

GAKU-NO-MICHI
(« Ways of Music »)
GENERAL CONSTRUCTION

Text n° 38 (1979)

film without images, for electronic and concrete sounds
produced in the electronic music studio (Denshi Ongaku)
of N. H. K. Radio (Nippon Hoso Kyokai), Tokyo
1977-78

楽の道

Partial first world performance :
Festival d'Art Contemporain de La Rochelle (July, 1978)
Complete first world performance :
Festival d'Automne à Paris (January, 1979)

The following text is a general text written on the occasion of the first performance of « Gaku-no-Michi » in Japan (festival « Music Today », Tokyo, 1979) and for the double LP album of this work that came out under the Adès label (n° 21.005 collection MFA). This same text has been re-published for most of the concerts.



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« Pachinko »

Sound of introduction

The progression of this « environmental sound » can vary, according to preference, from about 30 to 55 minutes, depending on the place, circumstances, etc. It can even be practically extended infinitely...

Pachinko is a very popular game in Japan (a sort of vertical electric billiard game). The sound made by metal marbles was recorded, then considerably re-worked in the studio (slowing, thickening, various ring-modulations, one of which used an extremely slow sinusoidal wave of 0,002 Hz, filtering, etc.).

This complex sound serves to introduce the composed sound environment to come. It places the work in context, prepares the listeners as they enter the concert hall, and underscores the concrete *everyday* origins of the musical material comprising one of the poles in « Gaku-no-Michi ».

東京

I - « Tokyo »

The Way of everyday sounds

(From the concrete to the abstract)

As its title indicates, this part finds its source in Tokyo city sounds (subway, bus, voices on speakers, buzzers, elevators, department stores, railway stations, etc.), to which other sounds of Japanese life are mixed (temple bells in Kyoto, priests' bells, drums, announcements of « Sumo » wrestling matches, etc.).

In the first phase, the original sounds – although modulated, re-worked and assembled in numerous ways – remain deliberately identifiable, for the most part. Then, a second phase, rather short, forms a more abstract transition, relying on numerous exclusively electronic sounds (a voice asks the question : « *What is ... Japanese sound ?* »...).

Finally, the third phase – the longest one – is made up of a continuous thread, slowly progressing and often very dense : a direct allusion to the *bustling* impression given by teeming active masses, an impression this gigantic city can provoke. This « spiraling » development unifies, gathers up, mixes the diverse origins of sound material (concrete and electronic), carrying them towards greater and greater abstraction, which turns the end of « Tokyo » into a kind of transsubstantiation-loss from the distant, nearly forgotten memory of sound « signs » of this city. An example of the « Way », of the « path » through sounds.

In its entirety, « Tokyo » lasts for about 48 to 50 minutes.

不 識

II - « Fushiki-e »

(« Towards what is unknowable »)

The Way of meditation sounds

(From the abstract to the abstract)

This title should be interpreted on several levels. « Towards ... » expresses the implied : « in the direction of », which is understood in the meaning of « Way », of « path », of « seeking... « What is unknowable » expresses no rejection of « knowledge » per se, but alludes instead to the paths of knowledge attained through intuitive channels. This uncommon expression is utilized here in relation to Zen philosophy.

This is the longest composition of the work (1 hour 15 minutes for this part alone). Evolving within a context of very different tone-colors from the preceding section, this part calls on *abstract* material for the most part (electronically produced from the beginning), which statistically gives the spectrum a greater proportion of complex textures that are more or less periodical.

Concrete sound materials, which are less prevalent, are often *broken up*, just barely identifiable. Various elements include traditional musical forms, such as the Gagaku « Etenraku », shouts and percussion from Nô theater, various Shômyo chants (Buddhist music), accompanied by Mokugyo percussions, as well as the typical sound of Geta sandals (wooden sandals worn by priests) during the « Omizutori » ceremony which takes place every year at the Nigatsudo, in the Todaiji temple in Nara.

Without wishing to over-simplify music which, by its very nature, is in constant flux, one can, nevertheless, identify a few points of reference in the overall shape of this part :

Introduction : uses electronic sliding sounds of immense softness, and transformed « Gagaku » fragments.

First part :

- a) Extended sound of high-pitched octaves (approximately « E »)
- b) Melodic progression (glissés), followed by a complex development of growing « tension », using octaves (climax).
- c) Period of calm and immobilisation on a great bass octave sound, or the « first stage of contemplation ».
- d) Electronic impulses (such as the « bells ») re-worked in various feedbacks (with a few memory-elements from « Nô » theater)
- e) Concentration surrounding a kind of « tonic » note (« G »), from which a very slow melody begins to develop, rising progressively (If the « Alap » style, typical of music from Northern India, is recognizable, the reference is obviously on purpose ; Shômyo, or Buddhist, chants originate in India and resemble « Dhrupad » music. But no concrete material has been used here. The result comes exclusively from manipulation and electronic sources).
- f) Progressive formation of a compact, fixed block, of middle register, or the « second stage of contemplation ».

g) Large high-pitched electronic layers, whose acoustic features, envelopes, articulations, etc. define themselves in the spirit of a vast ensemble of « Sho's » (mouth organs).

h) General transformation into a « third stage of contemplation » (more agitated, given the very rapid voltage-control filtering), then mixed with a multiplication created from an acoustic spectrum of a vowels taken from a priest's voice.

Transition I : pedal point (approximately « D ») finely worked electronically in its harmonic fluctuations. A sort of « procession » of several modulated Shōmyō chants comes into the sound.

Second part : long, more turbulent part in which the source material finally reveals numerous internal rhythmic pulsations – modulated, transposed, accumulated, re-modulated, etc., using in large part phenomena of beats between neighboring frequencies or with neighboring multiples. This part concludes on rather muted punctuated sounds, similar to large bells (but still electronic in origin).

Transition II : on a distant background of Shōmyō chanting, a voice repeats the expression « *Hoêtsu seisen* » several times. This expression means something like « *Extasy comes from the fountain* ». I found it written in calligraphy on a temple wall in Kyoto. (« Extasy » in this case refers to religious extasy. And the translation for « fountain » should instead be « crystal-clear waterfall »).

Third part :

a) Contrast. « Geta » sandal sounds, at first alone, then modulated more and more, followed by a long electronic sequence which cuts abruptly in color with the preceding parts.

b) Extremely low-pitched sounds, multiplying in various registers, having a specific ornamentation rhythm. One of these sounds, extremely extended in its rhythmic length, will endure until the end of the movement and then become the « Mokuso » sound.

c) Sounds of a broad fluctuating harmonic spectrum (somewhat like an Indian Tamboura). The utter calm of this texture brings a slow resorption of all elements towards the final point of concentration (the sound coming from « b ») ; immobile, despite a very slow intermittent swaying, this sound constitutes the « fourth stage of contemplation », the stage which is, in spirit, boundless....

« Fushiki-e » lasts for 75' in its entirety.

« Mokuso »
(« Contemplation »)
Sound of stillness

This sound is the continuation (with some slowly progressing variants) of the sound concluding « Fushiki-e ».

In general, during a concert, I use this sound between 5' and 7' before starting to slowly mix in the beginning of the next part. But it can be heard for up to 20', acting as a sort of intermission allowing listeners to either remain completely focused *within* this sound, or to get up and move around momentarily outside. It is practically an immense « pedal point » (evolving internally) in the continuity of the musical discourse. It can also extend infinitely... This sound, which is purely electronic, marks the highest level of abstraction thus far attained at this central point of the total journey of « Gaku-no-Michi ».

流動

III - « **Banbutsu-no-Ryudo** » (« The incessant flow of all things ») The Way of metamorphoses of meaning (from the concrete to the concrete)

This title – slightly Buddhist in character – was found after the creation of the part it came to designate.

Numerous concrete elements taken from daily life are to be found here, making this part a sort of equivalent – in the second half of « Gaku-no-michi » – to what « Tokyo » represents in the first half.

The concrete source material is, however, different ; political speeches, nationalistic songs of « fighter pilots », crowd footsteps in railway station tunnels, television commercials, electronic toys, chants and shouts from the « Sakura » festival, and the « Shishiyodoshi » – hollow bamboo regularly striking a stone in the gardens of certain temples.

Although these concrete sounds have a clear and defined *meaning*, they have been manipulated in such a way that they ultimately become completely different sounds, whose meaning lies elsewhere, even diametrically opposite.

Violent political speeches turn into insects in nature. The « fighter pilot singing » later triggers an extended neo-tonal harmonic passage (a sort of « E major »), vast, slow, subsiding.

Such is « the Way of metamorphoses of meaning ». This long *traveling* of accumulated concrete material concluding « Banbutsu-no-Ryudo » for the first time calls upon abrupt changes, interspersing numerous rhythmic micro-silences. After two hours of continuity, the relativity of perception assigns particular power to this *broken* technique which contrasts with everything that has preceded it. In certain passages, premonitory fragments of the part to come (« Kaiso ») have been introduced.

« Banbutsu-no-Ryudo » lasts about 30 to 33 minutes in its entirety (*).

(*) Proofreading note : 40 to 43 minutes in the revised version 2001.



IV - « **Kaiso** »

(« Reminiscence »).

The Way of meaning beyond metamorphoses
(from the abstract to the abstract)

The predominance – once again – of abstract source material (or concrete, but rendered unidentifiable), to some extent, makes « Kaiso », in the second part of « Gaku-no-michi », the equivalent of « Fushiki-e » from the first half. But the similarity stops there because the treatment given to material in « Kaiso », no matter what the origin, travels progressively towards a resonance which is *psychological*, ultimately leading to a unifying *dramatization*, in spite of the diversity. Thus unfolds « the Way of meaning beyond metamorphoses ».

This is the Way that gives birth to the *memory*, grave in its distance ; an allusion to the tragedy of Hiroshima and the ruthless end of an already distant war, still present in memories... (Proofreading note : *this text was written in 1979*).

An overview of this piece gives the following breakdown :

A) – A great transition-bridge between the preceding part and « Kaiso ». The principal, rather violent thread was created using sounds of Japanese cicadas.

B) – First part of « Kaiso ». Long sequences based on blocks composed of precise frequencies, coming from a chromatic scale. Sounding sometimes like real orchestras (with massively-sustained strings), these blocks were all created from a single sound lasting but a few seconds : the train horn from the old Tokaido line...

Material of different natures are inserted numerous times within these sustained sections :

1) Shakuhachi modulated and intertwined elements ;

2) Filtered quotation-elements, extracts from the first two parts (« Tokyo », « Fushiki-e ») like flashes of memory, « reminiscences ».

C) - Transition. Rapid linking sequence (analogy with film techniques) leading into a short spoken sequence : a reading of a few lines about the atomic explosion in Hiroshima – brief elements from the radio from the commemorative ceremony held annually in this city.

D) – Second part of « Kaiso ». Electronic sounds of a completely different origin from the preceding part are organized in ostinati and slow repetitive groups. The memory-quotations, recalling previous parts, are more numerous and conclude on a very soft sequence ; a vibrating, meditative, calm sound, as if dispassionate...

At this point, we enter the last part of « Kaiso », a kind of « lamento », which constitutes the true cadential gesture of the total shape of « Gaku-no-Michi ».

The Japanese National Anthem (« Kimigayo ») - slowed down, filtered, and surrounded by modulated strands of this anthem and the Samourai shout of defeat - closes this cadential gesture, which takes on particular strength as it comes after 3 and 1/2 hours of listening.

« Kaiso » lasts for about 40 minutes in all.

« **Han** »
Sound of prolongation

A response to the sound of introduction, the sound used in « Han » serves to avoid an abrupt ending, allowing the listener to detach little by little from the sound action. As much as « Pachinko » derived its sound material from the most ordinary of everyday sounds, « Han », on the contrary, is a much rarer sound.

It is composed of three types of material :

1) A very calm, soft sound, coming from an extremely complex electronic circuit used at the end of « Tokyo », and whose original source material was a subway buzzer ... here, impossible to identify ! – the ultimate outcome for « Ways of music » whose effect is to transform and overturn the ordinary.

2) « Han » : a hanging wooden plaque that is struck according to ritualistic rhythms, used in temples to punctuate certain times of the day. This sound is used here in numerous transformations (speed changes, filterings, multi-tracks, etc.) as well as the following sound ;

3) Sumo combat drum (with the rhythm of the Sumo match end).

The sound of prolongation achieves fusion between the concrete and the abstract, the fading of forms, struggles and contrasts and eventually reaches a momentary Unity.

« Han » lasts about 15 minutes in concert. (*)

« Gaku-no-Michi » is dedicated to Wataru Uenami, as a tribute and with all my gratitude.

Jean-Claude Eloy : Tokyo, August 1979
Translated from the French by Meredith Escudier

(*)Proofreading note : *in the revised version 2001, « Han » can be kept indefinitely.*



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