Abstract

This lecture concert will examine the history and characteristics of traditional Japanese instruments and music from various viewpoints. Pieces named Tsuru no sugomori [Nesting of crows], classical yasuhata honkyoku, are taken as examples representing some essential aspects of traditional Japanese music. Music in the context of Japanese culture will also be investigated. Highly artistic performing techniques, in particular, the tronetto-like techniques that frequently appear in these pieces will be demonstrated. With these demonstrations we try to prove that music is an art in time and space, in which the human mind and spirit unite with body and are controlled in a highly developed way.

0. Introduction

0.1. Computer and music: technology and traditional culture

In today’s post-industrialized societies, computers have already become part of our daily lives; not only a symbol for the elite but also partners of lazy men in their work and studies. Everything in our lives, from the automobile and airplanes to the microwave oven and refrigerator, are in some way connected to computers. Music is no exception. Highly developed technology and sophisticated techniques are closely associated with today’s music making. It is conspicuous that few types of genres of music can be created or can survive in this world without the recording technique of today, even though one may call it "commercialism".

Fortunately and ironically this "commercialism" or "consumptionist" sometimes helps prevent traditional music disappearing from ongoing musical scenes, some of which are indifferent toward "old-fashioned" styles. Traditional Japanese music is now in vogue in the world of contemporary music and is regarded as a fountain of the offsprings. This could be partly because traditional Japanese music has something common with the Western-originated "contemporary music" which, as Umberto Eco describes, "are linked by a common feature: the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work" (Eco 1989:1), or partly because it enjoys the influence of John Cage in this field, whose "Zen-like approach to sound" is repeatedly mentioned (Horst-Jütte 1989: 699).

Computer/electronic music featuring traditional Japanese music and/or instruments are, however, composed in many cases with the manners which treat most of the sounds merely as materials sounding strange or exotic. It should be considered that the majority of music is always derived from its surroundings and also deeply rooted in its culture. Sounds are so closely interwoven with the history and philosophy by which they have been nourished that it is in this so-called "cultural context" that we must examine and try to understand the music in order to create a new horizon for our own sake.

0.2. Syukuhachi (shaikohachi) in the high-tech world

Také the syukuhachi, Japanese five-hole vertical bamboo flute, for example. It has been said that the
ideal sound of the ryoakahati is the sound of the wind blowing through a bamboo forest, which apparently alludes to the connection of the instrument and the Zen Buddhism. In fact, many of the classical pieces of the ryoakahati have some kinds of relationships with religious meanings. Even in the modernized Japanese society, as it is revealed below, there are people who honestly retain their traditions handed down from generation to generation.

One of the key words toward a better understanding of the characteristics of Japanese culture is "coexistence": old and new, harmony and discord, spirituality and practicality, the list seems to go forever. "Simplicity" and "complexity" is also counted as one of those examples which represent this cultural "coexistence".

0.2 Aesthetics of Japanese musical instruments

Although the ryoakahati is now used in every genre of music such as pop, jazz, rock and of course, computer music, it is just a simple bamboo flute with five holes and a cut mouthpiece. Despite this simplicity, there are two types of manufacturing methods which are clearly illustrated when you carefully examine X-rays of the instruments. Differences between the inner bores of the two types can be seen.

With the first method a mixture of whetstone powder or plaster and urushi (urushi), Japanese lacquer, is applied in order to regulate the shape of the air column inside the bore, whereas with the second method, the material is left raw so that the individual bamboo keeps its own character retained since its genesis. An important clue to the aesthetics of Japanese musical instruments might lie in these two ways of simplification, from which diverse and complex sounds are created. (Further detailed discussions: see section 7.)

0.4 Cranes

Beautiful sceenries of Japan have undoubtedly influenced Japanese music, though it is a universal

phenomenon in the field of music that the nature surrounding and affecting the human settlement of living is dealt with. It does not necessarily mean, however, that Japanese music always depicts something concrete and is totally "programmatic" in the sense of Western music. Quite comparable to what is called "absolute music" in the Western grand tradition, Japanese music can often be appreciated in its beauty of abstract expressions in terms of purely sonic organisation.

In this context, the ryoakahati compositions dealing with the crane may be a good example for us to speculate on the essence of traditional Japanese music as an integral part of the Japanese culture as a whole.

Cranes, sometimes confused or identified with herons or storks, appear in many folk tales and is very familiar to us. It is generally believed that they represent a symbol of longevity, although in reality cranes can live only for twenty or thirty years. In the repertoire of ryoakahati there also exist some pieces concerning cranes. Among them is Sekaku reitu included in a CD recording, along with other various different motifs representing "the sound of Earth", which was carried out by Voyager 2, one of the two unmanned US probes of the outer solar system.

1. Turu (Tsuru) no sugomori, a piece of classical ryoakahati honkyoku

1.1 Simplicity of classical ryoakahati honkyoku

Ryoakahati pieces called honkyoku are in general solo pieces for ryoakahati, with a few exceptions which are played in antiphony or accompanied by ostinato. Honkyoku pieces entitled Turu no sugomori, literally translated "nesting of crane" are examples to denote the interdependency of simplicity and complexity as well.

As already mentioned above, honkyoku are solo pieces, which means melodic lines are played on only one instrument, without harmony or polyphony, or
1.2 Complexity in its transmission processes and lineages

Since the name of this piece appears in the kabuki entitled Konadehon Tyūsingura (Chūshingura) (premiered 1748), the most popular play in the kabuki repertoire, the title Tsuru no sugomori is rather famous. It is reasonable to assume that at this point of the mid-18th century there was already the consensus that the piece represented the syakuhachi. But, from a musicological point of view, little is known about this honkyoku including its history, other than the fact that nearly 20 variants were born along the course of its long tradition of more than 250 years, and that they can be classified into two lineages of entirely different styles.

One of the lineage is called the Kansai tradition which has been chiefly disseminated in the western part of Japan; the other is the Tōhoku tradition, transmitted and spread within the northeastern part of the country. There is speculation that some sorts of relationships exist between the Kansai tradition and the piece with the same title of the kōyū, a three-string bowed lute. The lineages of transmission are too complicated to be easily understood off hand, but it was in this process of dissemination that the verification and diversification occurred. In addition, it should be noted that the classical syakuhachi honkyoku are taught only within an oral tradition; notations are used merely as mnemonic devices (Further discussions: see Tokita et al. in press).

1.3 Invitation to syakuhachi honkyoku

Tsuru no sugomori is said to be a drama of crane parents and their children, in which various types of love, affection, joy and sorrow are described by featuring the sophisticated performing techniques.

Several pieces have been transmitted to the present in the Kansai tradition. For this lecture concert, Tsuru no sugomori of the Tozan ryū honkyoku will be performed. Tozan ryū is one of the important syakuhachi schools or sects. It was founded by Nakao Tozan in 1896, and has played an influential role in the society of traditional Japanese music since then.

From the Tōhoku tradition, we have chosen a piece transmitted through the komuso temple Hataken (Futaiken) which existed in a remote town of Miyagi Prefecture. Onodera Genki (Genkichi) (ca. 1850~7), master of the syakuhachi, has transmitted this piece.

2. Technicalities of the syakuhachi

Attempts must be made in order to clarify the music style of syakuhachi that has been nurtured in the course of its long history. Indeed, the instrument itself may be seemingly simple; nevertheless, the style of expression is highly sophisticated and complicated. Perhaps, the physical simplicity of the instrument is essential for the achievement of stylistic complexity. As a concrete example, we have selected another composition with the same title as the first example, Tsuru no sugomori, but it is as a matter of fact a different piece. It is older in origination: it belongs to the orthodox haku (shaku) syakuhachi tradition still retaining the original style. In order to distinguish it from other compositions with the same name in other styles, we shall call it Hataken 1860 sugomori, because its transmission was based in Hataken temple located in northern Japan.

A major reason why we have chosen Hataken 1860 sugomori is that we can find in this composition a variety of technicalities in terms of playing methods and therefore the piece is brilliant in nature. From among the playing methods incorporated in it, we will isolate only some that may interest you most. By doing so, we hope that we will reach a better understanding of the complicated technicalities in syakuhachi which involve not only the tonal or tone height aspects but timbre or tone colour and intensity or sound loudness as well.
2.1 Sutzen [blowling zen] and zyubatsu (ichōn jōcū) [one sound for entering Nirvana]

Prior to the Meiji (Meiji) Restoration, the zyukahati, an item of Japanese material culture, was not a musical instrument but in fact it was considered to be a religious tool to be used by a specific type of priests called konsōtō belonging to the Luke sect of Zen Buddhism. As a religious service, one may sit for hours and concentrate himself in meditation: this practice is known as zazenshū [sitting zen]. There used to be another practice called sutzen [blowling zen]: i.e., one could play the zyukahati as a religious practice.

A saying of sutzen was ichōn zyubatsu: ichōn means "one sound" and zyubatsu means "entering Nirvana" or "attaining Buddhahood". Originated in a passage in an old Buddhist book, this saying has become well known among the circles of people involved in zyukahati playing and has been interpreted in many ways. Even today most zyukahati players are aware of this saying as something symbolising the mental aspect of being with the instrument (Tōya 1984: 20).

2.2 The mind and body in zyukahati blowing

An interpretation of the saying ichōn zyubatsu is that even one single sound of nature (naturesču) (the sound obtained when all the fingerholes are closed) could reveal itself in a variety of states as if to reflect respective states of mind or of nature. Some examples of this are: 1) kūshibuki (wedge blowing) -- a playing method of blowing likened to the shape of a wedge; blowing strongly in the beginning; not using vibrato on the sustained sound; and finishing in a lingering manner, obeying the natural flow of the breath; 2) yari (shaking) -- vibrato performed by shaking the head upward and downward or to the left and right; or by fluctuating one's breath or shaking one's arms; 3) on (shū) [push] -- on repeating the same note, opening the closed hole very rapidly and closing it at ones (bending technique is not used in the traditional way); 6) konsōtō [emphasised blowing] -- tightening the abdominal muscles intermittently in order to change the strength of blowing strongly and weakly in alternation; the musical effect is obvious in a series of changes in dynamics; 5) sama (sounds like beads) -- a soft trill like effect attained by fluttering either the tongue or the uvula; and 6) marumakito [scattered breathing] -- the air stream coming out of the mouth is not concentrated to the sharp edge of the blowhole but other is scattered around it, resulting in numerous subdivided air streams with the sound effect of complicatedly fative noises.

For the purpose of explaining the diversified playing methods of the zyukahati, we propose to classify them on the basis of relationships between the physical appearances and structure of the one hand and the contents of these with the use of the human organs on the other. A simple classification can be made as follows: 1) techniques of head movements; 2) techniques of finger uses and/or movements; 3) techniques of breath diversification; and 4) others (Sakaiha 1988: 144).

2.3 Technicalities and aesthetics in Hitatsken taru no sugomori

We shall refer to the individual playing techniques as applied in our composition Hitatsken taru no sugomori so that we may appreciate the piece better.

One conspicuous feature commonly observed in different versions of Turu no sugomori is that trono-like effects in various tempos and in different pitch levels and tempos are richly woven into the melodic configurations. Particularly in Hitatsken taru no sugomori, almost all sounds throughout the piece are ornamented with the difficult technique called tamuite wa tabane. Tamuite utama sounds like beads or balls rolling, and tabane means "bundled sounds". This technique requires the musician to tremble either the tongue or the uvula just as in pronouncing the consonant "r" in French or German, which effectuate changes in breath in rapid succession. It has been said that only one out of 3,000 musicians can fulfill it. Therefore, this technique is seldom applied in the pieces of other ryūsha.
Master syukuhati players in olden days used to concentrate themselves on this kind of tremolo-like sound effects applied to each sound [miao] within a single breath. We will also concentrate on it but with three cases.

2.4 Onomatopoeia and mimetic in syukuhati performance

One case of using a tremolo-like effect is to imitate the cries of a crane. In general, syukuhati music has a number of compositions in which onomatopoeia and mimetic sounds of the cries of deer or insects and their behaviours are intertwined. The performer’s intention is to imitate them as realistically as possible rather than to express them abstractly or symbolically.

The tremolo-like effects as imitations of crested cries are exemplified in Figure 1-a for Tosan ryū and in Figure 1-b for Hataken. The technique in the Tosan style involves finger manipulations and breath control with the diaphragm as well. The technique in the Hataken style also involves finger manipulations and breath control with the diaphragm but with the uvula. In the latter case, the sound effects must be such that they sound like cries of crested cries as expressed orally as heberou nehe heberou. Otherwise, a student would not OK his disciple’s performance. A member of our group Syukuhati Kenkyukai (Syukuhati Research Group), SODERA Satoru, has become a disciple of SAKAI Syōkō (Shōdō) and mastered this technique. According to his experience, we can describe the process as follows: the finger manipulations are so diversified that he had to accomplish not only opening and closing of the fingerholes but also grasping and hinting the fingerholes. In addition, the tamane technique of trembling the uvula is simultaneously applied. The teacher SAKAI Syōkō confessed that it took him ten years to master this piece, Hataken tora no sugomori.

2.5 The playing technique called korokoro

A second case of tremolo-like effect is the playing technique called korokoro which is applied in both styles and other styles as well. This technique is fulfilled mainly with finger manipulations. As is often done today by most musicians, the first and second fingerholes are simultaneously opened and closed. More precisely speaking, there are moments in between the alternating when all the fingerholes are closed as shown in Figure 2. Unless this diagrammatic occurrence of finger manipulations is accomplished, the “rattling” effect orally described as korokoro cannot be obtained.

We have a proverb referring to the difficulty of mastering this technique: Kubihuri (Kubifuri) saessen, korohai kiri (hachiten) -- it means that it takes three years until one can master the technique of head movements and eight years for the korokoro technique.

Incidentally, almost everybody is either right-handed or left-handed. Our hands or his own better hand for writing or wrapping. When a syukuhati player applies the korokoro technique only with his left hand, it may be easier than with the other hand. Although it is extremely difficult to do it with the both hands. As a matter of fact, this difficult technique is found in Hataken tora no sugomori: the second and third fingerholes are the objects to attain this korokoro effect.

The korokoro techniques on different fingerhole assignments in fact produce different acoustic phenomena, though very minute. These minute differences are essentially significant in purey musical terms. This kind of microscopic sources in expression

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are thought to be common to many genres of Japanese music.

2.4 The playing technique called \textit{karakara}

A third case of the tremolo-like effect is \textit{karakara}, which is similar to \textit{karakore} but is done an octave higher and with different fingering techniques. The lower four holes are opened and the first hole is hit successively—this is the process for \textit{karakara}.

Hitting the first fingerhole is frequently used in combination with fingers other than that of the \textit{karakara} technique. In the \textit{Tosan ryū} piece, \textit{Turu no sugomori}, these combinations create a series of sounds in succession (Figure 3). In the case of \textit{Hutaken turu no sugomori}, this effect is accomplished without hitting the first fingerhole but rather, in contrast, with the \textit{u-vala}, that is previously mentioned technique \textit{taramu}. The differences of similar tremolo-like playing techniques tell us that there are minute differences in musical style between the two pieces.

![Figure 2: The tremolo-like techniques](image)

Also, the minute differences are essential in determining the musical atmosphere at a whole: in fact, the microscopic diversities contribute to establishing the macroscopic style.

3. Epilogue

The inharmonics of the \textit{yuukien} as explained and demonstrated today are only a small portion of the complicated aggregate that has been nurtured in its long history. But with these representative illustrations, we hope that we have reached a point at which we deepen our understanding of Japanese sensitivity and intelligence. Indeed, simple though the musical notations and instruments may seem at first glance, complicated are the performing arts realised with the use of these on the basis of respective cultural and historical backgrounds.

The old saying \textit{tsun rykoku} has deep meaning closely associated with a \textit{Buddhist} idea \textit{Izoku ta, ta zoku zi} [One is equal to many, many equal to one], which has often been cited by our contemporary composer \textit{Yuasa Jig} (\textit{Yuasa 1974: 42}) as something related to the musical ideas of his own electronic music. We sincerely hope that our uniqueness may lead to an understanding of manyness of the human culture.

Acknowledgments:

We are grateful to Ms \textit{Arakawa} Keiko, Mr \textit{Riley Kelly} LeR, and Ms \textit{Yukio Tomoko} for their cooperation in this project.

Notes:

1) Included in the lecture concert based on this paper are the performances of the two kinds of \textit{Turu no sugomori}, demonstrations of music examples and the projection of pictures and figures.  
2) The English words follow the British system of spelling. The roman transliteration of Japanese terms is based upon the government notification system (which is almost identical with the \textit{kunrei system}) rather than the most commonly used \textit{Hepburn system}. Only at the first appearance, the \textit{Hepburn spelling} is indicated in round brackets.  
3) Japanese names are listed family names first, given names last.
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Commentary on the compositions to be performed

*Turu no sugomori, Tozan ryû yakuwai honkyoku*

There are nearly 20 variants for *Turu no sugomori*, and this Tozan ryû honkyoku piece is one of them. In the mid-18th century, *Turu no sugomori* was already so popular as to represent the whole yakuwai repertoire, and its melodic lines were transmitted to the *kôyô*, three-string bowed lute, of the Osaka tradition. Then, in the modern age (Naka Tôzan I 1876-1956), founder of the ryû or school, incorporated the *kôyô* melodies into the yakuwai repertoire anew and arranged it as a piece of Tozan ryû honkyoku.

Although both the yakuwai pieces and the *kôyô* pieces of *Turu no sugomori* have been in many ways diversified and changed during the course of transmission, little is known about the details of the diversification and change due to the lack of historical sources. Only this Tozan ryû honkyoku retains melodic lines which can be traced and which verifies the relationship between these two instruments.

Construction: The piece is composed of three sections, and each section is divided into two parts respectively, melodies of the first part are loyal free rhythm and those of the second part have beats and are accompanied by rhythmic ostinato called *sugomori* (Figure 4). Each melody in the first part is composed by Naka Tôzan based upon the traditionally transmitted *Turu no sugomori*, whereas each of the second part is derived from the *Turu no sugomori* of the *kôyô* of the Osaka tradition. Contrasts between the rhythmic styles in each sections, performing techniques describing the lives of cranes and lighthearted melodic lines which allude to the ensemble of the *kôyô* and the *sugomori* (shamisen), three-string stacked lute, in the rhythmic part can all be appreciated.

Note: the piece will be performed from the second section until the end.

*Shûtenken Turu no sugomori, classical yakuwai honkyoku*

The many pieces named *Turu no sugomori* are distinctly classified into two categories on the basis of their musical style. We may call them 1) the Kanazawa tradition and 2) the Tôhoku tradition respectively according to their areas of dissemination and/or origin.

The Kanazawa tradition is a line of one could presume to be interpolated to the *kôyô* and is chiefly transmitted in Kyoto and Osaka. The above-mentioned *Turu no sugomori* of the Tozan ryû honkyoku also belongs to this lineage.

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Tsuru no sugomori of the Kansai tradition in general include the melodic lines alluding to the kokyū and retain a traditional performing practice of rhythmic estuato, though not always so obvious as the Tozan ryū piece.

Sōtaku reiho of the Kinko ryū which Voyager 2 is conveying through space is the other tradition located between the Kansai and the Tōhoku districts. But, since the roots of its lineage of transmission is in Kiyoto, the piece is included in the Kansai tradition.

The Tōhoku tradition, on the other hand, employs free rhythm throughout the piece. In these lineages occurred the very complicated ramifications which can be compared to the similar phenomena in m minor, folk songs, that they change their melodic lines during the course of generation. Among the various types of Tsuru no sugomori of the Tōhoku tradition, Hataken toru no sugomori is the most difficult to perform, which enable very few performer to play this piece completely. Thus we merely have occasions to listen to it.

Hataken toru no sugomori which is handed down from Onoda Gennō (ca. 1850-?) onto Sakai Syūdō across five or six generations, consists of two sections. One of the most remarkable characteristics of this piece is that the tamune technique is employed for entire piece. It should be noted that among nearly 200 honkyoku this is the only one that the whole piece is played using the tamune technique, although the Kōyū (Kōshū) ryū in Aomori Prefecture, northernmost of Honshū (Honshū) Island, retains the tradition in which one plays all of the repertoire of the ryū using the konomichi technique, which is also very unique.

Profile of the performers

Sakai, Syūdō 酒井松道
was born in 1940, the third of three sons of Sakai Tikoju (Chikuyō), founder of Tikoju ryū. Syūdō studied yosekaki with Kazumori Iyōm, the 38th generation head of the Myōkan tradition. Mr. Sakai received from Kōkunmi all of the classical honkyoku of the tradition. He also studied with Yoshimura Hsiun (Yoshimura Fuan), the 40th generation head of the same tradition, and with Moriyasu Niwot, a disciple of Jūn (Jin) Nyōdō, who transmitted to Sakai several dozen classical Honkyoku of other lineages, including the Hataken tradition. His debut in the series "Take o jutsu [Blowing bamboo]" received the award of the Osaka Sankenki (Osaka culture festival) and the second of the series consecutively received the same award the next year (1982). In 1982 he also won the culture award of Ya city and the encouragement prize of the Blue Ribbon Award. Sakai Syūdō became the third generation head of Tikoju ryū in 1984.

Kawamura, Taizan 川村泰山
was born in 1947, and studied yosekaki with Katayama Ryōzan and later Yamamoto Hōzan. After majoring in engineering and graduated from Doshisha University, he studied music theory at Seiko Gakuen [Seiko Conservatory of Traditional Japanese Music]. In 1983, he passed the audition of NHK [Japan Broadcasting Corporation]. He won the first prize and the award of the Education and Culture Ministry at the Tozan ryū contest of yosekaki honkyoku (in 1988). Geiizumon (Geijutsu) award [Award of Art Festival] sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (in 1989); the Tozan award (in 1988). He has performed in Europe and Southeast Asia as well, performing not only classical pieces as a solo player but also contemporary works as a member of "Teppan", a trio of the piano, the drum and the yosekaki. He has written many compositions, mostly for traditional Japanese instruments, and is the Daishin (Daishin) [Grand Master] of Tozan ryū.

Watanabe, Kōzan 渡辺紅山
began to study the yosekaki of the Tozan ryū with Kawamura Taizan in 1977. He became Shihan [Master] of the ryū in 1983. At the Tozan ryū contest of honkyoku in 1988, Mr. Watanabe won a prize.

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