

Japanese Onkyo Music. Cage and the Vulnerability of the space

In September 2002, I visited Japan for 6 weeks: 4 weeks in Tokyo 2 weeks in Osaka, During my stay I investigated a Cagian form of experimental electronic music called Onkyo [Onkyo translated into English literally means reverberation of Sound]. During my stay I interviewed and saw Onkyo performers such as Toshi Nakamura , Ami Yoshihide, Sachiko M, Taku Sogimoto, Omote Yoshihide perform live in concert.

Onkyo performers are interested in exploring the quality of a given sound- [i.e. the tone timbre or texture] rather than its strictly harmonic rhythmic or melodic musical qualities. Onkyo music mixes elements of Techno, Noise, Improvisation and Cagain sond art. Some Onkyo performers like to use conventional instruments such as avant-guitarist Taku Sogimoto, some use less conventional approaches to music making, Toshi Nakamura for example creates all his sounds through a no-input mixing desk . Toshi explains below:

“If you connect the output of the mixing board to the input, its going to make a loop, it going to feedback., If you don’t control it it’s going to get bigger and bigger until it becomes a huge harsh noise,. So you use subtle movements to control the feedback. Every single knob on the mixing desk that you shift varies the sound. You can even play melodies if you like.”

Onkyo performance

During my stay I managed to see a number of Onkyo performances. One of my favourites was a collaboration between Toshi Nakamura and Taku Sogimoto at Gendia Hieghts Gallery, Shibuya. At times the sounds in the space were so quiet you became intensely aware of the sounds of your clothes, breathing and body. The audience became an agent of disruption against a backdrop of zen-like quietude. Before the concert I decided I wanted to record the performance onto mini disc for review purposes. The music was so quiet it started to confuse the mini disc, the mini disc started spluttering trying to process the information, the sounds started to disrupt the performance, and the musicians started taking out a musical dialogue with the sounds of my mini disc.

My conclusions from seeing Toshi Nakamura, Omote Yoshihide and Taku Sogimoto live was that Onkyo music was a musical from concerned with insularity and introversion. The music was all about negative presence, whether this negative presence was conjured up through understated amplification, or within the literal space of a given feedback system.

The sounds used were always intensely powerful- but the power that was created was often paradoxical in nature. It made you squirm in your seat- because it mirrored not only your own disruption but the disruptive affects of the surrouning enviroment. The music held you in bondage not only to the performance but to your own headspace, one could only truly be in tune with such an environment by succumbing it, to accepting your role within that environment.

Such Narratives concerning silence, negative presence and environmental disruption can be traced back to Cage. In 1989 Cage concluded: “People will often opt for quiet

sounds. The awful presence of intention in music makes the non-intentional Ambient sound more useful. It is more possible to live affirmatively if you find environmental sound beautiful...The music I prefer is what we hear if we are just quiet”

Cage famously explored the idea of silence by locking himself in an anechoic chamber [an acoustically silent room], instead of exploring ideas concerning silence as he intended, he came face to face with himself, the sounds of the blood running through his veins, the sound of his body's inner workings, he concluded :

“There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence...I entered one [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard 2 sounds, 1 high and 1 low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.

In 4’33 Cage explored ideas concerning silence and negative presence in a performative situation: for a pacific duration of time, any performer of any instrument was required to not-play. The music was everything else heard, The Ambient sounds of whatever environment the performance was happening in. Cage had professed that “his favourite music was when everything was still, when nothing was attempted. The very sounds of his everyday environment were poetry to his ears”.²³

Cage famously proposed in his silent performers that we “open” the doors of the auditorium to listen to the sounds around us, to listen to such sounds as music or art in itself. Perhaps what the new wave of Japanese Onkyo performers are really asking is was it really necessary to actively do this? The latest wave of Onkyo musicians seemed to be taking a less interventionist approach to miscellaneous city sounds, this incidental noise wasn’t “art” or “music” as proposed by Cage- it was not consciously emotional it was “just there”- such materials could be “used” or “not used”. The point being the doors to the auditorium never needed to be artistically opened in the first place- the sounds were already there around us- despite any act of artistic pretension or intervention.

In order to highlight the miscellaneous sounds of the city, Onkyo musicians often played deliberately quietly. Other artists such as Kroner and Max Eastly have also used deliberately quiet sounds to similar affect- to make us reflect on the soundscape around us.

Kroner speaking of his work discusses the role that inaudible sounds play in his work. “While composing and developing a piece, my passion for inaudible sounds is a guiding principle”. He continues: “I choose and build my music from elements which cannot be perceived by the normal ear. Perhaps these sounds that are so closely related to silence transport some of their origins into the music, like a memory”. He talks about diffusion of light, sound sources that can't be localised, which shift in focus. reflecting on the Kroner piece Permafrost, Avant composer Paul Schutz wrote that “by the end of the disc my sense of aural perspective was so altered that the music seemed to continue in the sounds around me. Tube trains passing beneath the building, distant boilers, the air conditioning and the elevator engines had been pulled into concert. This affect lasted for about forty minutes during which I could not get anything to return to its normal position in the mix of my flat.”

In Ocean of Sound Toop describes Max Eastley, as a creator of sound sculptures “which can be audible but almost invisible or visible but almost inaudible” writes:

“Paradoxically, unusually quiet music highlights the supposedly polluting sounds of our environment. A recording studio is a quiet place until you attempt to record sounds on the threshold of hearing. “The more you try and achieve this mathematically impossibility, the more it recedes”

Noise and saying “No” to the city!

Feedback is a concept central to Onkyo music. Any device with an input and an output has the potential to feedback. Artists such as Toshi Nakamura and Omote Yoshihide describe music based around this process as no-input music, Toshi Nakamura has produced several CDs exploring this concept “No-input mixing desk 1” and “No-input Mixing desk 2”.

Toshi Nakamura describes such no input music as a form of refusal:

“It seems like I just keep saying no to everything...Everything is small, tiny or no. I said no to emotion. I changed to a minimal set up with this minimal music. I play in small combinations of musicians to small audiences. I don’t subscribe to a newspaper . I don’t have a TV. But the information coming is too much I have to say no. So my music is that kin of statement.”

Omote relates no-input music, as a reaction to the chaotic nature of Japanese life:

“In Tokyo there is always too much information, like an information ocean everywhere. So we have to survive with too much information and too much information in noise”

As a westerner, it was hard not to be overwhelmed by the frenzy and hyperactive energy of Japanese city life. The relentless billboards of the subway, the perpetual flashing lights and TV screens of Shinjuku- the white noise of pachinko and the dense sketches of Manga can be a strange and frightening experience for there uninitiated.

Omote Yoshihide said of his previous work in Ground Zero that the intention was to mix lots of sounds together, in his words he aimed to play with the idea of information overload and its relation to sound saturation. After a while he found this sound world became to transparent, to reflective of his surroundings- to him it resembled the billboards and flashing lights of Tokyo. Omote Yoshihide a former noise musician adapted his style to what is now called Onkyo ,a minimalist form of noise music that mixes techno and Cagian sound art aesthetics. Onkyo musicians have a love of the quiet and infinitesimal- in particular many Onkyo musicians [Omote Yoshihide, Taku Sogimoto, Toshi Nakamura, Sachiko M and many others] favour no input sound sources. This Change form over saturated sounds using the principles of information overload to working with no input information was a political stance- a rejection of the commerce and glitter of Tokyo. Omote talking of the change in his musical friction, states in interview:

“Before I was mixing a lot of information together , it the real world is just like that, especially in Japan. People are barely surviving in a sea of too much information. In the

80s this mixture was new for me, but now it's the same as reality., theirs no critique, no distance. And the structure of this mixture style became just like the advertising on the subway, just one poster after another. A lot of sampling music is like that. Anyone can sample cheaply and easily now. So now I want to focus to find a whole world of tiny things."

Conclusion

Perhaps we can interpret Japanese Onkyo music as draws attention to the contradictory realities and emotions associated with everyday city life. the isolating invasion of personal space one can experience living in a Japanese city environment. Living in the city can be as stressful, as it can be isolating, and It can often propose a confusing mixture of often contradictory emotions. It is hard not to feel personally violated by the sounds, congestion and commerce around you.

In the city you are a nobody anonymous- you get up, you go to work, you go to sleep. By making us aware of our own disruption within the confines of the performance space in addition to highlighting the disruptive nature of the soundscape that surrounds us. Perhaps artists like Toshi Nakamura are trying to show us something about the importance of individual thought and action within the clustered uniformity of overpopulated city environments. We could of gone to a rock concert that night- we could have chosen to have been immersed in volume, we could of chosen to escape - and forget who we were for a while. But we didn't, we instead chose reflection over hedonism, we came face to face with ourselves- we came to learn about how we hear and how we interact with ourselves and others in an chaotic environment.

