

Interview 2001

Michel Henritzi interviewed Otomo Yoshihide via email for the French magazine Revue & Corrigée.

(1) R&C:

Has your approach to sound and music been influenced by traditional Japanese musical forms? A link could be made between *onkyo* music (with which you are associated) and this tradition--for instance in its relationship with silence, minimal gestures, and the withdrawal of the musician behind the music.

Otomo:

Before I answer the question about the influence of "traditional Japanese musical forms," I need to clarify the meaning of this vague reference. I don't really understand what music of what era you mean. For instance, the music of Japanese taiko drum ensembles like Kodo and Ondekoza, which most people (including many Japanese) think is traditional music that has been around for a very long time, actually has a history of only a few decades. There are a number of genres of Japanese classical music, so it upsets me to hear it summed up briefly as "traditional Japanese musical forms."

I definitely have been influenced by Japanese music since I was a child, but this was mainly music from the 1960s--TV music and Japanese pops (*kayokyoku*). At the time I had no contact with traditional or classical music. Up to the present, in fact, I've had no connection, culturally speaking, with classical performing arts. So superficially, I'm not influenced by these traditions. If there is any influence, it comes from knowledge I've gained from books and CDs, not from my daily life. If I think about it more deeply, though--if I think about the fact that the *kayokyoku* I liked as a child had some of its roots in folk music and popular music of the Meiji era (about 100 years ago), which in turn was influenced by older music--then I can't say that I've had absolutely no connection with traditional music. Anyway, to me, '60s music is tradition. Each person has a different idea of what tradition is. You can't say that all Japanese have a common tradition. I can say that my life followed the typical pattern of a Japanese city person who spent his childhood in the '60s. But even Japanese of the same age must have different traditions, depending on where they grew up and their family environment.

As for the second part of the question, I'm still not sure if "onkyo" can be considered a genre. But for the sake of convenience, I'll use the word as it is often used in Tokyo, to name a new musical trend. First of all, I never looked to Japanese traditional music in order to find my current *onkyo* style. It's certainly true that some traditional forms of Japanese music feature a particular kind of silence, but others have almost no silence. On the other hand, what did influence me a great deal were the live performances of Taku Sugimoto, Sachiko M, Ami Yoshida and others at tiny venues in Tokyo; and the music of Yuji Takahashi and Toru Takemitsu. Takahashi has seriously studied Japanese popular folk songs and *ichigenkin* (monochordal) music, and Takemitsu studied Japanese classical music, especially *gagaku* (Japanese court music) and *biwa* (four-string lute) and shakuhachi music, so in this sense I suppose I have been indirectly influenced by these things.

(2) R&C:

With the New Jazz Quintet, you have just released a jazz album called *Flutter* on the Tzadik label. Among other things, you play some jazz standards by Eric Dolphy and Gerry Mulligan. Why play jazz again today--a tradition imported by American soldiers after the war? Instead of that, you could have chosen to play works by Masayuki "Jojo" Takayanagi or Kaoru Abe, who, while staying within the borders of the jazz idiom, deconstructed it with a unique, free approach.

Otomo:

Not even I have a definite answer to the question of why I started doing jazz. But I'm sure one indirect reason is that in the '70s I often went to jazz *kissa* (jazz cafes), and admired and was influenced by Masayuki Takayanagi and Kaoru Abe. Actually, it isn't true that jazz was first imported to Japan after World War II. Before the war, a lot of jazz came to Japan via Shanghai and Hawaii, and there were several jazz bands in Japan. But I don't think these historical facts are directly related to my playing jazz. It's simply that I make music while having a conversation with each work that led me more deeply into the world of music of the '60s, '70s and '80s. Jazz is one of these types of music.

(3) R&C:

What idea did you have in mind when you were mixing the sounds of Sachiko M and Masami Akita into this all-jazz project?

Otomo:

I don't really know. But if their sounds weren't there, it wouldn't work well. If I had to explain it, I might say that I was born in Japan and grew up in the Japanese culture, so jazz is not my mother tongue and I will never use the language like a native; therefore, I throw a musically different vocabulary into the jazz format to keep a kind of balance. But this is a reason I've just thought of.

(4) R&C:

You were once a student of the guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi. How did this encounter affect you and your guitar technique? You spoke of the vertical structure in Derek Bailey's musical approach, with the idea of playing and then forgetting--being memory-less. Is this a necessary condition for improvisation? Keith Rowe, on the contrary, says that he regards Bailey as a figure a little like Picasso in the history of modern painting, and that his improvisation is horizontal in approach. Is it important to stay connected to the instrument, as Derek Bailey does, or should one go beyond it, as Keith Rowe does?

Otomo:

The time I spent with Mr. Takayanagi had an immeasurable influence on both my music and my life. But I was not a good student, and in the end I left him, so I don't think it's the right time yet to say much about him. I don't think there is a necessary condition for improvisation, because each person improvises in his own way. To me Derek Bailey's improvisation sounds very different from Keith Rowe's, but I really like both.

(5) R&C:

You announced that you were going to release a record called *Dear Derek* on the Meme label, which will be based on samples from Derek Bailey's records. This brings to mind Fennesz, who literally made the body of his instrument disappear in the process of digital sampling, in an attempt to go beyond the prepared guitar. How far along is this project?

Otomo:

I made this work in 1998-99, but I haven't released it. I listened to it several times and decided I wasn't satisfied with it. I haven't heard Fennesz's work, so I don't know how different his idea is from mine. In my view, improvisation is fundamentally unrepeatable, and when it is recorded and listened to many times, it generates a different meaning. In this sense, the repetition of certain parts of Derek's performances emphasizes the beauty of his guitar playing and recording, but within a completely different concept. I was trying to accomplish this through improvisation using audio equipment. Some of the work was satisfactory, but I felt that something was missing, so I decided not to release it.

(6) R&C:

After a period in which you didn't play the guitar much, or played it in conjunction with other devices, you came back to playing guitar, notably with Taku Sugimoto in an acoustic duo on *Rectangle*, and also in his guitar quartet. What motivated your return to the guitar? And can you tell us about your encounter with Taku Sugimoto, and what attracted you to his music?

Otomo:

The indirect reasons for my becoming fascinated with the guitar again were that I heard the album *Shiawase no Sumika*, by Seiichi Yamamoto, of *Boredoms*, and *Phew*; and that I was struck by the beauty of Taku Sugimoto's guitar playing. But I think the biggest reason was that in planning my *New Jazz Quintet*, I thought I would need to play the guitar; and my close friends Naruyoshi Kikuchi (sax) and Yasuhiro Yoshigaki (drums) strongly encouraged me to play. Currently I like both the sound of the guitar and playing the instrument. Listening to Taku Sugimoto's album in 1997 led to my meeting him. I thought his playing was great, so right away I got in touch with Ami Yoshida, who knew him, got his phone number, and called him. After that I went to his concerts and played with him, and also got to know musicians he works with, like Tetuzi Akiyama. Around the same time, Toshimaru Nakamura and Sachiko M started playing together regularly (they had played together a few times before); and Nakamura, Akiyama and Sugimoto started an improvisation concert series. I had a feeling a new movement would emerge around all of these musicians. Self-styled music critics in Japan who hardly go to concerts were completely indifferent to them and ignored what they were doing. But their presence and methods were really important to me in finding my new approach after *Ground Zero*. I got a lot of hints from them in terms of time and playing. Most importantly, my way of listening to music changed completely after I heard them.

(7) R&C:

You have written about Chinese music in the time of the Cultural Revolution, and about Japanese popular music during World War II. You chose two traumatic moments in human history. Notably, you wrote about the confiscation and use of music by those in power in totalitarian regimes. Can you tell us what interested you in these subjects? What relationship do you see between music and power?

Otomo:

I got interested in and studied those themes over 20 years ago, so I've forgotten my actual motive. Maybe I simply thought it would be good to study them because no one else had. But in the course of the research I discovered that in Japan during the war, not only was music controlled by the authorities; also, in many cases, musicians regulated and reshaped their own music in order to cooperate in the war effort. I remember I was shocked to learn that even musicians who were, essentially, far from the fighting became warlike. In any case, this is just knowledge I gained as a student by reading various materials. The important thing is the choices you make. Look at the situation today. The majority of people support war. Would you have believed a year ago that this would happen?

(8) R&C:

Compared to the two musical cultures I mentioned, which emerged from totalitarianism, how do you view the omnipresence of music in today's social and public spheres--in particular, its transformation into a commercial product, its promotional use as propaganda for the consumer society?

Otomo:

I'm not interested in using music in order to send the kinds of explicit messages that can be put into words. I may have been in the past, but now I'm against that kind of thing. Today, when 90 percent of Japanese support the new prime minister and the U.S. is in a war, I feel that way more and more strongly. So I have absolutely no intention of making propaganda about the consumer society with music. I don't think music is something that can be simplistically changed into words, and I'm against the use of music as a propaganda tool, no matter how valid your beliefs are. Of course, my personal opinions are implied in the ways in which I make and sell my music, and in the way I live. But I don't think I should explain my opinions in words. I think musicians should confine themselves to making music.

(9) R&C:

Do you think turntablism is merely a representation of our acoustic reality, with our sound environment perceived as a great, permanent mixture? Even Ground Zero sounded to me like a live mix of different musicians, each with his/her own story and technique.

Otomo:

I'm not that interested in turntablism itself. Lately I've been thinking that sampling and mixing aren't that special, either; they're just two of many options. It certainly can be said that music is an eternal remix. But since things can be called anything, depending on the angle they're viewed from, I don't think verbal explanations have any meaning. I'm tired of the tendency to treat remixing and sampling as special--it doesn't interest me at all. But I am interested in the fact that people have started using the turntable as a musical instrument--recycling it, in a way--just when its role as a practical piece of audio equipment was ending and it was about to retire from the scene. In this sense I'm interested in the work of musicians like Christian Marclay, Martin Tétreault, Philip Jeck, and Tetuzi Akiyama. Yasunao Tone's way of using CDs is extremely interesting, too. I still feel that there are possibilities in that direction. About my work with Ground Zero, I don't want to comment. I think it's a good thing for different people to see it from different angles.

(10) R&C:

You thought a great deal about the question of copyright, of finished works, which you conceptualized in the term "sampling virus," but then you turned away from these issues. You still use the turntable, but now you use it without records. What caused you to move away from the political idea of musical material to engage in a pure relationship with sound, through projects like I.S.O. and Filament?

Otomo:

I still think Sampling Virus is an extremely satisfying work. Even now people sometimes send me pieces in which it's used. But now it's completely out of my control. I can't say what will happen to it in the future. And since the original was made up mostly of sounds sampled without permission, it's debatable whether it can even be called my work. I was able to send out into the world this totally inconsistent, uncontrollable thing that I may not even be able to call a musical work, and in that sense I like it more than the projects I've had total control over.

As for the change I've gone through in the past few years, I really don't know the reason. At some point I simply got sick of making music that produces an effect through the use of a lot of memory. My interest in controlling the sampling process practically disappeared. I quickly get tired of things that I can control myself. I started to think that using the turntable without records and making feedback, gathering noises...that this kind of process, which is much less controllable than sampling, was extremely interesting. I discovered specific techniques by actually working with I.S.O. and Filament. And Sachiko M was probably a big influence.

(11) R&C:

What should we think of music that establishes a sadomasochistic relationship with its audience through pain? From speed metal to techno to noise, there's an avid pursuit of musical extremes. How do you react when you are told that the sounds produced in Filament are extremely painful? What would you say about the beauty of these sounds?

Otomo:

I don't perform with Filament with the intention of inflicting pain. I simply make sounds I like. In using noise or high-pitched sine waves, I'm not pursuing any kind of good feeling that might be derived from pain, because I don't want to make sounds that are really painful to me. But I know these sounds are quite difficult for some people to take, so I don't want to force them to listen to them. I have absolutely no interest in musical exchanges based on a sadomasochistic type of discipline. To me, Filament's sound is very beautiful. But the experience of beauty is always linked to danger. The danger is the cessation of thought. I really want people to be aware of this.

(12) R&C:

The history of Japanese noise music could be roughly divided into three periods: the '80s, with groups like Merzbow, Hijokaidan, CCCC, and so on, whose approach was based on accumulation and saturation; the '90s, a period of deconstruction and chaotic mixings, with Ground Zero, Asteroid Desert Songs, Nasca Car, etc.; and the current period, with musicians like Toshimaru Nakamura, Sachiko M, Ryoji Ikeda and *O, who have an esthetic of elimination, reduction, and focus on detail. Do you agree with this breakdown? In other words, do you see an evolution in musicians' relationship with sound? If so, what does that say in terms of the social changes under way now?

Otomo:

Roughly speaking, I think this breakdown is appropriate. If it were me, I'd add the early noise period of the '70s, which was strongly influenced by jazz and rock--with musicians like Takayanagi and Keiji Haino. It also might be interesting to think about the differences between the Tokyo and Osaka scenes. But I think one of the mistakes people always make when they talk about history is to categorize things by decade. For instance, Takayanagi further developed noise methods in the '80s, and Merzbow is still in the core of noise music. In reality, the boundaries of these activities are vague; it's a kind of gradation.

(13) R&C:

An often overlooked but important musician is Yasunao Tone, who approached music from the starting point of music on support. As far as I know, he was the first musician to use the CD player as an instrument, while at the same time being completely removed from John Oswald's "plunderphonic" approach. He was also a member of Group Ongaku, the first total improvisation group in Japan. How is he viewed by those on the electronic and improvisation scenes?

Otomo:

I think the pieces making use of his CD were the most amazing and beautiful of all the works of the '90s using audio equipment. In particular, his attention to bugs in the data was something I identified with. He was active in Japan in the '60s, and then he moved to New York, so unfortunately I wasn't directly influenced by the work of Tone or Group Ongaku. There is no direct connection between the movement that he was part of and myself, just as there is no direct connection between Toshi Ichiryu or Takemitsu and me. I came out of the Japanese non-academic avant-garde scene that started in the late '70s, when the subculture went further underground. There was a revival of the works of Tone and other people in the early '90s, and I really feel that this is when a lot of us came to appreciate and reevaluate their work. The other day I had a chance to talk with Mr. Tone for the first time, and it was fascinating to hear him talk about the musical activity that preceded and led up to Group Ongaku. He had started playing with Takehisa Kosugi and others in the late '50s, and some of their concepts were similar to the current ideas of Taku Sugimoto and Sachiko M.

(14) R&C:

It seems to me that it's become much easier to make music, thanks to the new technologies. On one hand, the tools that are blamed by critics for turning music into merchandise--turntables, samplers, software--are sold by the music industry, calling into question the nature of the criticism; it's as if it were no longer possible to avoid becoming a part of this commercial world. On the other hand, I have the feeling that there are no real political or esthetic stakes, no real necessities to justify making music, if you compare the current period to the '60s, when Fluxus was active and a lot was at stake in free jazz. What is your opinion on this topic, and on the new technologies?

Otomo:

The period when Fluxus and free jazz emerged was so different from the current situation that I don't think you can make a simple comparison. I know that music can be effective in enlightening a movement, and it's true that new musical movements contain hints as to the direction society should take in the future. But I don't think music that merely asks questions whose answers are already known is at all interesting. I've never been jealous of the '60s. I'm always making music within the present situation. The answer is in the listener's imagination. It's the listener who discovers something

in the work of Taku Sugimoto and Sachiko M. This is fundamentally different from the method where the music maker has the answer from the beginning and presents his or her work to the listener. If you overlook that aspect of the current music, it will be hard to understand. We can't choose the time we live in. What we need now is surely not movements like Fluxus and free jazz. For the same reason, it's hard to reject new technology. Convenient technologies like the telephone and the Internet will become popular even if no one tries to make them popular. I don't think it's a good idea to try to destroy them or deny their existence just because you think they only benefit big business. What we as individuals can do is show how to use those technologies in an open way. One of the important roles of the artist is to show how to use them in ways other than those that benefit big business.

I don't really understand the idea of a valid reason to make music. Why do you have to explain in words why you make music? It's the same as not being able to explain in words why you live. You don't need a reason to dance. I don't know yet why I'm alive. I simply live, doing what I do every day, what I think is good, trying to make my life better, finding small pleasures like enjoying good food. In any case, I think dancing and singing badly, being disappointed in love, and making strange noises are incomparably better than conducting terrorism and dropping bombs.

(15) What do you derive from playing with other turntablists like Martin Tetreault, Christian Marclay, Philip Jeck or Erik M? Do you see any similarity between that and the battles between hip-hop DJs? And what is your opinion of this African-American culture of re-appropriation?

Otomo:

I'm interested in the activities of L?K?O? in Tokyo and BasRatch in Kyoto, who have made record scratching more abstract, and of Tetuzi Akiyama, who plays the turntable as an object, with no records. I don't know much about the DJ scene in the U.S.

(16) R&C:

You have composed a lot of music for movies. What interests you in the relationship between sound and image? Are there any composers or directors who have influenced you in this area? Have you ever wanted to write concrete music, or "cinema for the ear"?

Otomo:

Composition for movies is a very important part of my work. Of course, I'm influenced a lot by directors who I work with, and also by movies that I've seen in the past. Sometimes the influence from movies affects other types of music I make, and sometimes not. The way I compose music for movies is different from the way I usually compose. I always consider the relationships between the music and the images, the dialogue, and the sound effects, so I have to think in a different way than when I make music independently. Also, unlike in my own productions, I need to consider every style of music as an option, if necessary, like an actor who can play every role. I don't know the meaning of "cinema for the ear," but some of my works could be considered very cinematic. But to me the idea of making music in a cinematic way isn't very attractive, because it seems too limiting. Movies are fascinating, but they can be restrictive in both expressive and financial terms. My musical works are much freer than movies.

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