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**The Japanese Aesthetic  
of Wabi Sabi  
and its Potential in  
Contemporary Composition**

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## *Abstract*

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The central subject of this thesis is the multifaceted Japanese aesthetic of *wabi sabi* and the expressive implications of its application in contemporary composition.

The introduction provides information about *wabi sabi's* origins, main characteristics and a definition compiled from a variety of sources.

The first chapter offers additional information about the diverse aesthetic connotations of *wabi sabi* exploring examples of its application in traditional Japanese arts, the Zen garden of Ryoanji, traditional Japanese music, and finally in contemporary music.

The second chapter presents six original compositions each supported by a commentary. Their scoring features a variety of instrumental forces including Japanese and Chinese instruments (sho, shakuhachi, koto, shamisen, erhu and biwa). The different emphasis given by each of the compositions in analysis, helps provide a broad picture of the potential of *wabi sabi* in contemporary composition.

The third and final chapter presents three additional compositions that demonstrate in a freer manner a glimpse of the potential of *wabi sabi* for future applications.

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## Table of Contents

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<b>Section 1:</b>	Introduction	1
<b>Section 2:</b>	Wabi Sabi – Its Application in Japanese arts and Music (Traditional and Contemporary)	5
	I. In Traditional Japanese Arts	7
	II. In The Garden Of Ryoanji – A Closer Look	15
	III. In Japanese Traditional Music	22
	IV. In Contemporary Music	35
<b>Section 3:</b>	Commentaries	48
	I. Fantasmata	50
	II. Faded Shonorities	65
	III. Charmed By A Dream Of A Butterfly	73
	IV. Ithaka	83
	V. For The Ice	96
	VI. For The Ice II	108
<b>Section 4:</b>	The Next Step	117
	I. Little Songs Of The Geisha	119
	II. Antiphon To Mary	126
	III. Faded Shonorities II	130
<b>Section 5:</b>	Scores	135
	I. Fantasmata	136
	II. Faded Shonorites	172
	III. Charmed By A Dream Of A Butterfly	184
	IV. Ithaka	200
	V. For the Ice	218
	VI. For the Ice II	239
	VII. Little Songs of the Geisha	251
	VIII. Antiphon to Mary	273
	IX. Faded Shonorities II	278
	<b>Bibliography</b>	291
	<b>CD / DVD Track List</b>	300

# Introduction

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## Section 1

*Kare-eda ni*

*Karasu no tomari keri*

*Aki no kure*

A crow is perched on a bare branch;

It is an autumn eve

Basho (Transl. Astaro Miyamori, 2002).

## Introduction

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Japanese traditional music often creates the impression of being rather plain, empty, lacking in brilliance or virtuosity. The same phenomenon can be observed in Japanese arts (including architecture, painting, calligraphy, poetry) and in many aspects of everyday life (including traditional Japanese cuisine, interior decorating). To a large extent simplicity, the lack of extrovert sophistication is a result of the penetration and influence of Zen Buddhism in the Japanese mind (Paul, M., 2000, p.17). For centuries, Zen has been associated with the majority of the traditional arts such as the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), ink painting (*sumie*), flower arrangement (*ikebana*), garden design, archery, poetry (specifically in *tanka* and *haiku*), music (*gagaku*, *noh*, *shakuhachi honkyoku*) to name but a few. Although most of these disciplines were originally associated with high social status, only accessible to the elite of the society, their effect and fundamental principles were gradually transmitted more broadly as the veil of their surrounding secrecy was gradually lifted, setting norms of taste, thought, behaviour and expression.

One result has been the formulation of numerous aesthetic terms, in order to describe as accurately as possible the governing principles of the artistic pantheon. Among this plethora of terms, one in particular seems to surpass the rest in terms of its complexity, associative multiplicity and ambiguity. *Wabi sabi*, essentially consisting of two individual terms (*wabi* and *sabi*), is a key aesthetic concept for the comprehension of the most fundamental principles of the traditional Japanese arts and music. Its study and its in-depth comprehension offers valuable answers to questions about the origin and function of simplicity, emptiness, incompleteness and imperfection of structure, form and design often encountered in the Japanese arts.

Finding an equivalent or a short explanation for a term such as *wabi sabi* in English or any language including Japanese, is almost an impossible task. In the limited bibliography available in English, there are no fixed answers provided on its definition. Leonard Koren for example remarks that “when asked what *wabi-sabi* is, most Japanese will shake their head, hesitate and offer a few apologetic words about how difficult it is to explain ... although almost every Japanese will claim to understand the feeling of *wabi sabi*, very few can articulate this feeling” (Koren, L., 1994, p. 15). Andrew Juniper pinpoints *wabi sabi*'s complexity in the gradual process of semantic augmentation: “as usage and intended meanings change, the complexion and depth of words can increase exponentially ... words are like living organisms, they evolve to match the expressive requirement of those using a language. As the words *wabi* and *sabi* have evolved over such an extended period, they have been used to express a vast range of ideas and emotions, and so their meanings are more open to personal interpretation than almost any other word in the Japanese vocabulary” (Juniper, A., 2003, p. 47). Suzuki's references to *wabi sabi* emphasise its elusive nature as each chapter of his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Suzuki, D., 1959), seems to grasp a different aspect of its identity without ever capturing its complete

## Introduction

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picture. Some possible translations of the two related terms *wabi* and *sabi* are 'humble grace' and 'refined simplicity', or according to Toru Takemitsu 'cultivation of the serene' and 'tranquil resignation' respectively (Takemitsu, T., 1995, p.9). However, due to *wabi sabi's* strong associations with Zen, its true meaning expands beyond the limits of any possible theoretical definition making the task of its in-depth understanding more challenging than one might at first believe.

*Wabi* originates from the verb *wabu* which means languish and is associated with sentiments of loneliness and wretchedness. In Suzuki's translation *wabi* means 'poverty' or negatively, 'not to be in the fashionable society of the time' (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.23). Effectively this translates into 'to be satisfied with little' and 'achieving harmony through simplicity' (ibid). The initially negative connotations of *wabi* were gradually transcended into poetic ideals through the viewpoint of Zen and associated with a lifestyle ideal. It precedes the application of aesthetic principles applied to objects and arts, the latter being *sabi*.

The idea of *sabi* is said to come primarily from *renga*<sup>(1)</sup> poetry masters, who show great aesthetic appreciation for things suggestive of age, desiccation, numbness, chilliness, obscurity—all of which are negative feelings opposed to warmth, the spring, expansiveness etc (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.285). In their poems the essence of *sabi* is revealed through images of reeds withered by frost, fading colours, the overwhelming feeling of melancholy, winter. Etymologically, the Chinese character of the term *jaku* (quiet, weak) is pronounced in the Japanese way as *sabi*. (Shigeo, K., 1984, p.16) As in *wabi*, *sabi's* initially negative connotations evolved gradually in the direction of more positive aesthetic values.<sup>(2)</sup> As a result, *sabi* became associated with unpretentiousness, the beauty contained in objects of primitive rusticity, the archaic imperfection, apparent simplicity and effortlessness in execution or richness in historical associations (which, however, may not always be present). From Suzuki's viewpoint, the above descriptions can only give us a glimpse of *sabi* as to a large extent *sabi* contains inexplicable elements that raise the object in question to the rank of an artistic production (the utensils used in the tearoom for example are mostly of this nature) (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.24).

With the passage of time, the meanings of the terms *wabi* and *sabi* crossed over so much that they are almost impossible to separate. In fact their roles have become tangled and interchangeable casting an almost impenetrable cloud around their true meaning. Both Suzuki (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.284) and Koren (Koren, L., 1994, p.23) sustain that *wabi* refers to the spirit, a way of life, a

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<sup>1</sup> *Renga* or 'linked poem' which made its appearance next to haiku, consists of a series of poems composed by different poets and connected through a process where the ending of the one would be the beginning of the following etc. (Miyamori, A., 2002, p.25).

<sup>2</sup> It was Basho who elevated *sabi's* status and use (Juniper, A., 2003, p. 76).



## Introduction

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philosophical construct whereas *sabi* is related to material objects, art and literature and represents an aesthetic ideal; the first is inward, subjective and personal whereas the latter is outward and objective.

The complexity and ambiguity of those two words is partially attributed to their close relationship with Zen, which considers language the greatest obstacle to real understanding. There is a tradition in Zen of maintaining ambiguity so that the mind is challenged towards finding the right answers and does not get trapped focusing on the wrong thing. It is also the strong attraction for the Japanese of ambiguity—in poetry for example the writer will try and maximise the potential meaning of his prose by deliberately omitting the subjects and objects, thus increasing the scope of interpretation—that explains their reluctance to voice a definite opinion on its interpretation. Thus *wabi sabi* through its deliberate avoidance of an interpretative fixity has become an advocate of the inverted relationship between the external emptiness and inner richness that describes both the conception and interpretation of traditional Japanese arts. Therefore it is due to these very characteristics of plainness, lack of brilliance and terseness, that traditional Japanese art forms such as the poetic miniatures of *haiku*, the humble construction of the tea house or the imaginary landscapes of the rock gardens, yield a multitude of associative connotations through a subjective interpretative process described in Suzuki's words as: "*objectively negated but subjectively affirmed*" (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.285).

Despite its importance and rich associations with Zen, classical arts and music, its unusual elusive quality and interpretative ambiguity has made *wabi sabi* a rare subject of concrete theoretical analysis. Today, there only exist a handful of relevant books in English, with hardly any reference to its links with music. Such references are also mysteriously absent from the writings by or about composers such as Toru Takemitsu and John Cage whose music incorporates an abundance of prime Japanese aesthetic trends.

Targeting this analytical gap, the current thesis is a small-scale attempt to tackle the most fundamental questions about the relationship of *wabi sabi* and music. The first chapter focuses on the understanding of *wabi sabi* through its multiple aesthetic connotations and diverse function in the traditional Japanese arts and music (traditional and contemporary). The second and most extensive chapter is a commentary upon seven original compositions, approached through the prism of the various aesthetic dimensions of *wabi sabi*. The third and final chapter focuses on the brief presentation of three additional original works, paradigms of the free application of *wabi sabi* in contemporary music composition.