
The Japanese Sound Culture

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The decision of whether some sounds are regarded as music or not rests with the cultural background of the listener. In other words, cultures do not share the same methods of listening; there are as many ways of listening as there are cultures and ears. I am going to introduce the Japanese sound culture and its heritage.

SOUND OF THE BLOOM OF A LOTUS FLOWER

In the early Showa period (1925-1989), people gathered to listen to the sound of the bloom of a lotus flower at Sinobazu-no-ike pond in the early summer. (The pond is in Ueno Park and is one of the most famous ponds in Tokyo.) However, the frequency of that sound is approximately 9-16 Hz. As we normally hear sounds within a frequency range from 20 Hz to 20,000 Hz, people were unable to actually hear the sound of the bloom of a lotus flower. But they loved and wanted to listen to that phantom sound. The experience was a kind of communal auditory hallucination.

THE SOUND INSTALLATION SUIKINKUTSU

The Japanese musicologist Naoko Tanaka is one of the most important soundscape researchers in Japan. In her thesis, she investigates the Japanese sound installation, "suikinkutsu" found in Japanese-style gardens from the end of the Edo period (1603-1867) to the early Showa period. "Sui" is equivalent to "water," "kin" is the Japanese zither and "kutsu" means "cave." The sound of the suikinkutsu was made by the stream of a drain coming from a stone basin or a wash basin. A gardener usually dug a thin hole under a drain, and he always covered it with stones to allow water to flow naturally. In the case of the suikinkutsu, the gardener made a drain using an overturned water pot or barrel. There was water at the bottom of the pot. When someone washed their hands, water dropped slowly, falling to the bottom of the pot, and these sounds were amplified inside the water pot. People enjoyed listening to the subtle and quiet sounds coming from underground. Not only did they appreciate the sound of the suikinkutsu itself, but also the time spent creating the sound. After washing their hands, they had to wait for a moment until the sound from the suikinkutsu emerged. This delay, caused by the structure of the suikinkutsu had the effect of directing people's listening to other environmental sounds in the garden. While looking at some of the garden plants and stones, and while listening to the voices of the birds and the whispering of the wind in the trees, the suikinkutsu contributed its quiet sound a few moments later. The result was that people forgot their ordinary time sensations little by little during the visits in the Japanese-style garden. However, suikinkutsu is totally different from the other classical arts (e.g., the Japanese tea ceremony and the art of flower arrangement) in that it is just one aspect of Japanese daily life, closely related to the human sensory organs and physical movements or daily actions like washing hands and gargling.

EARS WITNESS ACCOUNTS FROM LITERATURE

We can find references to the Japanese musical sensations in ancient Japanese literature, such as "The Tale of Genji." Genji Monogatari was written by Lady Murasaki. (Prince Genji is the ancient Japanese aristocrat, who is a son of the Emperor and his concubine Kiritsubo;

Monogatari is equivalent to "tale" or "story") (Murasakishikibu, A.D. 978?-1031)

If an ancient master plays the kin, his music has the power to move the earth and a fierce god, and all kinds of instruments have a variety of effects according to kin sounds. However, when poor players play the kin, its sounds sometimes move the moon and the stars, make snow and frost out of season, and disturb the clouds and thunder. Thus, the kin is the greatest instrument. So why should we choose any other instrument except the kin as a standard for tuning all sounds?

Naoko Tanaka says,

We should understand 'all sounds' as 'sounds of all things in nature.' Thus, it is equivalent to 'soundscape of the world' rather than 'sounds of all kinds of instruments.' The kin sound then was important not only as a musical sound but also as a symbol able to move the world. Or, to say it another way, sounds which were organized by the kin were not only sounds of the instruments but 'all sounds' of the world. We should understand that 'sounds of all kinds of instruments' is the same as 'sounds of all things in the world.'

This idea is very close to the Western concept of the Music of the Spheres. Murray Schafer wrote in *The Tuning of the World* as follows:

This is identical with the Western concept of the Music of the Spheres, that is, music as rational order, which goes back to the Greeks, particularly to the school of Pythagoras. Having discovered the mathematical correspondence between the ratios of the harmonics in a sounding string, and noting that the planets and stars also appeared to move with perfect regularity, Pythagoras united discovery with intuition and conjectured that the two types of motion were born expressions of a perfect universal law, binding music and mathematics. Pythagoras is reported to have been able to hear the celestial music, though none of his disciples was able to do so. But the intuition persisted.

It is very difficult to explain the Japanese musical sensations in Genji Monogatari using English. It seems the ancient Japanese people considered various sounds as the total 'scenery,' and being more imaginative than us, there was no border between sound and music in the ancient Japanese sound culture. The Japanese people regarded sound as an abstract image rather than as a pragmatic acoustic event, like the sound of the bloom of a lotus flower and suikinkutsu, for instance. The concept of sound was extended from the real sound of an instrument to sounds of a variety of phenomena in the ancient Japanese culture.

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