

SOUND, AS STRONG AS SILENCE

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Everything that attracts me to music is basically of an inner, personal nature. Outside influences are totally unimportant, though not entirely non-existent. The only time they can affect me is if I am able to develop and transform those parts which can nourish my music.

I often talk of 'nature', a word which I use simultaneously as an adjective, adverb and noun. It is really an imaginary 'nature' in which I experience reality intensely, particularly in eastern and western music, both of which are absolutely 'natural' because of being imaginary.

It seems to me that most contemporary music carefully avoids the past. I am not afraid of it. On the contrary, I need at the same time whatever is newest just as much as I need whatever is oldest. However, the unknown is found neither in the past, nor in the future, but in reality, simply in the immediate present.

My musical form is the direct and natural result which sounds themselves impose and nothing can decide beforehand the point of departure. I do not try in any way to express myself through these sounds but, by reacting with them, the work springs forth itself.

For several years I have composed a number of works for traditional Japanese instruments, in particular the shakuhachi and biwa, mainly because I have rediscovered them through the genius of two particular interpreters. But there is no profound reason which could logically explain my attraction to the music of my country, except perhaps a slight curiosity and musical interest.

At first, the sonorities of traditional Japanese music meant no more to me than something novel and quaint. But gradually these sonorities came to pose a fundamental problem and I was forced to consider them seriously, though without ever arriving at the solution, because the peculiar freedom of this music escapes the will and control of the composer since it can only be realised through the actual musical instrument.

One cannot translate into theory a swift or striking attack, if only because it would happen too suddenly, like lightning, too complex to grasp. Such sonority, developing of its own accord, gives rise to silences of tremendous metaphysical tension. It is the same with the 'Itcho' which punctuates the action in Nō Theatre, where musical sound and the negative sound of silence, without having any directly vital relationship with the expressive aims, nevertheless set up a violent resistance and create an intangible balance.

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To repeat the point: the complexity of lightning sound and the Japanese sensitivity towards this particular refinement has given simple silence an extraordinary significance and great musical weight.

To make the void of silence live is to make live the infinity of sounds. Sound and silence are equal. But this conception cannot work without extracting to the full the expressive potential of a musical sound or phrase which then will become an abstract, anonymous entity freely offered to the executant. The virtuoso of the Shakuhachi dreams of a perfect, sublime sound, like that of the wind in the bamboos, and in that is the full expression of belief in Japanese music. The inner complexities of a natural sound are akin to nothingness.

What more can one say? If I reconstruct the language of our traditional art I will always remain alien to historical cause and conversely, if I westernise the original sound incantation, I would divest it of all emotional power.

Is it necessary then to abandon the sounds of classical tradition, on the basis that they elude our present day ideas and authority? Even if that is the case, I must confess that they affect and satisfy me as much as the sounds of any other music...

It would be wrong to believe that expressiveness artificially born of a composer's skill, and innovation in method and form, guarantee the worth of a creative personality. Musical sound which freely approaches natural noise and therefore nothingness, escapes all criticism of its kind and poses a problem otherwise more general.

I would like to develop in two directions at once, as a Japanese in tradition and as a Westerner in innovation. Deep within myself I would like to keep two musical genres, both of which have their own rightful form. Making use of these basically incompatible elements at the heart of the many processes in composition is, in my view, only the first stage. I don't want to resolve this fruitful contradiction; on the contrary I want to make the two blocks fight each other. In this way I avoid isolating myself from tradition whilst advancing into the future with each new work. I would like to achieve a sound as intense as silence...