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miya masaoka

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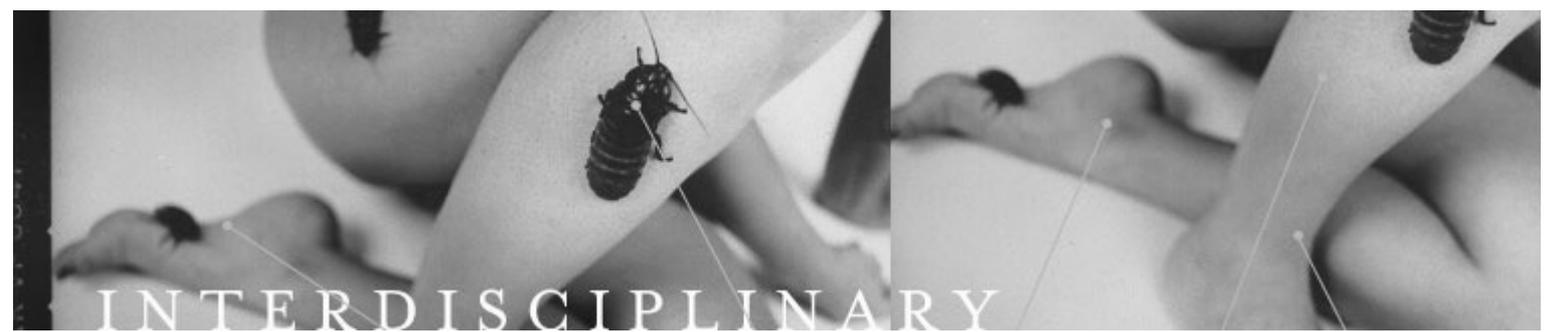
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## **Koto no tankyu (Koto explorations)**

by *Miya Masaoka*

Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter, Volume XXV, Number 2, Spring, 1996

I am a kotoist and composer, simultaneously navigating the varied worlds of traditional *gagaku* music (Japanese court orchestral music), new music, jazz, improvised and electronic music. Classically trained and holding degrees in both Western and Eastern music, I have been informed and inspired by performances with a wide variety of musicians, including Pharoah Sanders, whose music resonates with a sense of spirituality; L. Subramanian, virtuoso Indian violinist; Alvin Curran, avant-garde composer, the Cecil Taylor Orchestra, led by Cecil Taylor, who has spearheaded a deconstructionist concept, Steve Coleman, brilliant saxophonist/composer, Francis Wong and Mark Izu, leaders in Asian American jazz; Henry Kaiser and Fred Frith, guitar improvisers; George Lewis, innovative trombonist/composer/programmer; Roham de Saram of the Arditti String Quartet, who taught me bowing techniques; and my esteemed gagaku teacher, Suenobu Togi.

Over the years I have moved gradually from playing traditional koto, under my first koto teacher, Seiko Shimaoka, to developing my own approach to technique and vocabulary. The transition was at first tenuous, and I often feared that Shimaoka would attend one of my concerts outside of the traditional koto sphere. While she never did so, at one lesson she mentioned any disobedient student could be expelled from the school and have their costly koto certificates revoked if the teacher requested. Feeling vaguely guilty, I immediately apologized for any potential problem I might be creating. Yet, at the next lesson, she spoke proudly of an article she had read about me in the local Japanese newspaper, and, over the years, she has come to support my efforts.

The koto is a Japanese zither-like instrument with an ancient history. Koto is an abbreviation of “*kami no nori koto*” — the oracles of the gods. It has deep roots in the spiritual practice of Shintoism, and to a lesser extent, Buddhism. In gagaku and Shintoism the instruments are sacred; they are gods embodying spirits, just as trees, stones and air do. To pluck the string of a koto, for example, is to release its spirit/soul, its sound. In studying koto, the student becomes the koto, as the drummer becomes the drum. (“Become the fourteenth bridge,” my teacher used to say.) To lose a sense of self, to become one with the instrument — these ideals are the main ideals.

The koto finds its natural place in gagaku, an ensemble of strings, wind, and percussion instruments. Notated gagaku scores date back to the seventh and eighth century Tang Dynasty in China, a vital period when musicians from Persia, India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and China performed and improvised together. My gagaku teacher, Sensei Togi, traces his lineage through more than 1,000 years in the Imperial Court musical family. Studying music with him was both fascinating and startling. He conducted the orchestra sitting on the floor, his left arm conducting the strings, his right arm the winds, his right leg signaling the taiko and his left leg bringing in the reeds — all four limbs moving in the most graceful method of conducting I have ever experienced. Nevertheless he wouldn't hesitate to hit my koto or my hand with his baton if I made a mistake.

My odyssey with the koto has led me to break venerable cultural traditions, touching on points of controversy musically, aesthetically, and politically, from both inside and outside my . In “Playing Other People's Music” (Sounding Off, Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution, Edited by Ron Sakolsky and Fred Wei-Han Ho, 1995) Royal Hartigan states “It's disrespectful and wrong to play traditional instruments in a non-traditional context,” an ongoing debate within the cultural imperialism/appropriation discourse. Hartigan's position, framed as a Euro-American ethnomusicologist and percussionist theorizing and performing traditional music within the context of post-coloniality, has a certain justifiable significance. But for me, being of Japanese heritage and born in America, bi-culturalism and trans-cultural identity has always been a part of my existence; it is this hybridity that engenders and perhaps necessitates a new cultural expression for me.

As a composer concerned with new sounds, contexts, structures and realities, I have no choice but to construct my own musical reality. In traditional Japanese music the emphasis is on refinement rather than creativity, emulation of one's teacher rather than developing a personal style. As such, traditional music represents a culture, a way of life of a collective people emanating from a particular location in history and geography. A contemporary composer, however, is required to grapple with both tradition and innovation, Western or otherwise, and the finished oeuvre is primarily that of an individual. Musical configurations using collective improvisation by the individual performers, such as I have experienced in the Cecil Taylor Orchestra and performing works of Pauline Oliveros, Christian Wolfe, and George Lewis, reduces the singular control of the composer, and relegates more responsibility — and hence individuality — to the performer. I have composed a series of ten pieces using gagaku and Western instruments, and have been fortunate to have coaxed members of the gagaku ensemble to perform my pieces. Frequently there are sections that call for some aspect of improvisation, as well as non-traditional techniques.

*Trilogy for Sho, Bassoon and Koto* (1994, employs extended techniques for the *sho* (a 17 bamboo reed mouth organ), harmonics on the bassoon, and tremolo and bowing on the koto. As in gagaku, there are no harmonic progressions, but rather harmonic structures of relative dissonance and consonance. The *sho*, a fixed pitch instrument, capable of only nine tones and approximately 1/4 tone below 440, is required to bend notes in an uncharacteristic manner, as well as execute sets of three rhythmic cells.

*The Wanderers and the Firefly* (1994) is scored for three *hichi-riki* and snare drum. The shrieking quality of the *hichi-riki*, a wide double-reeded instrument, is especially effective with three *hichi-riki* playing in unison, then canonically, and eventually yielding to improvisation. The gagaku performers, even those who read western notation, had difficulty performing without the familiar archaic calligraphy. After trying many notational formats, including using the same gagaku characters in my handwriting, the best results were obtained through cutting and pasting gagaku notation in original calligraphy onto the score and combining it with verbal instructions. Throughout much of this piece, the snare drum is an annoying buzz — like a pestering insect — and gradually develops into a virtuoso expression of rhythms, accents and widely ranging and quickly changing timbres.

The search for new techniques, timbres and contexts for my own instrument, the koto, has comprised much of my research and activities. Exposure to Cage's prepared piano pieces, as well as performing with improvisers who have developed a repertoire of prepared sounds on their instrument inspired me to do the same with the koto. As a result, the koto began taking on a new personality for me as new sounds emerged from the strings. An alternate persona seemed to be revealing itself. Excitedly, I documented more than 200 new techniques and tunings, such as the use of different materials for the bridges, changing location of the bridges, uses of differently material for the strings, alternate tuning possibilities, inserting metal, wood and rubber between the strings, different finger picking techniques, uses of a

plectrum rather than a picks, etc. Over the years, I have developed some of these ideas and discarded others, based on the relative success of their application in performance. Bowing the koto has been one of the more successful techniques, and, in the Cecil Taylor Orchestra, I sat in the string section and bowed violin lines on my instrument. The other violinists were tolerant of such an odd addition to their section, and would watch with great curiosity and amusement as I set up my koto next to them.

*How to Construct a Tar Paper Barrack* (1993) is a piece for tape and koto that refers to the barracks in American internment camps where my parents and relatives lived in for four years during World War II. I recorded fragments of koto, bowed koto and piano that have been stretched, convolved and mutated digitally by computer. I then improvise with the tape, entering three sound spheres that are defined by both the pre-recorded material and my improvisation.

I have also been active in computer interfacing with the koto. *The Not Quite Random Koto* (1995), which employs Max (interactive object-oriented software) and digital sound processing, explores some of these possibilities while continuing to assert the physicality of the instrument. The combined use of software and internal programming allows me to respond in new ways to my environment and could more accurately be described as transformative in design.

This year, I will be attending STEIM, an institute in Amsterdam where a team of hardware and software specialists are developing advanced technology for musical and performance application. A digital interface will be built for my koto, extending the possibilities for interacting with digital video images, various sound sources.

My own feeling is that art is an inescapable expression of the social values and aesthetics of a culture and its historical location. Gagaku succeeded in expressing the cultural values and way of life of seventh and eighth-century Asia, and later embodied the ideals of the Heian Era, and now, we, as artists struggling to create art at the cusp of the twenty-first century, are contributing our individual musical voices to the vast repertory of music that has preceded us. How to cope with such a daunting proposition? I think of the words of Cecil Taylor: Living out the quintessential contemporary experience, you don't have anything but your music. You worked all your life on your music — your voice — your music is all you've got. So guard it, and don't give it to anyone who doesn't appreciate it."

*Published by Institute for Studies in American Music*  
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