

# Challenging Cultural Borders: Tōru Takemitsu's Claim to Creative Transgressions

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**Abstract.** Confronted by issues of East/West demarcation, Tōru Takemitsu challenged the imaginary border through acts of transgression resulting in his varying musical products that demonstrate his confidence in both Western and Japanese musical traditions. Through methods of a rigorous critical and theoretical analysis, selected works of Takemitsu have exhibited that this demarcation or imaginary bordering of East/West has retained its strong influence on both the process and product of his musical compositions.

**Keywords:** Takemitsu, Japanese traditions, Western music, creative transgressions.

## 1. Introduction

Can borders be challenged? Borders as geo-political structure, borders as racial segregation construct, borders as cultural demarcations of domains. One of the most potent border construct is an imaginary one – the border that demarcates the East and the West. Japan's foremost composer, Tōru Takemitsu (1930–1996) saw himself positioned on the border between the East and the West where he was constantly confronted by various cultural issues and disparate musical forces throughout his career span. In the early 1960s Takemitsu was “experiencing a European revolution and a Japanese tradition”<sup>1</sup>, and likened his situation to “facing towards an ocean into which everything pours ... I knew I would plunge into this ocean sooner or later.”<sup>2</sup> Takemitsu then expressed his intention “to develop in two directions at once, as a Japanese in tradition and as a Westerner in innovation.”<sup>3</sup> Despite his enthusiastic application of Japanese elements in his Western based music, the overall presentation and musical gestures<sup>4</sup> in his works still noticeably conforming to Western musical language hence alluding to a paradox. Until this writing Takemitsu's conformity to Western musical characteristics at the expense of his Japanese traditions has been unexplored. This paper examines Takemitsu's treatment of Japanese and Western musical traditions in the formation of products of cross cultural context illustrating differing aesthetics in line with varying operations of innovation and integration. Selected works by the composer will be rigorously interrogated through critical analysis to gauge his creative transgressions.

## 2. Takemitsu's Music in Context of Tradition and Innovation

Takemitsu's personal relationship with both his birth culture and reverence towards Western art music has reflected an inner struggle that has become an ongoing manoeuvring and oscillation between the two cultures throughout his composition career. The issue arising from correspondence between innovation and

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1 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 67. All citations of Takemitsu's text in this paper are adhered to its original form.

2 Takemitsu, 'Mirrors', p. 52.

3 Takemitsu, Cronin and Tann, 'Afterword', p. 209.

4 Western art music especially of the Romantic and early 20<sup>th</sup> century eras has a characteristic sound which does not exist in the music of other cultures. This distinctive quality is attributed to the Western concepts of harmonic dependency, tonic- dominant polarities, progressive linear development of themes, and polyphonic textual intricacies. Besides utilizing an affective harmony, expressiveness is further accomplished with lush orchestral sweeps that give that distinctive Western musical contours.

tradition in Takemitsu's music invites a debate. Since from a post-structuralist stance, both notions of innovation and tradition contain some of itself within each other, thus one cannot be without the other. To illustrate, Japanese traditions such as instrumental timbre, silences as in *ma*, dissonances and noise resulted from overtones or during performance as in *sawari*, and independent stratification of rhythmic construct - *mitsuji*<sup>5</sup> are characteristics not totally alien to Western music of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And alternatively, Western contemporary extended performance techniques, long held silences, delicate instrumental colours, and the concept of noise as an essential musical element that had never been perceived before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are already intrinsic in Japanese traditional music. Hence, Takemitsu's attempts at innovating Western music through influences of Japanese traditions may be debated as merely an integration of Western and Japanese musical traditions.

### 3. Tradition versus Innovation

According to Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary, tradition is "a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people."<sup>6</sup> It is a form of cultural continuity that has been passed down by means of aural transmission with no written instruction - a typical process of dissemination of musical knowledge and practices in most non-Western cultures, in the context of this paper - traditional music of the East. Despite having been in circulation for centuries, traditional music on the whole undergoes very little change thus its overall musical contents and aesthetics are preserved.

On the contrary, Western art music revered and modelled on by composers of distant cultures is ever changing in time thus has undergone stylistic transformations and never ceased to experience an ongoing evolution as well as revolution in the hands of composers who persistently strive towards cultivating novel ideas to facilitate innovations. At this point, innovation according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is "the introduction of something new", consistent with the definition of innovate in the Oxford Online Dictionaries - "to make changes in something established, especially by introducing new methods, ideas, or products."<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon picked up momentum with transatlantic as well as transpacific crossings by composers and musicians, such as Terry Riley, Philip Glass, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Ravi Shankar, Alla Rakha, Chou Wen-chung, Toshiro Mayuzumi, and Toshi Ichiyanagi, facilitated by the advent of technology as well as aviation industry. These movements naturally geared towards cultural reciprocity and globalization of art music which has allowed composers the opportunity to travel outside of their own culture to gain immediate experience and knowledge in the traditional music of other cultures. The effects of cultural reciprocity are evident in the works of many European and American avant-garde composers who drew inspiration from various musical materials, concepts, philosophy, and etc., in non-Western cultures. Therefore, it transpires that innovation is an important source of perpetual flux in Western music.

In this respect, Western music and non-Western music are disparate not only in terms of their musical traits and instrumental properties but most importantly in their overall cultural fundamentals and functionality. Cultural reciprocity between the East and the West not only has far reaching effects on modern composers of both worlds but has also paved the path for their explorations of varied musical properties of opposing traditions with the strong intention of crafting a new voice. Challenged by two opposing musical traditions, Takemitsu had benefitted and excelled greatly from cross cultural influences of the East and the West.

### 4. Innovation or Integration: An Analysis

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5 *Ma* is a Japanese concept that prevails in every aspect of the Japanese life. *Ma* literally means space; it denotes temporal space as well as the physical space between two objects or two sounds. Japanese view this space as nothingness that is filled with limitless events and it is this notion of space that is held in high esteem. *Sawari* is an acoustical phenomenon developed and practiced in traditional Japanese music. It is the noisy "buzz" created by plucking a string of the *Biwa*; Japanese regard this noise as complex beautiful sound. *Mitsuji* is a rhythmic pattern in *nōgaku* in which the length of each beat is different, and according to which the *nōkan* and drums proceed simultaneously in different time scheme.

6 Definition is taken from the Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (2005).

7 Both definitions are taken from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary and the Oxford Online Dictionaries respectively. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovation> (accessed on 16 June 2011). <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/innovate> (accessed on 16 June 2011).

Notable Japanese aesthetics and musical elements often found in Takemitsu's music are *ma*, *sawari*, orchestral or instrumental colours, the concept of non-developmental musical movements, and formlessness. It has been widely documented that these elements have contributed to the Japaneseness in Takemitsu's soundscape which took shape from as early as *November Steps* (1967) for *biwa*, *shakuhachi* and orchestra, commissioned by Leonard Bernstein for the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of The New York Philharmonic. Upon receiving this commission, Takemitsu was aware of the fundamental differences between Western and Japanese musical traditions and realized that it was impossible to blend them; hence he chose to "confront those contradictions, even intensify them."<sup>8</sup> Although Takemitsu had successfully revealed to his audience his confrontational presentation of traditional Japanese instruments and Western orchestra at its premiere in 1967, *November Steps* still embodies various idiomatic Western musical characteristics in its harmonic construct, formal structure, orchestration, and notational scheme. These idiomatic Western traits continue to appear along side with various Japanese elements in his later compositions. What seems to be rather palpably obvious is the overpowering presence of these Western traits that the Japaneseness has dwindled towards inconsequentiality.

#### 4.1. Harmony

As Yoko Nakatani points out "a few subtle changes between harmonies, using an almost octatonic scale or whole-tone scale" is Takemitsu's typical method for constructing harmonies.<sup>9</sup> Western chromatic scale, whole tone scale and Messiaen's octatonic scale are commonly utilized in his creative output. These scales are found in *November Steps* for instance mm. 1-2, as well as the melodic motifs in *Autumn* (1973) which are constructed based on subtle changes between different scales. Hwee Been Koh stresses the presence of focal pitches D and A in *November Steps* which she parallels them to "a polarity that is not unlike a V-I relationship"<sup>10</sup> in Western music. Implied V-I relationship is also found in *Rain Tree Sketch* (1982) for piano. To link the harmonic differences between the traditional Japanese and Western music, Takemitsu utilized E, D and A – three common pitches between the *biwa*, *shakuhachi* and the Western orchestra, as focal pitches in *November Steps*.

#### 4.2. Form

One day in 1948 while travelling in a subway, Takemitsu became aware that "composing is giving meaning to that stream of sounds"<sup>11</sup> and "those are the sounds that I should have the courage to let live within my music."<sup>12</sup> Hence it is often noted that formlessness which is generally intrinsic in Japanese aesthetics takes precedence in his musical structure where musical form is portrayed by the unfolding of events and their relationships in shaping the listener's aural experience. Despite that, irrespective of its structure, some kind of form which serves as the "garden" he strolled in still persists in his works. Takemitsu viewed his musical forms as "imagery soundscapes ... composed as if fragments were thrown together unstructured, as in dreams."<sup>13</sup> For instance, *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* is made up of "thirteen small sections, thirteen variations - not variations in the Western sense, rather, like a scroll painting."<sup>14</sup> This structure is not unlike that of *November Steps* which has eleven *danmonos*.<sup>15</sup> The overall structure of *November Steps* that also comprises of an orchestral introduction, a cadenza showcasing an instrumental duel between *biwa* and *shakuhachi*, and a coda is undeniably derived from Western formal concept. Classical principle of symmetry as well as arch form may be seen in *Rain Tree Sketch* whereby the restatement of the opening materials (mm. 7-27) in mm. 59-79 reflects a balanced structure that is favoured by many 20<sup>th</sup> century composers such as Schoenberg, Bartok and Berg.

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8 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 93.

9 Nakatani, 'November Steps and Autumn: A Comparative Analysis of Two Orchestral Works by Tōru Takemitsu', p. 12.

10 Koh, 'East and West: The Aesthetics and Musical Time of Tōru Takemitsu', p. 168.

11 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 79.

12 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 81.

13 Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 106.

14 Takemitsu, 'Afterword', p. 208.

15 The word *dan* in Japanese means step. *Danmono* or *dan* is a section in traditional Japanese music. There are eleven *danmonos* in this piece which Takemitsu described "My November Steps are a set of eleven variations." (Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence*, p. 63)

### 4.3. Orchestration

Japanese sensitivity to complex sound and tone quality is one of the significant Japanese aesthetics that shape Takemitsu's soundscape. Besides the "beautiful noise" of *sawari* and the silence in *ma*, Takemitsu's music is characteristically slow paced, spatial, light, buoyant, and tinged with delicate tonal colours. Takemitsu regarded Debussy's "many points of focus and many gradations of color [...] very important. [...] and this music is also very spatial. [...] Debussy's harmonies move, float."<sup>16</sup> Besides, Takemitsu also noticed the common characteristic of sensibility to tone color in Debussy's and traditional Japanese music. Hence a parallel may be drawn between the music of Debussy and that of Takemitsu - their orchestral sonority is the product of a confluence of East and West as both composers were influenced from outside of their own culture and eventually integrated the aesthetics of the "Other" in their own musical tradition. Having said all that, it is this coloristic orchestral sonority that Takemitsu relied on to confront the sound of *biwa* and *shakuhachi* in *November Steps*. However, it is also worth mentioned that Takemitsu had carefully devised a way to bridge the overt difference between the instrumental sonorities of the East and West by utilizing harps and percussions to initiate the entrances and exits of traditional instruments throughout the piece. Nakatani concurs that "Takemitsu effectively uses the unique tone color of the harp to mediate between traditional instruments and an orchestra."<sup>17</sup> Hence as he proclaimed, Takemitsu had not only brought on a dramatic cultural confrontation in *November Steps*, he also had successfully integrated the sound of the East and that of the West through instrumentation techniques. Greater integration is also achieved in *Autumn* by bridging the timbral differences of traditional Japanese and Western instruments through the exploitation of performance techniques as well as inherent timbral qualities of the instruments concerned. "Uncertainty is a part of the nature of the *shakuhachi*, and Takemitsu knew that giving extreme uncertainty to the trombones [...] created by *portamenti* [...] a major characteristic of the trombone, [would] integrate the two different types of instruments while still allowing them to retain their individual characteristics."<sup>18</sup>

### 4.4. Notational System

As pointed out in the section on "Tradition versus Innovation", traditional music is an art form peculiar to a specific culture customarily disseminated through aural practices, thus it is not documented in the form of symbols. On the contrary, Western music has developed an increasingly complicated if not a mere representational image of notational system since the Medieval period. Notational system, therefore, presents another dimension in gauging the level of integration in Takemitsu's attempts at innovation. In both *November Steps* and *Autumn*, the music of the traditional instruments is notated using Western notational system without meter and bar-lines. The complexities in the music of the cadenza in *November Steps* had prompted Takemitsu to create a unique design of graphic scores for the traditional instruments. However, whether the parts for *biwa* and *shakuhachi* are notated with or without meter and bar-lines, the moment these traditional instruments play simultaneously with the orchestra they are instantaneously subjected to the constraints imposed by Western notational system and as a consequence removed from the inherent spontaneity of traditional music. Hence the usage of Western notational system itself is already a form of privileging the Western concept.

## 5. Conclusion

Takemitsu's compositional strategies in merging two disparate traditions had undoubtedly created many outstanding works that contributed to the development of Western art music. Although traditional Japanese aesthetics and musical elements permeate all genres of his music, the level of integration is still not sufficient to affect innovative feats that would transcend cultural borders. This evidentiality is derived from the notion that Western aesthetic ideology has been a powerful force in the shaping of art and culture globally, especially post-Meiji Restoration Japan. Takemitsu's sound image is a virtuosic, wholesome integration of East and West brought about by the composer's careful manoeuvring, superimposing and juxtaposing of opposing aesthetics. Hence Takemitsu's positioning as a composer in terms of the notion of tradition and

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16 Takemitsu, Cronin and Tann, 'Afterword', pp. 207-208.

17 Nakatani, 'November Steps and Autumn: A Comparative Analysis of Two Orchestral Works by Tōru Takemitsu', p. 21.

18 Nakatani, 'November Steps and Autumn: A Comparative Analysis of Two Orchestral Works by Tōru Takemitsu', p. 34.

innovation tends to lean towards the domain of integration where his craftsmanship repeatedly exhibits an acculturation of his Japanese tradition within the sphere of Western music – music of the “Other” which he had appropriated as his own and demystification attempted.

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