

Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya, or thoughts on form and silence;

A young person's encounter with selected Asian contemporary and traditional music

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ABSTRACT

My encounter with East-Asian music and especially that of Japan has played a significant part in the shaping and foundation of my own aesthetic approach over the last several years. While a student of electroacoustic music composition in Denmark, I found myself drawn to the works of Japanese musicians and composers such as Taku Sugimoto, Sachiko M, Toshimaru Nakamura and Taku Unami. As I now pursue further studies in this area as a graduate student in Tokyo, I have encountered parallels between the explicit use of silence in the work of these contemporary artists and traditional thoughts on form and emptiness as expressed, for example, in Zeami's writings on *nō*. In this paper, I reflect upon the meaning and significance in these encounters and how they influence my own artistic practice and perspective as I seek to clarify my aesthetic point of view.

Introduction

I have become increasingly interested in the experience and use of silence in music. An interest which, as the title may suggest, is highly indebted to my encounter with certain East-Asian music, most notably through the works of contemporary Japanese artists often collectively cited as *onkyō*, although any kind of fixed label seem to fall short in categorizing this rich, diverse and continually evolving music. That being said, I do however think that a very concrete integration and awareness of silence can be seen as a shared foundation transversing through the music.

When we experience these works or others inherent with a substantial silence something quite extraordinary can happen. What it is exactly, I still do not know for sure, but I would like to share on these pages a collection of thoughts in the quest of getting closer an initial understanding hereof; a collection of thoughts on emptiness and form and what it is

we encounter when listening to silence in a situation normally filled with sound.

Form is Emptiness

Zeami Motokiyo, the great actor, playwright and co-founder of *nō*, makes a highly interesting remark in this respect in his *Yūgaku shudō fūken*, *Disciplines for the Joy of Art: "Being is what is visible, and Non-Being is the vessel. That which manifests Being is Non-Being"*[1].

It may also lead us further on the way to note the quotation Zeami makes a few pages earlier and seemingly close in spirit to the one above, stemming from the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya*, or *Heart Sūtra* as it is also known: "*Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form*"[2].

We see in these two sentences a clear equivalence between non-being and emptiness, both constituting *that*, in lack of a better word, where being can be – or come into form. While it might be slightly challenging to fully describe in proper words, then it is perhaps in fact a rather evident and unsurprising set of correlations, if we think about it for a moment or simply take a look around; at the outline of this piece of paper or the black ink on it for instance, achieving its respective form and distinctiveness through the white surroundings – that which it is not.

If we follow this thought, then it is naturally not any different in relation to music. In music we call emptiness silence and I'm sure we may come across many a definition of such term, sounding most likely rather differently from one another – might even in more than just on sense. Perhaps we could in connection to form describe it as that which precedes the beginning and appends the end; at all levels, from the lowest one of the smallest discrete material and up to the final piece in its whole.

From this perspective then, there could be said to exist in music, as well as all other audible phenomenon, a continual presence of silence, being the vessel of what we hear. It does however not for us as the listeners necessarily

equal an experience of it, any more than we consciously take note of that which encompasses these before-mentioned printed letters. But it seems to me that these relationships of form and silence, being and non-being, also continue and may go beyond what is merely to be found inside the closed piece of music and extend in a highly noticeable manner onto the listener and the listening experience itself.

Emptiness is Form

John Cage's 4'33" from 1952 is doubtlessly the most well known example of a situation where we encounter an explicit silence in music. More recently, we also find such in a very distinct way through the works of the above-mentioned contemporary Japanese artists. Or we may for example also look back in time to various branchings of traditional oriental performing arts in which the presence of buddhist thought pervade, such as the Japanese *nō* theatre or for instance the Hwanghach'ong 향하청 of the Korean court music repertoire, originating about a 1000 years ago during Chinese Song dynasty.

In this remarkable piece of music we encounter in the course of its approximately 40 minutes long duration a steadily recurring event of tones each separated by a small yet very substantial space of silence. In for example the work of contemporary composer Taku Sugimoto, this space has become considerably extended, spanning from shorter moments as well and up to several minutes in between each given sound. In 4'33" we encounter a piece of music with no actual sounding material in it at all.

These pieces of music provide in each of their own way a very concrete experience of what we could call a musical non-being, an emptiness, presented through silence in a very fundamental state. And if we allow ourselves to pay attention to this, such as sitting quietly a little more than four and a half minute, then I do believe they prove a refined example of Zeami's statements from above.

The musical experience expands and opens up to the whole of the situation we are situated in. We encounter a musical non-being reflecting back on our own being as the musical experience no longer is strictly fixed at a defined exterior musical content, but rather becomes the very act of listening instead. The sudden sounding emptiness in the piece of music we hear, makes it possible for the

sounds outside of it to come into a for us suddenly hearable form: the cars outdoors, the footsteps from upstairs, the quiet moving about in a chair or maybe just the slightest gulp. But not less is our attention brought to the material existing inside the piece of music, which no longer may happen to take part in the usual high level of internal, functional relationships, but where each of the given sounds instead are possible to become the very functions in themselves. And this I think, is of a very high value.

And so it is a main aim in my own musical practice, currently devoted to feedback which in its own nature almost could be viewed as an accumulation of silence; to make a heightened awareness of non-being possible to manifest itself in a heightened awareness of being: inside the music, accentuating each sound and its own independent qualities; as well as outside the music, where we, the listeners, find ourselves.

REFERENCES

Note: The translations of the upper quotations are written as found in the foreword of *The Flowering Spirit* by William Scott Wilson. For the full treatise, see for example J. Thomas Rimer & Yamazaki Masakazu, pp. 111-120. The translations differ slightly, the substance does however not.

- [1] · Wilson, *The Flowering Spirit*, p. 16, 2006 (Rimer & Masakazu, *On the Art of the Nō Drama*, pp. 118-119, 1984)
- [2] · Wilson, *The Flowering Spirit*, p. 21, 2006 (Rimer & Masakazu, *On the Art of the Nō Drama*, p. 116, 1984)

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Simon Roy Christensen, born 1988 and graduate student at DIEM at the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus, Denmark. Currently a 1-year foreign scholarship student at the Sonology Department of Kunitachi College of Music in Tokyo, studying composition and music programming under Prof. Shintaro Imai.