

# Studying Japanese Contemporary (and Traditional) Music from Italy

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Japanese musical sounds were among the first objects of the new ethnomusicological research in the early twentieth century, an interest that challenged the harsh opinion of Japanese music held by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century, who noted that “our vocal and instrumental music wounds their ears, and they delight in their own music which truly tortures our hearing.”<sup>1</sup> It was at the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology that Japanese music samples (contemporary by necessity) were recorded at the Phonogram Archive of the Society for Oriental Music Research, founded by Carl Stumpf and Erich von Hornbostel in 1900.<sup>2</sup>

There were monographs about Japanese music and musical instruments, the first written by Leopold Müller (1874), then by Francis Piggott (1893) and Rudolph Dittrich (1897), followed by Noël Peri (1939), but these were concerned with traditional music, which although fascinating and unique, no longer enjoyed favor in Japanese society, where the popularity of Western music had been firmly entrenched since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since its introduction, mainly through school education,<sup>3</sup> there have been Japanese composers, musicians, orchestras, conductors and musicologists in the Western tradition, making up a successful and complete musical world, which is in turn the result of a large project of acquiring knowledge and inevitable exchange.

In the 1980s, fully trained in music and with an M.A. in musicology, I was very much aware of the discourse on contemporary music in the West (in which I specialized) but had never heard of a Japanese discourse, or indeed anything similar related to the Japanese experience of incorporating Western music and developing an (inter)national musical language that built upon their native tradition.

My eyes were opened thanks to the 21st Annual Festival Pontino in 1985, in which a workshop on Contemporary Music, chaired by Goffredo Petrassi, was dedicated to Japan. It was an important event that hosted, in beautiful locations such as Fossanova and Caetani castle at Sermoneta, figures from the musical world such as musicologist

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1 Boxer 1951, p. 77.

2 McCollum and Hebert 2014, p. 310.

3 Galliano 2002, Chap. 3, pp. 1, 93.

Charles Rosen, interpreters Alicia De Larrocha, Cecilia Gasdia, Massimiliano Damerini, Roberto Fabbricani, and so on. The Festival Director, Riccardo Cerocchi, wrote in the program notes (which contained some explanations in Japanese): “Distinguished Japanese musicians [...] have honored us with their participation [...] This unique and coveted opportunity for dialogue is realized during three days of work with a detailed comparison of the musicians of the East and some of their most authoritative Italian colleagues.”

These “distinguished musicians” included Takemitsu Tōru, Ichianagi Toshi, Jō Kondō, and Matsudaira Yoriaki, together with Tanba Akira and Yoshihisa Taira, who came from Paris where they had long been active. Their works, both symphonic and chamber music, were presented in three concerts organized by Mario Bortolotto, together with pieces by the “authoritative Italian colleagues” Francesco Pennisi, Salvatore Sciarino, Paolo Castaldi, Aldo Clementi, Luciano Berio, and Camillo Togni, whose works had been commissioned for the occasion. The concerts were broadcast by the national radio RAI culture channel; the event was of great importance, and garnered intelligent criticism and excited comments from a positive public.

At the concert that I attended on June 15, I listened to pieces by Matsudaira Yoriaki and Takemitsu Tōru, both representative of the new melding of traditional Japanese and Western music, and by Ichianagi Toshi who was by then already beyond the profound influence of John Cage. At the corresponding conference, the composer Tanba Akira and the architect Isozaki Arata engaged in dialogue with their Italian counterparts. It was on that day that I was struck by the different quality and sensitivity of the music of those composers compared to what I knew of the European scene, and I decided to further my study of contemporary Japanese music. The pieces played there were different from the average “good” European writing, some beautiful, others opaque and impenetrable. I had to understand more, but at the time there were no studies of Japanese modern music available in Western languages.

There had been a Japanese musical presence in Italy since the late 1950s, including at the Festival of the International Society of Contemporary Music (SIMC, Rome 1959), and at the various Venice Biennales (1938, 1942, 1954, 1958, 1961, 1962, 1966, etc.). The Third Annual International Week of New Music in Palermo, held in the first week of October 1962, was a cornerstone in terms of the influence it had on Italian composers.<sup>4</sup> The

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4 *Bugaku* by Matsudaira; a Quartet by Mayuzumi Toshirō; *Succession* [sic] by Matsushita Shin'ichi run alongside *I canti di vita e d'amore* by Luigi Nono (then titled *On the bridge of Hiroshima*); *Puppenspiel* by Franco Donatoni; *Hétérophonie* by Mauricio Kagel; a *Klavierstück* by Karlheinz Stockhausen; John Cage's *Atlas eclipticalis*, etc. See Tessitore 2003, p. 116.

presence of Japanese contemporary music in Italy increased from the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, with a constructive partnership created between two new contemporary institutions in Rome in 1962, the Associazione Nuova Consonanza and the Japanese Cultural Institute, where we find such important figures as Giacinto Scelsi and Hirayama Michiko.<sup>5</sup> Together the two institutions produced concerts, meetings and exchanges of knowledge between Japanese and Italian composers, whereby both groups referred to and used a new international contemporary musical language. However, the ensuing response from the media was lackluster, with newspaper and magazine critics unable to truly grasp the specificity of what I had heard and what had intrigued me at the Sermoneta concert.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore I embarked on a long-term research project that involved not only studying texts but also getting to know composers, musicians, and musicologists: this was a new musical landscape that built upon a traditional one, and one about which there were few reference books in European languages (Malm 1959; Harich-Schneider 1973; Garfias 1975; Kikkawa 1984). My aim was to shed light on the state of contemporary Japanese music.

In 1987 I left for my first extended period of study and research, funded by a Monbushō grant, and in 1991 I graduated with a DMA in Musicology from Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (Tokyo University of the Arts, known more commonly as Geidai). My efforts culminated in 1998 with the Italian publication (Cafoscarina) of my book *Yōgaku: Japanese Music in the 20th Century* (English edition published by Scarecrow Press in 2002), hailed by some as the first comprehensive text on Western-style modern and contemporary Japanese music available in a Western language. Fellow researchers at the time in Tokyo included Judith Herd who had just completed a study on Japanese *yōgaku* for her Ph.D. (Herd 1987), Ury Eppstein (Eppstein 1994), and Emmanuelle Loubet, who was exploring the electroacoustic music scene (Loubet 1997–98). I had to study Japanese in order to be able to read the scarce Japanese literature (Togashi 1956; Inoue and Akiyama 1966; Akiyama 1979; Takeda 1980; Akiyama 1981, etc.) and to write my dissertation thesis. Virtually my entire cohort at Geidai Musicology—Chōki Seiji, Narazaki Yōko, Numano Yūji, Takaku Satoru and myself—turned to contemporary Japanese music, and ever since then we have all been fully active in research and publication.

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5 Nuova Consonanza was founded in 1959 by a group of young composers associated with Franco Evangelisti—Egisto Macchi, Mauro Bortolotti, Domenico Guaccero, Mario Bertoncini—and committed within the European trends of avant-garde music. See Tortora 1994, also the Appendice I “Michiko per Nuova Consonanza,” p. 173.

6 Galliano 2004.

It goes without saying that in order to understand music, we need to know where it comes from—the history and the people—and I was able to learn this musical tradition at Geidai. Nevertheless, at a certain point I felt I had to go deeper. Thanks to my first Nichibunken Fellowship, for ten months (September 2004–June 2005) I was able to study the history, theory and aesthetics of Noh theater, a keystone and source of different uniquely Japanese performing arts. I analyzed the themes and techniques of the music performed in Noh theatre, or Noh *opera* as I prefer to say, since this form is primarily singing accompanied by musical instruments. Previous scholarship tended to emphasize the literary and performative aspects of Noh, whereas I shifted the focus to the music itself. I was able to develop an understanding of the complex Noh repertoire with the wonderful resources of the Nichibunken library, conversations with fellow scholars, the musicians who made themselves available to my questions, and especially the ample time to research afforded me by the Nichibunken Fellowship. All of these factors allowed me to finish a manuscript on the work of composer Yuasa Jōji, the subject of my doctoral thesis, whose style was deeply influenced by his many years of experience as a *kokata* (child performer) in Noh. This was published in 2012 as *The Music of Jōji Yuasa* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing); the Japanese translation by Ono Michiko will be released by Artes Publishing in 2016.

I have been asked why I chose Yuasa, and not the more famous and established Takemitsu Tōru, to devote years of study and analysis to. Firstly, I very much liked Yuasa's music, of course, but I also found it fascinating that while Takemitsu was internationally known and considered intriguing *because* of his “exotic” nationality and unprecedented sensitivity to phrasing and instrumental color, Yuasa enjoyed an international reputation as a composer pure and simple (that is, with no regard for nationality), although his special mastery of techniques and time flow were obviously not Western but deeply Japanese.

Having studied in depth contemporary Japanese music and compared the output of both Italian/European and Japanese composers, I found the 1960s of great interest, and perhaps the most fertile and interesting period for contemporary music in Japan and in almost all Western countries. There has been much interest from scholars in this period and I felt compelled to continue to explore the Japanese music scene of the 1960s, looking at a group of extremely radical avant-garde Japanese artists that were part of an international movement called Fluxus. Fluxus was an incredibly innovative and creative movement, critical to the ensuing vanguard; it was the first, and to date the only, truly international

group in which music played an important role conceptually. I started researching Japan Fluxus thanks to a Japan Foundation Fellowship (September–November 2011), and I was able to complete it with a second Nichibunken Fellowship (September 2014–March 2015). I examined important materials, and this led to a better understanding of the uniquely Japanese creative aspects within the international avant-garde movement.

By looking in depth at the restlessness of radical young artists in the 1960s, I was able to reveal a new dimension to avant-garde, one different to that of the “official” or recognized trope of Takemitsu, Yuasa, and their contemporaries. The musicians and the aesthetic of Fluxus in its Japanese meaning, i.e. the movement I studied and that existed, in my opinion at least, from the end of the 1950s until 1968, dwelt in a different concept of freedom, in an unprecedented depth in terms of the great themes of life, art, expression, social community, otherness, and gender. This new research involved a new survey focusing on the Japanese social scene and its discourse—this meant adding to music (in the conceptually wide understanding of Fluxus artists) the themes of contemporaneity and interculturality, and elaborating on concepts of “otherness,” and on aspects of various social identifications and expressive issues in Japan mediated by musical production (performance, technology, textual and visual productions). I presented my research in two lectures (a 2014 Symposium titled “Music and Modernity in East Asia” at the Research Center for Japanese Traditional Music of the Kyoto City University of Arts, and at a 2015 Nichibunken Thursday seminar), and I am working toward publication.

Since I began my research on Japanese contemporary music, the number of scholars has increased and the caliber of research has greatly improved. It is true that musical “cultural postmodernism can be seen as an ideology *tout court* in the classic sense of a cultural system that conceals domination and inequality,”<sup>7</sup> as composer Hosokawa Toshio confirms: “when we speak of culture, all of us understand that it is Western culture which is spoken of.” Nevertheless, certain musical exchanges can act as paradigms of a “communicative action” as defined by Jürgen Habermas. “[C]ultural postmodernism... [can conceal] domination and inequality,” yet musicians, composers, musicologists, performers, organizers, institutions—an army of people—work together to produce a common world of (musical) intentions and meanings. This is a *communicative action* vis-à-vis Habermas: a negotiating, a using and exchanging of languages and representations,

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7 Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, p. 21.

sounds and thoughts, humanity and proximity, in which the Japanese are actors along with Italians, other Europeans, Americans and so on, and of which I am proud to be part of.

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