

Colby College

I prefer the orange cushions to the purple ones;
An Exploration in Japanese Sound

By Thomas Crisp

When first confronted by Kurosawa's theatrical masterpiece, *Ran*, I was scarcely able to articulate my thoughts. The film, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, pulls no symbolic punches, delivering violent blow after violent blow against the backdrop of the slopes of the almost mythical Mount Fuji, where color, music and speech blend together to create an overwhelming tribute to the passage of time and its implications for the Ichimonji clan. Perhaps the biggest contribution, however, to the film's overwhelming impact on its viewer is its soundtrack, which upon close inspection, covers less than half of the film's run time. By Western standards, this is difficult to interpret. Why would such a cinematic epic be so devoid of musical accompaniment. Why would Kurosawa, who envisioned a Mahleresque score for his film, pair Takemitsu's ¹ sparse and spacious soundtrack with his grand Japanese vision of chaos and order? The answer lies in the Japanese concept of Ma.

Ma is essential to understanding the music of Japan, as it demonstrates how the lack of objectivity in melody can obstruct language, literal or figurative. The word itself is composed of two characters, 門, meaning "gate" and 日, meaning "sun". These two characters combine to create 間 or "Ma". Roughly translated, Ma can mean "place" in a spatial context, or more specifically, the interval that gives shape to a whole. Jonathan Chenette offers an accessible formulation:

For the Japanese of the past, space and time were conceived of in the same way. Both could be roughly defined as "an interval of motion."³ The time between the setting and rising of the sun, for instance, would be thought of as the interval of waiting for the sun. The road connecting Kyoto and Edo (the old name for Tokyo) known as the Tokaido, with its fifty-three stations or resting places, would be thought of as the interval of walking organized by the stops for rest. Ma in its aesthetic sense, then, refers to intervals of space and time that become meaningful only when filled with motion.²

This concept of a space that invites relation, or "empty intervals of space or time that invite some sort of action to fill them with meaning" as Chenette so elegantly puts it, can also be understood through a different lense: music. In this section, I will endeavour to relate the concept of Ma with the Western concept of melody, demonstrating how melody can create an "interval that invites motion". We will begin with the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure.

Saussure is widely considered to be the founding father of semiotics, as he was the first in the (Western) analytic tradition to point out the fact that the words that we use to refer to their objects (tree, wood, red, etc.) which he called signifiers, have only an arbitrary (assigned) connection with those entities to which they refer (the "signified" as Saussure called them). Saussure's contribution to semiotics is easily overlooked, even taken for granted in contemporary thought. However, this is the basis on which we will begin our discussion of the main form

of signifier that we employ today: spoken words. All religions utilize the human voice in a marked duplicity: the spoken word and the stable tone; speech and song. Those concerned with the monastic traditions of Christianity understand that whilst the text of a song provides one type of pleasure, its musical performance yields a quite separate sensation, a sort of shudder that Roland Barthes aptly calls *jouissance*. Whilst this word is simply a placeholder, a signifier for an admittedly ethereal signified, it speaks of the joy that comes with the musical performance of a text, often under religious circumstances: “You will be raised on high like an eagle” claims one enthusiastic monk (Crocker 132). But what is it about music that provides us with this *jouissance*? For Richard Crocker, *jouissance* derives from music’s own dimensionality: “music, while it can accommodate itself to all sorts of purposes, still has something of its own to say, and may have had its own effect on monastic life” (Crocker 133). In order to understand this “something of its own” that music delivers, we must understand that music is essentially an exploration of spacetime. The ‘time’ component of music is relatively straightforward: music relies on the frequency and repetition of tones over a certain duration of time. But how exactly does music operate within a spatial dimensionality? For this latter component, we must dig deeper.

Crocker provides a helpful basis for the understanding of music as space: “Intonation is a sonic platform for the words with their referential meaning, while a melody can rise above the literal, referential meaning of the words into a realm of pitch relationships” (Crocker 147). Indeed, we see Barthes lamenting the decay of *mélodie*, (a more useful signifier than *jouissance* for musical meaning) in the French language using these terms: “The French are abandoning their language, not, assuredly as a normative set of noble values – but as a space of pleasure, of thrill, a site where language works *for nothing*, that is, in perversion.” (Barthes 187). But what exactly makes French a ‘perverted space’ is not our concern... What does concern us is the struggle between music as a signifier and the fact that there exists no suitable signified to complete its Saussurean pairing. Put simply, the perversion that we see is the result of music/language existing as a *space for no-thing*. Of course, in the Western tradition, adjectival discourse is the default method for musical description. But what does it mean to describe a tone as warm, a suite as triumphant, a chord as royal? ⁴ There is no such thing as royalty incarnate, warmth manifest, triumph embodied. Surely, to describe a song as royal with no rigid designation of its royalty, triumphant with no proof of its triumph, is to say nothing. By Barthes’ own admission, this is the present and oh-so-inadequate standard for musically descriptive discourse: “Are we condemned to the adjective?... it is not by struggling against the adjective that one

stands a chance of exorcising music commentary and liberating it from the fatality of predication” (Barthes 180).

How, then, can the Japanese musical tradition help us to find a way out of the fly bottle? How can Japanese music divulge the spatial aspect of music?

Differentiations in value is what provides dimension. The recognition of this “area of pitch relationships” as a non-physical though nonetheless spatial entity is essential to the discussion of melody, the elevation of meaning from referential to experiential, from signification to relation. Barthes hints at this: “Isn’t it the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? Isn’t the entire space of the voice an infinite one?” (Barthes 184). And so it is not so much that language is incapable of interpreting music, but rather that music possess the ability to transcend descriptive gesture, thereby entering into the realm of the noun, the signifier, the body. In turn, this elevation suggests a dialogue between the music and, not a meaning, but a truth which cannot be encoded back, as it relies totally on personal relation. To experience musical spacetime as an object is to miss the point: “I experience something.—If we add “inner” to “outer” experiences, nothing in the situation is changed. We are merely following the uneternal division that springs from the lust of the human race to whittle away the secret of death” (Buber 5). These are the words of Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher who wrote heavily on the subject of subject-subject relation. His seminal work, *I and Thou*, details the mechanism through which two subject can relate in the realm of the unspeakable, establishing two word pairs, one for subject-objects (I-It) and one for subject-subjects (I-Thou):

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object. I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone. This and the like together establish the realm of It. But the realm of Thou has a different basis. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.⁵

Buber intended to provide a phenomenological approach to understanding God, but it would appear that these words could be profitably applied to the concept of *Ma* and melody, as well. To experience musical spacetime as relation, then, is to unlock its power. Pure melody, it seems, belongs to the world of relation, and is thus afforded musical dimension. And so we must not expect a meaning to be rendered *out of* music. In allowing music to transcend predicative description, we encounter the thing that is not present, the “no-thing”. We encounter the space that invites relation and yet is void of recognizable form.

Perhaps this is as close as I will be able to come, as Western writer and Western reader, to an understanding of the theoretical framework that is *Ma*. With this concept employed, however, we can now explore various elements of the Japanese musical tradition that are present in *Ran* and, in turn, explore the ways in which they reinforce the concept of *Ma* and its relationship to elements of Japanese culture. These components include the *Biwa*, *Gagaku*, *Noh* theatre, *Shakuhachi*, and *Shomyo* chant.

The first musical tradition that we will examine in terms of its potential for *ma* is the *Biwa*. The *Biwa*, a Japanese lute, has a long history on the island and has two very interesting connections to *Ma*. The first connection surrounds the way in which *Biwa* music is traditionally taught to a student. The *Biwa* student is taught orally and visually, without the need for written music or complicated theory. The *Biwa* players skill, therefore, is learned solely through rigorous repetition. Takemitsu speaks of this: “Now I became aware of how much incessant training in Japanese traditional music meant. Strictly abiding only by the manner transmitted according to tradition, the player only twangs on the sound handed down by word of mouth”.⁶ The *Biwa* also has a strong association with blindness, as this is a profession that the blind have traditionally gravitated towards. The film *Kwaidan* explores the relationship between physical space and language, where the film’s protagonist, Hoichi, a blind *biwa* player, is cursed by a deceased Samurai, and is gifted with supernatural vision that ultimately costs him his ears [in a visual and visceral demonstration of the relationship between language and the physical world in Japanese thought].

Shakuhachi music is rhythmically loose, and variations in the scale degrees means that it is slightly microtonal, even atonal. A breathy timbre, combined with “merri” (the term that describes loudness of notes) creates a resting feeling at certain times, and “keri” creates a climax/crescendo feeling at other times. Takemitsu says: “When I hold such an instrument in my hands and play it, I am nearer to the essence of music than when I compose something new for this instrument.”⁷ The most important aspect of *Shakuhachi*, as Takemitsu explains, is its closeness to the human voice. Its relationship to *Ma* is apparent: the breath, being the most natural human interval save perhaps the heartbeat, is present in every note that the instrument sounds. The opening of *Ran* features a *Shakuhachi* monologue, pitting the sonic platform of the film against the towering slopes of the mountain, followed soon thereafter by the orchestra. The opening line acts almost as a *Haiku*, delivering understanding through its silence, as we see the Old Lord’s guard surveying their lands. *Shakuhachi* plays an important role in *Ran*, as it suggests a lyrical grace that has saved Tsurumaru, a blind *Shakuhachi* player, from utter despair, his flute being his

only solace for the slaughter of his family and the mutilation of his eyes. As he performs a rendition that he calls “hospitality to the heart”, Hidetora realizes the great depth of his crimes against Tsurumaru’s people. Far removed from any hospitality, the Great Lord is tortured by the flute’s words, as if his crimes are being reported to him for the first time by the blind flute player.

Gagaku, which forms the basis for the orchestral portions of Ran’s score, is perhaps the best glimpse we may be offered of the difference between Western orchestra and Japanese, ensemble-based music. Takemitsu speaks of his compositional style:

What I want to do is not to put sounds in motion towards a goal by controlling them. Rather, I would prefer to let them free, if possible, without controlling them. For me, it would be enough to gather the sounds around me and then gently put them in motion. To move the sounds around the way you drive a car is the worst thing you can do with them.⁸

Perhaps this is the greatest aspect of Takemitsu’s score: it’s subtlety. His use of natural sounds accompanies the actual instrumentation, with crickets, hooves, and even the rumble of thunder accenting the dialogue. This is very much inline with the concept of Ma: the listener is invited to combine the sounds (subconsciously, no doubt) as opposed to experiencing the collected visions of a conductor. When the scene shifts to the third castle, a round of drums highlights the fortifications of the landscape, and then silence until the doors open and Saburo’s men flood through, accompanied by the orchestra. With each change of scene, we often hear a round of orchestral drums. This mimics the drum accompaniments of the Noh theatre that help to signal a change in scene. When the Great Lord is being drawn out of his keep, the sounds of war fade and give way to the orchestra, just as Hidetora’s vision for his future crumbles, completely disarmed and emasculated, as he slips further into madness. The viewer is shielded from the sounds of death all around, and the orchestra’s volume begins to drop. Suddenly, the Lord, Hidetora’s first son, is shot, and instantly the music ceases, as the sounds of the scene come hurtling back, as if the orchestra has been decimated by this very same shot. As Hidetora walks out, banished from his own castle, the orchestra, having slowly been sustained by chiming bells, descends into a coarse and unarticulated scraping, mirroring the wind that rushes through the once-great Lord’s hair. As his fool finds him in the tall grass, the listener is treated to an audial (rather than visual) rendition of Hidetora’s wild hallucinations. Preceded by a shrill few licks on the flute, the Great Lord’s eyes widen, as we experience the full might of his vision, courtesy of the orchestra. As Hidetora grasps his head, the fool performs a scene from a Noh play. The traditional theatre of Japan, Noh is characterized by long

pauses and sudden, violent movements, always accompanied by an ensemble. Much of *Ran* epitomizes a Noh drama, and so I will now focus on Noh's general treatment of music:

An important aspect of Noh's treatment of music is the value that it places on negative aural space. As the Western view of music is generally based on a foundational approach (chord progressions, layers, contrapuntal melody and matching harmony, etc.), the presence of negative space, or in other words the exclusion of sound, can easily be interpreted as a lack of meaning. This ties in to the larger idea of foundational vs holistic treatment of composition, a dichotomy that is integral to the comparison of "Western" and "Eastern" medicine, aesthetics, and philosophy. Another element of Noh theatre that challenges the Western viewpoint is the measured and at times minimalistic approach to performative works that is present in many other Japanese artforms. Whilst many Western theatrical traditions are known for their sprawling sets, overcrowded orchestras, and overwhelming sound, the Noh theatre seems to challenge the notion that the quality of a performance lies in its power to overstimulate the audience. One example of this more restrictive (or alternatively, tasteful) approach to theatre and musical performance is the limited tonal and dynamic range of the performers. Noh actors are restricted to a small tonal range, as well as to a scale that relies primarily on perfect fourths. Whilst the restriction of the actors range may be considered a sign of being unimaginative in Western theatre, this is certainly not the effect that results from Noh performances. A similar restraint is displayed in the dance of the Noh theatre, which privileges poise, control and balance over dynamicism and action. A relationship between negative aural space and musical precision can be distilled from Noh performances, where, as is described in the Nohgaku reading, "there is no music at all when the actor first appears. This heightens the effect produced by the slow-moving mass of ancient costumes and the evocative mask" (111). What is interesting in *Ran* is Hidetora as a Noh actor. His character's makeup can be viewed as the mask through which the Noh actor must sing, and we see his poise and control weaken as he descends further and further into madness.

Finally, an important element of Japanese sound that challenges the Western conception of what constitutes music is the juxtaposition of rigorous control (manifested through negative, not positive, space) and the apparent tonal abandon which often rears its head during the Biwa and Noh performances. In the case of the Biwa, a melodic line often gives way to an atonal, unstable striking of the strings that does produce something closer to noise than to pitched notes. The breathy timbre of Shakuhachi music mirrors this juxtaposition between control and abandon. The

same phenomenon can be witnessed during a Noh performance, with terrifying screams giving way to beautiful melodies. Whilst Western theatrical music doubles down on the layering of harmonies and big, brassy melodies, Noh theatre exhibits the duplicity (and necessarily the versatility) that is integral to Ma.

Of course, music can affect us in more ways than one. Ma is just one conceptual tool we have in our belt for understanding the ways in which Japanese music can alter our understanding of music's relationship with language. By examining the broader Japanese culture, we may also discover equally lingual-obstructional practices. Take for instance the idea of the Koan, a classical Japanese rhetorical technique which is tasked with expanding a monk's mental horizons whilst simultaneously rejecting language's illustrative or otherwise communicative faculties. The Koan, which does not have a codified answer, is best viewed as an example of perlocutionary communication, as opposed to illocutionary discourse. Illocutionary acts rely on language's ability to paint a picture in another person's head. Most of our daily communication is employed on perlocutionary grounds: giving directions, sharing desires and dreams, commanding, explaining; these are all examples of illocutionary acts. However, we also communicate in ways that are not primarily meant for transmission of ideas, but rather the transmission of mindset, or more specifically, viewpoints. Take, for example, the classic Buddhist tale "Nansen Cuts the Cat in Two":

Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks: "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat." No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces. That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out. Nansen said: "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat."⁹

Surely, Joshu's reaction was not logical, and this is exactly the point. Zen Buddhism is, at base, an anti-linguistic discipline. Koan (and Mondo) instruct on a perlocutionary basis, that is, they invoke a response as opposed to communicating information that might engender a response. "It is another belief of Zen Buddhism that it is because we make too many artificial distinctions that we are unable to come to terms with life and with our environment" remarks Crocker (112). Buber has similar thoughts on the subject of language's role in our lives: "How self-confident is that wisdom which perceives a closed compartment in things, reserved for the intimation and manipulated only with the key" (5). Indeed, the goal of a Koan, such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" is not to communicate any real truth about the world, but rather to broaden one's own model of the universe. After

enough enlargement, Zen Buddhist's believe that one can achieve a moment of clarity that forever changes the course of one's life: Satori.

Songs are perlocutionary in many ways, rendering order from the mathematical beauty of scales, the seemingly infinite density of a Biwa's tambre, and the intimate connection between the texture of Shakuhachi music and the most apparent synonym for life: breath. Even Zen meditation can help us to destabilize these divisions (and therefore language, the medium through which we disseminate them) by allowing us a physical and mental pathway to the contemplation of wholeness, Wabi and Sabi ¹⁰, and other Japanese concepts that privilege the division-less over the divided. Again, we might turn to the words of Crocker: "The master is not so much concerned to argue that distinctions are harmful and hence should be abandoned as he is to have the student abandon his distinctions" (118).

In closing, I would like to make one final offering that has become increasingly clear to me over the course of this semester as I have studied Zen and the world of Japanese music, and that is the potential that I see in Japanese thought for understanding a different type of "ma"—modern art. The modern artist is not trying to communicate, but to relate. The modern art piece is like a koan: it is not so much refusing your distinctions, but it is pushing what may be distinguished out of the realm of demarcation, referentiality, and communicable meaning. Standing before a Martin or a Rothko, there is an undeniable sense of relation-waiting-to-happen. The canvas', in all their anti-referential and non-representational splendor, are devoid of language, and yet, they beg for relation.

Endnotes

- 1 - The composer for Ran's soundtrack, Tōru Takemitsu.
- 2 - Consider the mathematical formula for linear velocity: $d / t = v$, distance over time equals velocity (motion)
- 3 - Chenette page 2.
- 4 - In Francesco Galeazzi's *Elementi Teorico-Practici di Musica*, Beethoven describes the Key of Eb Major as a "heroic key, extremely majestic, grave and serious: in all these features it is superior to that of C."
- 5 - Buber page 4.
- 6 & 7 - Linear notes from one of Takemitsu's long-play records, sourced from Chenette.
- 8 - Chenette page 6.
- 9 - This version of tale was written by Mu-mon.
- 10 - The terms Wabi and Sabi can be seen in an object or image as the beauty of its imperfections.

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