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Japanese Composers in the Multicultural UK: identity tactics and self-exoticism¹

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I have noticed that sometimes my pieces and I are perceived by British people in a manner different from that which I intend. It seems that this happens to many composers of Oriental origin. For instance, Frederick Lau writes about the reception by the Western press of Chinese ‘new wave’ composers:

It is not at all clear whether it is the music or the person behind the music that is being heard. However, one thing that is clear is that the reviewers invariably emphasize the composers’ ethnicity as a distinguishing feature of their music, as if this essence is readily apparent without the help of musical icons and verbal cues. (Lau 2004: 36)

This superficial attitude seems to apply to most aspects of life for the Oriental émigré. For example, in the spring and summer of 2003, in London, Orientally-inspired fashion was very much in vogue in women’s clothing, from a *kimono*-inspired collar and sleeves to an *obi* belt, from the Chinese dress and hair chopsticks to *ukiyo*e inspired prints: just about everything. But if I, as a Japanese woman, were to wear these clothes, people might think that I were doing so to emphasise my ethnic identity. And if, at the same time, I were to wear non-Japanese influenced items such as a Chinese stand-up collar, they might think that I were Chinese; or else they might believe it to be a Japanese collar. In fact, in 2000, I used a publicity photo in which I was wearing Orientally-inspired clothes designed and made in Britain and Italy, trying to make myself look like an imaginary pan-Asian in order to reflect my music: but it did not work; people thought the costume was a traditional Japanese one! Things are somewhat similar in music; when I use non-European materials people tend to assume that they are of Japanese origin.

Since I moved to London from Japan in 1993, I have encountered comments such as ‘*Gagaku* is excellent’ and ‘I love *Noh* (or *Kabuki*) theatre music’ from British musicians, scholars and music lovers, as if they expect Japanese musicians to know all about Japanese traditional art music. When I respond to such comments by saying that we Japanese do not learn much about them at school and they are very inaccessible unless you are born into special families, such people are really surprised. *Gagaku* is the imperial court music and has been played exclusively by musicians from a few families, to which common people have virtually no access. *Kabuki* and *Noh* are in a similar situation. Performers are exclusively male, with very few exceptions. Japanese children may have occasional school outings to see a short production of traditional theatre and may hear some recordings of traditional music, but without much guidance. It is asserted with reason that *Gagaku* is over-promoted amongst non-Japanese. Koizumi (1977: 113-15) says *Gagaku* is regarded as the most suitable music to present to foreigners as a first example of Japanese music, although it is not representative or typical at all; rather, it is exceptional in Japanese music. He argues as follows; it is instrumental music, so there is no need to understand the old Japanese language; it is ensemble music, like Western orchestral music and, ultimately, it is international by nature as it originated abroad (China via Korea) before flourishing in Japan.

Eppstein (1994: 4) argues that the uniqueness of the acceptance of Western music in Japan is caused by Westernisation without colonisation and by free choice. He also points out that the introduction of Western music in Japan occurred largely via an education system devised to raise the cultural level of the masses, while the diffusion of

Western cultural elements in colonised countries was decidedly elitist in character, operating through educational systems that were intended mainly for those select few whom the colonial government chose to favour for its own reasons. On the other hand, Japanese traditional art music exists in a rarified world, outside that of the ordinary Japanese. The training systems and aesthetics of these artistic genres are firmly attached to certain social classes in certain times, so, for ordinary Japanese, they are simply inaccessible. On the other hand, Western-derived musics are very accessible through school education and private instrumental teaching, are available for anyone who wants them, and affordable, compared to Japanese traditional instrumental tuition².

Since the turn of the previous century, Western art music has been opened up to influences from different musical traditions. For example, Debussy was deeply impressed by the Javanese gamelan, which he heard in the Paris Exposition in 1889, and wrote piano pieces which invoke its sound. Stravinsky incorporated folk songs from Latvia and Russia, as well as American jazz in his compositions. Benjamin Britten used ideas from Japanese traditional theatre into his Chamber Operas. Some instruments normally associated with jazz and popular music have been included in the orchestra, for example, soprano and tenor saxophones in Ravel's *Bolero*. Many composers continued to incorporate such influences into their compositions throughout 20th and 21st centuries.

However, the use of non-Western traditional instruments has hardly been standard practice. Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu's *November Steps* for orchestra with shakuhachi and Satsuma biwa in 1967, and Ravi Shankar's *First Sitar Concerto* in 1971 are relatively well-known experiments from the mid-20th century, but these are exceptionally successful cases. These successes are even questioned, as Brian Morton (1996), the author of *The Blackwell Guide to Recorded Contemporary Music*, commenting on *November Steps* that 'there is no doubt that the popularity of *November Steps* is due in part to a taste for musical exotica' (p. 194). The unfamiliar sound of the instruments themselves have a powerful impact in music and 'exotic' sounds can invoke a different world too easily.

Until 2005, I had myself been using musical influences from outside Western art music, most notably Japanese traditional folk music, which is less known in the West, but far more accessible than Japanese traditional art music, and British contemporary dance music, but I had used only standard Western instruments in my compositions. I had not have access to Japanese traditional instruments properly until then, and I did not feel that I had enough knowledge to write a piece for them. Also I felt that it would be very difficult to mix the sound of Japanese instruments successfully with Western orchestral instruments, as Toru Takemitsu (1981), the most internationally known Japanese composer, puts it, 'if I write one note for the biwa, a world protrudes which I do not want at all' (P. 21).

However, in 2005, I was approached by a British ensemble called OKEANOS to write a piece for koto, sho, oboe, clarinet and viola. The koto and sho players have spent a considerable time in Japan to learn their instruments. The commission was for a performance in an established annual contemporary classical music concert series called 'The Cutting Edge' organised by bmic (the British Music Information Centre). This was the first time I had attempted to write for an ensemble including traditional Japanese instruments. In the process of writing a new piece for them, I had to visit the sho player and koto player, both British, to learn how to write for the instruments. When I visited the sho player, he had invited another Japanese composer, Akiko Ogawa, who was also asked to write a piece for the same concert, from then on, I became interested in the phenomenon of British performers of Japanese instruments who ask

Japanese composers to write for Japanese instruments, although the composers themselves know nothing about these instruments.

There are a number of Japanese-born composers active in the UK such as Dai Fujikura, Fumiko Miyachi, Keiko Takano and Mai Fukasawa. Most of them were brought up with a Western music background in Japan, educated in UK universities or conservatories, and have established their career there. With increasing interest in Japanese culture, including more British performers who play Japanese traditional instruments, and the current policy of promoting multicultural arts by the funding bodies such as the Arts Council of England, the composers have been asked to write for instruments which they have never seen before, and such an interesting inversion will not be unusual from now on.

Traditionally, Western commentators tend to identify something 'exotic' even if it is not existent. For example, Curried (1996: 79-85) attempts a detailed analysis of the soundtrack *Merry Christmas Mr Laurence*, presupposing that Sakamoto was trying to produce 'Japanese-ness'. However Sakamoto's own explanation of his intentions is:

I worked hard to get the right music that would make us feel a kind of nostalgia, not for a real place, or country or time but a nostalgia for nowhere. I wanted to write music that would sound sometimes oriental for Western people and for Eastern people — something in the middle. I wanted to be in-between. (Russel & Young, 2000: 178)

Curiously, most UK-based Japanese composers make a point of promoting their ethnicity as a sales point of their music although most of them have exclusively studied Western Art music. It is possible that Japanese composers are taking advantage of these imaginary exotic elements. It has been noted how Oriental composers, Chinese American in particular, use race politics to promote themselves through scholars such as YU (2004). It seems as though, in the UK, now Japanese composers have begun to use exoticisation as a form of self-promotion. For example, Fumiko Miyachi, who moved to the UK when she was fourteen years old, introduces herself in the third person in her short biography:

Her music draws inspiration mainly from her multi-cultural background, Japanese and European which are seemingly at odds with each other. (bmic 2005: 44)

Akiko Ogawa, who was asked to write a piece for OKEANOS at the same time as they approached me also emphasizes her ethnicity to introduce her new piece for them:

As I grew up in Japan as a young child, I have been inherently influenced by the culture of the country musically, which may be particularly apparent in this piece. (bmic 2005: 27)

Dai Fujikura (2007) comments in the programme note for the piece written for OKEANOS that:

I did not dwell much on all that clichéd 'crossing-the-border', 'east-meets-west' rubbish that I see in a lot of publicity material for performances using Japanese instruments.

But immediately followed by a comment emphasizing his east-meets-west identity:

I was born in Japan but I spent my crucial teenage years in the UK and feel myself to be an equal mix of both cultures.

These are all curiously ‘self-exoticising’ comments. As I mentioned earlier, it is not normally possible to be ‘inherently influenced’ by Japanese traditional music (although Ogawa was fortunate that her mother played koto), and musical cultures of ordinary Japanese and Europeans are not much different. But if we look at these comments from a different angle, they might be saying what they are expected to say: these composers are asked to write pieces including Japanese instruments by British performers after all.

But there is a danger in innocently selling false identity, and ultimately giving the wrong impression of Japanese culture and people, maintaining cultural stereotyping.

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¹ Part of this article was originally appeared in Chapter 1 of my PhD thesis *Identity, Ethnicity and the International Music Scene: Oriental composers and Western expectations*, 2005, pp.10-31, submitted to City University.

² See Pecore (2000: 123) for the cost of Japanese traditional instrumental tuition.