Wabi Sabi –
Its Application in Japanese arts and Music (Traditional and Contemporary)

Section 2

The introduction attempted to provide a definition of the unified idea of *wabi sabi* primarily based on the etymological roots of the two terms, without going into further detail as to what these terms mean in their real-life application or how they apply in Japanese arts and music. This chapter examines the aesthetic connotations of these terms that expand beyond their original meaning, through the slow process of semantic enrichment and transformation, and provides examples of those connotations as seen at work i) in traditional Japanese arts, ii) in the specific example of the garden of Ryoanji, iii) in traditional Japanese music, and iv) in contemporary music.

I. IN TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ARTS

Kanso (poor, simple) is a term charged with negative connotations especially when used to describe someone's material possessions (e.g. house design, interior design etc.). Surprisingly, at the same time this term describes the aesthetic principle of simplicity, the core of things *wabi sabi*. A combined result of the limited natural resources in Japan and the asceticism that characterised the Zen monasteries and lifestyle, simplicity became gradually associated with ultimate refinement and taste. When savouring Japanese cuisine for example, one cannot help noticing that the basic ingredients of the indigenous food are limited to rice, beans, fish, seaweed and root vegetables—the staple diet of the Zen monks. Yet, a remarkable variety of flavours, colours and textures developed out of this limited pallet of ingredients. It is a fact that the Japanese culinary inventions are not as lush and flavoursome as those of the neighbouring China or Korea. Japanese cuisine has focused on the simplicity and purism of taste instead (Reynolds, R, 1992, p.22). By removing all the unnecessary ingredients through a careful filtering process, Japanese cuisine presents a unique example of refined subtlety and transparency in both flavour and presentation.

Beyond the culinary instance, Japanese show their almost obsessive preoccupation with transparency and detail in a variety of arts. *Ikebana* (flower arrangement) [(1)] is a characteristic example. Comparing to a typical English flower arrangement which takes up to two thirds of the area directly above the area with an abundance of extrovert flowers, the Japanese *nageire* (loose) flower arrangement may take less than 1/10 of the space (Juniper, A., 2003, p.116). The unoccupied 9/10, becomes a vital space (*ma*) through which the delicate, unobtrusive flowers seems to gain their importance and silent authority. By placing flowers inside the ascetic surroundings of the traditional Japanese room or the tea house, the attention of the observer is partially occupied by their fragile beauty without being totally absorbed by it, thus allowing the simultaneous reception and appreciation of the multitude of surrounding images, colours, fragrances and sounds. In Okakura's words: *"a solo of flower is interesting, but in a concerto with painting and sculpture the combination becomes entrancing. Sekishiu once placed some water-plants in a flat receptacle to suggest the vegetation of lakes and marshes, and on the wall above he hung a painting by Somi of wild ducks flying in the air. Shoha, another tea-master, combined a poem on the Beauty of Solitude by the Sea with a bronze incense burner in the form of a fisherman's jut and some wild flower of the beach. One of the guests has recorded that he felt in the whole composition the breath of waning autumn."* (Okakura, 1989, p. 117).

[1] The art of ikebana can be translated freely as 'keeping living plants alive in containers filled with water'. There are three distinctive types of ikebana: *seikwa* (cut flowers), *nageire* (loose arrangement) and *moribana* (landscape impression). (Herrigel, G., 1999, p.50).

Figure 1: Example of *Ikebana*. A single branch inside an earthen vase (Dajda, Wabi-Sabi Image Collection).

The careful orchestration of space is also evident in architecture. Associated with fluidity and flexibility the traditional Japanese house interior bares no fixed walls or windows. The non permanent spatial arrangements of *shoji* (literally, 'interceptor' or sliding doors), creates flexible spaces, temporary rooms that allow the transmission of light and sound defining the concept of a unified, flexible space. Due to the lack of their fixed positioning the architectural ingredients assume variable functions according to the time of the day. In a typical Zen temple, or a traditional Japanese house for example (Figure 1), the space used for social gatherings during the day can be divided into smaller compartments, converted into a sleeping chambers during the night with the addition of futon mattresses according to the number of guests. During the day, the mattresses and bedding are hidden inside large airy recessions (*oshiire*) also concealed by sliding doors.

The resulting ambiguity and vagueness inherent in such architectural designs is described by the aesthetic term *yojo*, literally 'extra emotion' or 'suggestion'. One of the most important examples and perhaps the root of the aspiration Japanese for ambiguity, is the function of language itself. In Japanese a verb, like 'go', all by itself makes a complete sentence. An adjective, like 'cold', by itself can make a complete sentence, too, because in Japanese the meaning of the verb 'to be' is built in. A sentence like *Iku*, can mean go/goes/will go. If this

relates to the person who is speaking then it can mean I go/I will go. In English, a standalone verb or adjective is considered a sentence fragment, because it does not have a subject and a native English speaker who spoke this way would sound rather silly. In Japanese though, sentences like these sound perfectly normal; in fact it often sounds quite unnatural to include the subject when it is already obvious from what came before in the conversation, or simply from the situation. (Lammers, W., 2005, p.2). In the introduction of English edition of the tenth century Japanese classic *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* the translator notes: "*Japanese authors, especially those writing in the classical language, omit personal names and pronouns as much as possible; in direct quotations the identity of the speakers is usually left to the reader's imagination. All this has to be supplied if the text is to be comprehensible in English.*" (Morris, I., 1967, p.16). A similar example of linguistic ambiguity is encountered in the famous classic novel of court life by Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji* (11th century) where as Reynolds describes *"three or four pages often pass without a stated subject"* (Reynolds, R., 1992, p27).



Figure 2: Flexible space of a traditional Japanese house interior
(Daja, Traditional Japanese Home Image Collection).

However even beyond the classic literature, ultimate examples of the evocative ambiguity of *yojo* are the *haiku*. Deeply inspired by the aesthetics of *wabi sabi*, *haiku* are the shortest of Japanese poems, consisting of three lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively, (seventeen syllables in all). A *haiku*, despite the limited word count of seven to ten words at maximum, is capable of depicting ideas so rich in meaning and connotations that it can create a virtually unlimited chain of interpretative and associative reactions.

Tsurigane ni	Upon the temple bell
Tomarite nemuru	A butterfly
Kochō kana	is sleeping well.

(Miyamori, A., 2002, p.5).

This haiku by Buson, a snapshot of a precious moment, grasps through a 'detached gaze'[1], a glimpse of the ultimate serenity of the contrasting images of a fragile butterfly and a heavy immobile temple bell. *Kocho* is a special word meaning 'spring butterfly' suggestive of the season. *Kana* originally translating as a mere exclamation mark or a hint of question and surprise, also means 'metal', 'steel' (though in different spelling) and sounds like *kane*—an alternative word for 'bell'. The hard, percussive effect of the repeated 'k' in *kocho kana* onomatopoetically alludes to the sound of the tolling of the bell, not as a reality but as imminent possibility contained within the idea of the bell.

Linking the images of 'bell' and 'butterfly' is achieved through the employment of a particle called *kireji* or 'cutting word' deriving from the aesthetic of *kire* (cutting). Such particles are used in *haiku* to terminate one sentence or phrase while simultaneously link it with another. *Kana*, one of the most important cutting words, concludes the haiku with a hint of doubt or surprise, suggesting the probability of an imminent incident—such as a sudden gust of wind or the tolling of the bell—that can potentially awaken the sleeping butterfly. At the same time *kana*, alludes to the image, make and sound of the bell as we saw above, establishing a subtle yet powerful link between the two contrasting images. The use of *kireji* particles in *haiku*,as we will see later, has its equivalent in all other traditional Japanese arts and music, and its meaning is connected with the distinctive aesthetic notion of *kire* (cut) or *kire-tsuzuki* (cut continuity). Its presence is discreet but significant and is connected with *wabi sabi* in a variety of ways. In general *kire* is an acknowledgment of the unpredictable quality of the natural order and subsequently of all the things or ideas *wabi sabi*, manifested through abrupt pauses, sudden changes of subject and imagery or the presence of violent cuts in object or design. At the same time *kire* describes the non-logical process of grouping or connection of these ideas, images or objects into a whole by means a wide variety of mechanisms of a primarily subjective and not always rational nature.

A term of a similar but more exclusive meaning is *mujo* (impermanence, transience). Originally an aesthetic principle of Zen, *mujo* only gradually attached to things or ideas *wabi sabi*. In our

[1] The expression is taken from the following discussion that took place between a garden master and his pupil: *"The first assignment I was given was to view thirty or so of the finest gardens in and around Kyoto. To my question, "Is there anything special I should keep in mind as I view them?" he replied, "No, just view them bon'yari shite" —in other words "**with a detached gaze**" without preconceptions, in a state of total receptivity"* (Slawson, D., 1987, p.41).

haiku example, the butterfly and the resting bell, in a moment crystallized, distilled, snatched from time's flow, attain momentarily a state of eternity through the absolute stillness of the present. And yet due to their changeable nature both are prone to an imminent disturbance from their current sleeping state. *Mujo* describes this imminent probability that allow us appreciate the beauty of the fragile stillness that lies in the brief transition between the coming and going of life.

The *Haiku's* great semantic and expressive wealth is not always overt to interpretation and can pass easily unnoticed without the reader's participation and sensitivity. This is because its expressive power, as in many classical Japanese art forms, does not rely on bold statements or big ideas but is attracted to humility (bugs, butterflies, frogs, crickets little birds) and the unpretentious natural beauty. Such gentleness of expression, imagery and spirit is known as *yawarag*i. Meaning both 'harmony' and 'gentleness' *yawaragi* seems to best describe the art of tea. According to Suzuki *"Harmony refers more to form, while gentleness is suggestive of an inward feeling. The general atmosphere of the tea-room (sukiya) tends to create this kind of gentleness all around—gentleness of touch, gentleness of odor, gentleness of light, and gentleness of sound. You take up a teacup, handmade and irregularly shaped, the glaze probably not uniformly overlaid, but in spite of this primitiveness the little utensil has a peculiar charm of gentleness, quietness, and unobtrusiveness. The incense burning is never strong and stimulating, but gentle and pervading. The windows and screens are another source of a gentle prevailing charm, for the light admitted into the room is always soft and restful and conducive to a meditative mood. The breeze passing through the needles of the old pine tree harmoniously blends with the sizzling of the iron kettle over the fire."* (Suzuki, D., 1959, p.275).

The act of tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) that takes place in the humble thatched-roof hut surroundings of the tea house, cannot be appreciated without the visitor entering the right spirit. The design of the tea gardens (*roji* or *chaniwa*), surrounding the tea house, aimed to emulate the feeling one gets when strolling through a desolate mountain trail (Figure 3). Designed with infinite care, a combination of irregularly placed stepping stones, mossy rocks of various shapes and subdued colors surrounded by austerely shaped pine trees and decaying bamboo fences, *"the tea garden aimed to distill a focused and refined state of mind so that upon entering through the low door of the tearoom the participants were ready to communicate not so much with each other but with the spirit of tea"* (Juniper, A., 2003, p.73).

The asymmetrical placement of the surrounding stepping stones, rocks and trees and the irregularity of the tea house design—where pillars, ceilings and walls made of variety of types of wood—represent another important aesthetic aspect of *wabi sabi*. Originating from the emulation of the Buddhist temples scattered irregularly over the grounds in accordance with

the topographical peculiarities *fukinsei* (asymmetry) is an attitude that runs largely counter to the pre-modern western design for symmetry. One of the aspects of asymmetry is pinpointed by Okakura in the incompleteness of design that requires personal input and interpretation. In his own words: *"the tea room (sukiya) is an Adobe of the Unsymmetrical worship of imperfect leaving things unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete"* (Okakura, K., 1989, p.70).



Figure 3: Japanese tea garden in Sagano (Kyoto)
(Jerry Drienjl, Riser Image Collection).

Another aspect of asymmetry stems from the aspiration of Japanese for natural beauty. In Japanese pottery, ironically the most prized bowls in history are those that have been initially discarded by the potters who made them (Juniper, A., 2003, p.81). In their irregular design, the result of the spontaneous qualities of natural fired clay, the Japanese see a beauty that surpasses the beauty of symmetry and is closer to natural life.



Figure 4a: Japanese tea house in Meimeian, Shimane. *Nichiriguchi*, the small aperture on the front left is the entrance (Hedonori Fukuma, Shebun Photo).



Figure 4B: a kneeling hostess, passing through the entrance (right image)
(Dajda, Tea Ceremony Image Collection).

The deep appreciation of natural patina—a sign of a natural ageing process— deterioration and impermanence, are ideas closer connected with the aesthetic term of *sabi*. Gustie Herrigel, on her description about the principles that govern the flower choice in *Ikebana* stresses the importance and great appreciation of small branches *"covered with the mossy patina of age"* (Herrigel, G., 1999, p.62). Sen Rikyu (1522–91), the person responsible for the codification of the tea ceremony (Soshitsu, S., 1983, p.388) was attracted by the Korean rough and unrefined pots which eventually replaced the extrovert, refined Chinese pots raising the tea ceremony into an art that values the unpretentious, understated and unassuming beauty freed from the need of validation or status.



Figure 5: Traditional Japanese tea pot (Dajda, Tea Ceremony Image Collection).

The artlessness of design of Korean pottery that attracted Rikyu, was in essence the result of a process of hard work devoid of any thought and artistic consciousness. Having its roots deep in Zen and even further back in the Chinese philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, purposelessness is a fundamental principle of w*abi sabi*. As described in *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*): *"there is in it no thinking, no doing [or no willing], absolute quietness, and no motion, but it feels, and when it acts, it flows through any objects and event of the world"* (Wilhelm, R., 2003, p.315). The basic rules of purposelessness stem from the mere observation of nature. Trees for example, according to Takemitsu *"are trees, only trees—a passive existence without deceit. No matter how sheltered the place where they grow, without asserting their presence trees concentrate self-expression, creating their own complex forms"* (Takemitsu, T., 1995, p.130). In Japanese aesthetics 'It', takes the place of the ego and the art of letting oneself go takes years of rigorous training to master. Eugen Herrigel, a German philosopher who took up the practice of archery toward the understanding of Zen, spent five out of the six years of his rigorous training, trying to free his shots from purpose, intention and consciousness. During that time, the ideas of 'target', 'arrow'

and 'bow' became increasingly irrelevant transforming the art of archery into no-art. During one of his Master's memorable demonstrations Herrigel recollects: *"I did not dare to pull the arrows out separately, but carried them back together with the target. The Master surveyed them critically. "The first shot," he then said, "was no great feat, because after all these years I am so familiar with my target-stand that I must know even in pitch darkness where the target is … but the second arrow which hit the first—what do you make of that? I at any rate know that it is not 'I' who must be given credit for this shot. 'It' shot and 'It' made the hit"* (Herrigel, E., 1989, p.53).

While in West the presence of qualities such as consciousness, intellect, control, form, structure, are often considered as merits in both the process of creation and appreciation, in Japan their absence signifies a truthful work of art. Due to the Japanese aspiration for asymmetry and incompleteness and the subsequent lack of formalism, their art tends to lack in large scale dramatic gestures, or monumental qualities. According to Roger Reynolds *" … tension accumulates and is dissipated not according to the orderly chains of cause and effect that make coherent, even methodical the drama in the narrative arts of the West (particularly in its music)"* (Reynolds, R., 1992, p.29) Reynolds continues, that *sumo*, the traditional wrestling ritual is characterised by a *"disconcerting contrast between long periods of ritual cleansing, posturing, admonishments from the referee and mock confrontations, and the following, furious bursts of grappling that may bring a bout to a close in less than ten seconds"* (Reynolds, R., 1992, p.29). Although *sumo*, cannot be characterised as an 'art', however the type of drama that it fosters which is quite at odds with similar sports in the West, is a fine example of the Japanese aspiration for 'anti-climax'. Such a tendency expands beyond the ritual of *sumo* and can be observed in the majority of traditional Japanese arts and music.

II. IN THE GARDEN OF RYOANJI – A CLOSER LOOK

Japan's first stone gardens were influenced by the imagery of the Chinese landscapes imported from the mainland during the Song dynasty (960–1279). The Zen monks also known as *ishitateso* (the monks who place stones) would shape their gardens as open gravel spaces with sparsely scattered rocks of varying shapes and sizes. The metaphysical purpose of their emptiness (*mu*) was the invitation of spirits (*kami*).[1] At the same time, the carefully placed rocks and the particular shaping of the gravel enhanced by the natural light changes, emulated landscapes of mountains and streams, panoramic views of islands forming a vast archipelago of subjective interpretations (Juniper, A., 2003, p.69).

Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, designed under the supervision of the artist Soami in 1450, is a typical example of a Zen stone garden made by merely placing raked sand and a collection of fifteen granite rocks within an oblong of empty space. This empty space (*ma*) that surrounds the fifteen rocks, is effectively a way of heightening the observer's appreciation of the composition through abstraction. Here the punctuation effect of the rocks is balanced by the monotony of raked sand that embraces them. Ryoanji's space is not a mere emptiness but, a meaningful visual silence, a reprieve for the eye and the mind in a setting conceived for self reflection (Engel, D., 1994, p. 20).

As in the *kireji* particles in *haiku*, the separation and link of Ryoanji from and with its external surroundings is achieved by means of an earthen wall (Figure 6a), high enough to create the impression of a definite border but low enough to permit a view of the natural surroundings. Internally, there is another border of pebbles that runs along the north and east edge of the garden. Those pebbles which are larger, darker and more rounded than the pieces of gravel and arranged in an austerely rectangular order, separate the irregularly arranged main garden area from the wooden viewing veranda and simultaneously provide a subtle yet unmistakeable link between the contrasting textures of rocks and gravel (Figure 6b). Moving inside the garden area, the five groups of stones are separated from the gravel area by means of the surrounding moss due to their contrast in texture and colour. The green colour of the moss functions as the only visual link between the 'still life' of Ryoanji and its surrounding organic life (Figure 7).

[1] The Japanese appreciation and reverence of nothingness differs radically from the Balinese attraction to completeness and saturation of time and space with consequent effects in their arts and music.



Figure 6a: Aspect of the surrounding earthen wall
(Jonathan Savoir, The Image Bank, 2005).



Figure 6b: Aspect of the internal borders
(Anna Watson, Axiom Photographic Agency).



Figure 7: Detail of the surrounding moss
(Art Wolfe, Photodisk).

The absence of trees, flowers or other plants (with the exception of moss that surrounds the rock groups) described with the term *karesansui* [1], is an allusion to the drying up organic life in contrast with the green plantation growing outside the separating garden wall, and a direct reference to the withered, desolate feeling of *sabi*.

[1] *Kare* means 'withered'.



Figure 8: 'Scroll' aspect of Ryoanji
(Paul Chesley, Stone Image Collection).

The strict limitation in the material choice and physical dimensions of Ryoanji's design, contribute to its unique transparency, also described with the term 'scroll' or 'single frame' composition. Ryoanji belongs in the category of a 'scroll' garden meant to be seen all at once as opposed to the 'stroll' garden that reveals itself gradually to the viewer (e.g. the tea garden mentioned earlier).[1] In Slawson's words: *"… like a painting in which every brushstroke and every patch of colour contributes to the overall effect (which is grasped immediately, in a single glance), a scroll garden should have no tree—in other words, no element—that is superfluous to the desired effect."* (Slawson, D., 1987, p.82).

The rocks, are organised in five asymmetrical groups of stones (two twos, two threes and one five) where each stone differs in shape and size from the others. This asymmetry is enhanced by the careful spatial placement of the five rock groups. It is a well known principle in architecture, painting or music that the combination of the size and positioning of an object (or sound) can enable us to sense the spatial qualities of 'nearby' and 'faraway'—a smaller rock feels more distant that a larger one placed on the same distant from the viewer. This sensation can be

[1] The size of a 'scroll' garden is not arbitrary, but determined by the laws of human vision. Ryoanji's size for example is somewhat larger than the normal binocular visual field for humans from side to side and from bottom to top thus always leaving a small portion invisible to the eye (when viewed from the wooden veranda) (Slawson, D., 1987. p.82).

enhanced by the character of the rocks themselves [(1)]—their colour, size, shape and texture. This effect can be further heightened when the rock also establishes a complementary movement, or thrust.[(2)] This strong sense of movement produced is described by Slawson: *"The first two groups of rocks are spaced at quite some distance yet from a compositional unit in the left half of the garden's rectangle. Beginning with the most massive group at the extreme left, there is a subtle yet unmistakable rightward thrust whose gliding, effortless quality is given physical form in the recumbent, whale-shaped contours of the second group, close to the rear wall . . ."* (Slawson, D., 1987, p.95).



Figure 9: Monk in Ryonaji raking gravel around rock
(Wayne Eastep, Photographers Choice).

Ryoanji is characterised by the modesty and sobriety prevalent in all *wabi sabi* designs, as anything superfluous to the desired effect has been carefully filtered and removed. The stones sized from moderate to small have a vague, attenuated quality. Their colours are limited within the spectrum of greys, and the wall displays an array of muddy yellow and grey tones. Unlike the large and impressive design of the gardens of Versailles, created at the same period in Europe, Ryoanji is small and intimate. Its size can easily compare to that of a backyard of an

[1] Each rock can be characterised by a unique colour, size, shape and texture. Also the placement of the rock (and therefore its appearance) is determined by its center of gravity or its point of equilibrium. In an irregular shape like a rock, judging this point requires a kind of developed intuition that becomes refined with experience. The size of the rocks used is not random. The small rocks are to the large rocks what the large rocks is to the entire garden.

[2] The shape of the rock can create vertical, diagonal or vertical sense of movement. A horizontal rock that has its grain parallel to the ground creates a lateral movement whereas a conical rock creates a diagonal one. Additionally there is a complementary movement implied by the asymmetry of its shape. Thus, a slightly descending line towards the right creates a rightwards thrust and vice versa.

average spacious house in England and its separating wall is not taller than the standard six-foot fence that divides the English gardens or houses. From the first glance it becomes apparent that Ryoanji belongs to a complete different aesthetic axis comparing to its Western counterparts. Its impressiveness and dramatic impact focus on subtle expressive gestures in the same manner as in haiku poetry. Within the emptiness and monotony of the raked sand, defined by the natural borders, the modest rocks are used as accents charged with infinite suggestiveness without disturbing the desired tranquillity of the design. The green moss that surrounds the groups of rocks—the only organic form allowed in the design—functions as a colour accent that complement and enhances the dramatic effect of the protruding rocks. Beyond the obvious, the spatial arrangement of the rock-groups creates a concealed but highly effective dynamic gesture described by Slawson as: *"The sensation of momentum being arrested is particularly intense when the entire composition is viewed with a slight backward glance from a standing position at the far end of the veranda …from this vantage point, the relative spacing between the five groups decreases geometrically from left to right. The tightening of space here in negatively accelerated increments is comparable in its visual dynamics to the sensation one experiences when a speeding train is being brought to a halt at a station platform."* (Slawson, D., 1987, p.95).

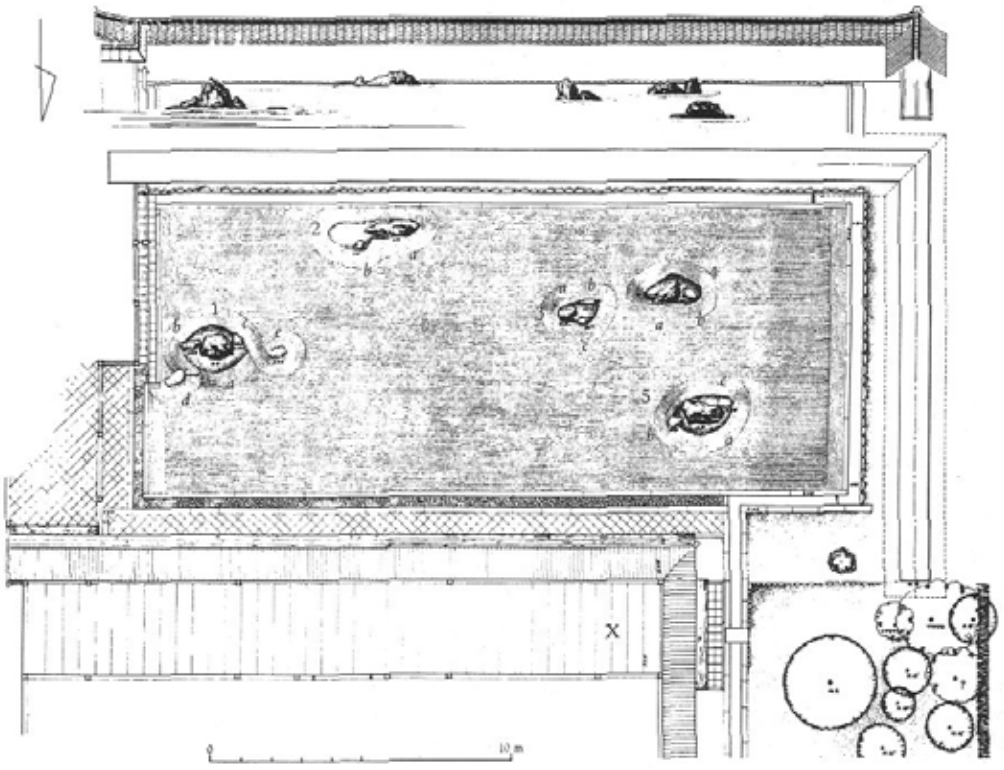


Figure 10: Plan and elevation of the Ryoanji
(Slawson, D., 1987, p.96).

The spatial and dynamic effects of Ryoanji have been conceived and applied with ultimate care in order maintain the simplicity of the design. However, behind its ascetic transparency, lies hidden a little surprise: depending on the viewing angle on the veranda, there is one rock always obscured by others. As we saw earlier, as a rule, a 'scroll' garden is designed in such a way so as all its constituent details (trees, rocks or other ornaments) are not overlapping in space and size. In Ryoanji, this rule applies in the great majority of the rocks with one exception: irrespective the positioning of the viewer on the veranda there are only fourteen rocks to be seen. This discrepancy creates a kind of dynamic tension that at first appears to be an imperfection in the design, but when looked at more closely, seems to lead to a greater perception of the works' perfection. Indeed, such a subtle gesture, works in favour with the three-dimensional impression of the garden. By changing viewing angles, it is not only the proportional spacing of the rocks that changes but also the rocks themselves, as their irregular shapes and sizes yield a multitude of shapes and associations. Robert Snarrenberg describes:

"The probability and potential of the garden at Ryoanji only began to register with me that winter's day in Kyoto. At the time, I recall, my fascination fixed on a curious phenomenon that follows from the shapes and arrangement of the fifteen larger stones that sit in and upon the rectangular field of raked sand: no matter where one stands along the veranda, only fourteen stones are visible: as you stroll the veranda, one stones slips from view behind another and a new stone emerges out form hiding—the composition of fourteen changes as you stroll." (Snarrenberg, R., 1992, p.224).

The variable perspectives, and ever-changing character of Ryonaji, not only lie in the sensory changes that relate to the viewing angle and light. Its surreal emptiness and frozen stillness seems to have a loosening effect in the sense of perception rendering the actual scales of the garden or the passage of time irrelevant. Its incompleteness triggers the human imagination towards a variety of imaginary plots: *"there is no shortage of theories to explain the garden's mysterious appeal, ranging from historian Loraine Kuck's description of the "sermon in the stone" and its occult balance to the more prosaic Japanese folk explanations of a tiger crossing the river with her cubs, mountaintops above the clouds, or islands in the sea. Indeed, these many possible meanings form a large part of its appeal."* (Bring, M., & Wayembergh, J., 1981).

Although in Ryoanji, the choice of material and its organisation in the given space has an inevitable quality, at the same time there seems to be no evident logic in such choice. Artless, and timeless, Ryoanji seems to defy the passage of time sharing the same qualities as an unearthly landscape which no longer decays the usual manner. And yet despite the illusionary immobility against the seasonal changes and surrounding nature, Ryoanji's rough-looking rocks

become ultimate symbols of impermanence through the inevitable signs of time imprinted on them, thus contradicting their very own existence.



Figure 11: An aspect of Ryonji in a picture taken during a winter night in December 1998 (Tadayuki Naitoh).

III. IN JAPANESE TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Although in the existing but limited literature on the subject, *wabi sabi* is linked with a variety of artistic disciplines, surprisingly enough there is a notable lack of concrete examples that explore its connection with music. However as music more than any other art is the most direct expression of the aesthetic framework of a given culture [(1)], it is inevitable that traditional Japanese music would feature a similar if not greater relationship with the aesthetic of *wabi sabi*. This chapter explores some of the possible perspectives of the application of *wabi sabi* in music, both traditional and contemporary.

A. Noh: Chu-No-Mai

Noh is an art form that combines all in one, literature, theatre, dance and music (Yuasa, J., 1993, p.186). Its staging is plain though elegant. The movement of the dancers/actors/singers tend to be slow though controlled, stereotyped and highly suggestive complemented by the timeless almost surreal beauty of the refined masks and costumes. Its orchestration is minimal and transparent consisting of just one flute (*nokan*) and three percussion instruments (*ko-tsuzumi*, *o-tsuzumi* and *taiko*) in total. Due to *noh*'s great versatility and multiple cultural associations, it would be an impossible task to attempt analysing each one of its disciplines through the prism of the aesthetic of *wabi sabi*. Similarly, a critical approach to just its musical aspect would by far exceed the limitations of the thesis. Therefore for purposes of economy, the analysis will focus on the flute part of a *noh* dance titled *Chu-no-mai* (moderate dance), used also as a structural model for the composition for saxophone and piano *For the Ice II* examined later in chapter 3.

The flute, the only melodic instrument in *noh*, is particularly prominent in dance pieces, songs or pieces that announce the beginning and ending of a play (Tamba, A., 1981, p.171). Unlike the traditional western melodic organisation, its material derives from the juxtaposition of stereotyped melodic cells. A melody cell is essentially a melodic group of predetermined notes which may be ornamented by improvised embellishments. *Chu-no-mai* consists of a combination of four reoccurring melodic cells (repetitive) (Figure 12) and ten unique cells (non-repetitive) (Figure 14).

[1] This presumption is based on the unprecedented immediacy inherent in the properties of sound and inevitably in the expressive immediacy of a music composition.
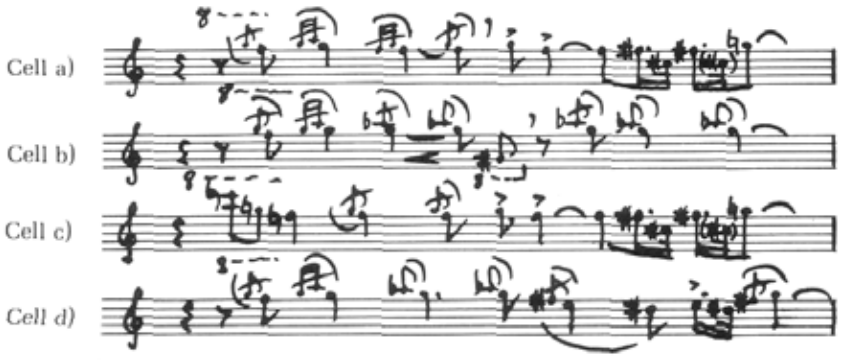


Figure 12: The four repetitive cells of *Chu-no-mai* (moderate dance) in Western notation (Tamba, A., 1981, p.177) (reference CD, track 1).

Though the complexity of *noh* dances can vary, *Chu-no-mai* is an example of a fairly complex structure, resembling that of an irregular rondo (Figure 13). In the diagram below the letters a, b, c, d represent the repetitive melodic cells, whereas the numbers 1, 2, 3, … , 10 indicate the non-repetitive cells. The combination of repetitive and non-repetitive cells results in melodic sequences marked as 'variable' whereas the orderly juxtaposition of the four repetitive cells (a–d) results in the 'fixed' melodic sequences (*ji*). The combination of variable and fixed melodic sequences constitutes a step, or section (*dan*). *Chu-no-mai* consists of three sections preceded by a very brief introduction.

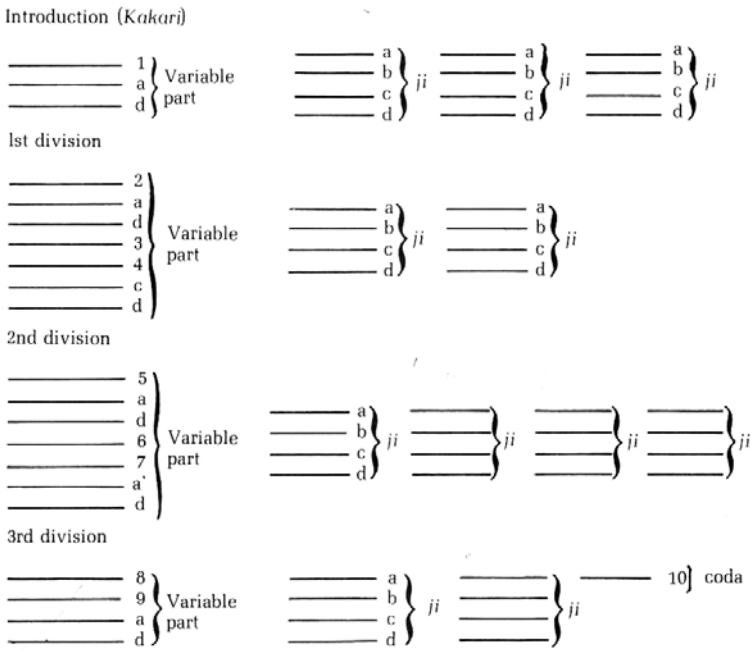


Figure 13: The structural outline of *Chu no mai* (to be read from left to right and top to bottom) (Tamba, A., 1981, p.176).

Although Noh music has been crystallised in an aesthetic and technical framework that stands very much on its own, one cannot help noticing in it the deeply rooted presence of fundamental aesthetic principles of *wabi sabi*.

Chu-no-mai's structure is a typical example of Japanese asymmetry. This is partially due to the irregular grouping of the melodic cells and sequences as well as the gradual temporal acceleration throughout the entire movement. In fact, to my experience, the temporal acceleration in the live performance follows a much more complex process which is altogether absent from the current score. Essentially the process of acceleration is often interrupted by dramatic *ritenuti* creating the feeling of a highly unstable temporal continuum. Within its integrated staged performance, *Chu-no-mai* demonstrates a deeper level of asymmetry, where flute, percussion (including the vocal interjections) and dance seem to unravel independently, each fixed and consistent to their own logic.

The melodic and rhythmic affinity between repetitive and non-repetitive cells[1] enhanced by the irregular temporal fluctuations (Figure 14) creates a highly unstable soundscape free of substantial aural landmarks. The prevailing ambiguity and irregularity here establishes the concept of space (*ma*) reminiscent of the open, but flexible interiors of traditional Japanese architecture.

Like in *haiku* where the *kireji* particles connect and separate contrasting imagery, or in *Ryoanji* whose borders function as both physical delimiters and dynamic links to its surroundings, similarly *Chu-no-mai* utilises the concept of *kire* (cutting) as a means separation and threading. In Figure 12 we can see that most of the repetitive cells (a, c and d) end with short, rhythmically distinctive codas (dotted semiquavers). These terminal music particles (attached only to the specified cells), not only signify the end of the melodic cell, but also differentiate the repetitive from the non-repetitive cells. At the same time the pitch G featured at the end of each of the terminal particles is a link towards either the next repetitive cell or to any of the non-repetitive cells as per the structural diagram. The only cell (c), without a terminal cell attached, is an instance of asymmetry that effectively counter-balances the regularity of repetition in the *ji* (fixed) sequence (a–d). Although not appearing in the current transcription, similar terminal particles are utilised in the percussion parts. *Uchikiri* (terminate), are cells that terminate a rhythmic sequence or lead to the initial cells of a following sequence (Tamba A., 1981, p181).

The notion of cut-continuation is also prevalent in the physical aspect of the *noh* dance. The actor slides the foot along the floor with the toes raised, and then 'cuts' off the movement by

[1] Upon comparison, the repetitive and non repetitive cells show a low level or 'thematic' differentiation.

quickly lowering the toes to the floor—and beginning at that precise moment the sliding movement along the floor with the other foot. *"This stylization of the natural human walk draws attention to the episodic nature of life, which is also reflected in the pause between every exhalation of air from the lungs and the next inhalation. Through attending to the breath in zen meditation one becomes aware that the pause between exhalation and inhalation is different—more of a cut—from that between inhalation and exhalation. This reflects the possibility of life's being cut off at any moment: the one exhalation that isn't followed by an inhalation, known as breathing one's last."* (Parks, G., 2005).

The concepts of development and variation as known in Western music are altogether absent here. Also the lack of a harmonic system does not support the concept of melodic structure as known in the West. Here the term 'structure' partially describes the juxtaposition of repetitive and non-repetitive melodic sequences according to a predetermined plan whose elements are not dynamically linked through an identifiable notional thread or a narrative based on the logical rules of cause and effect. Development is replaced by sound gestures identified as shifting pitches (*glissandi*, *portamenti*), grace notes (quasi-harmonic gestures), timbral transformations (sound and noise) and shifting tempi (*accelerandi*, *ritardandi*). In dances like *Chu-no-mai* time has a circular, subjective quality based on an inner respiratory continuity of the so called mental breathing. *"In it the performer does not count rhythmic beats but feels a kind of expansion within the continuous physical breath and spiritual breath."* (Yuasa, J., 1989, p.178). Continuity of breathing replaces here the Western concept of melodic continuity. The lack of a distinguishable logical coherence, renders the western sense of drama obsolete. In *Chu-no-mai* drama appears to the uninformed observer a puzzle because events arrive at unpredictable moments. The interest shifts from the argued succession of events to the events themselves: when in drama the chronological inevitability becomes irrelevant then the experience of the moment becomes the drama.

The melodic material in *Chu-no-mai* due to its simplicity has an astonishingly haunting quality. Freed from any harmonic associations; it seems as if the entire dance is reduced to a single melodic cell, a six-minute variations based on the tone G. And yet, here simplicity is counterbalanced by a subtle yet elaborate web of spatial, temporal and timbral nuances.
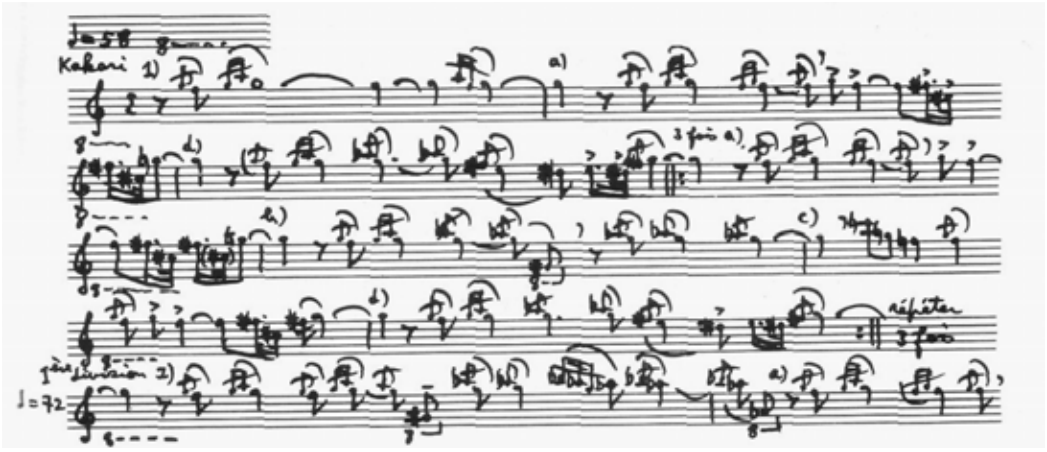


Figure 14: An example of the opening of *Chu-no-mai*. Two of the non-repetitive melodic cells make their appearance in the first bar of the first and last lines, marked with the numbers 1 and 2 respectively. The letters a, b, c, d demark the appearance of the repetitive cells outlined in Figure 12 (Tamba, A., 1981, p.177) (reference CD, track 1).

At an interpretational level, *Chu-no-mai* is characterised by a lack of brilliant virtuosity and spectacle. The instrumental writing is clearly not concerned with the demonstration of the flute potential. Instead, the music, usually danced by a heavenly maiden or spirit, focuses on the internal attainment of the essence of a mysterious and subtle beauty. According to Motokiyo Zeami (1363–1444) one of the founders of *noh* (Smethurst, M. 1989, chapter I), *"it is a rare accomplishment for a player to attain the fame of virtuosity by truly assimilating his inner self with the personage he is impersonating. This certainly would correspond to the Chinese saying "The difficulty exists not in achieving something but in achieving it with perfection."* (Malm, W., 1986, p.157).

The virtuosity conveyed in Zeami's words does not share the characteristics of western virtuosity, but rather assumes the form of inner control and perfection in the simplest action, sound or expression.

B. Gagaku—Etenraku

A similar, if not more extreme example of unassuming virtuosity, grace, quietness, and simplicity is *gagaku* (noble or elegant music), associated with ceremonies and entertainments of the Imperial Court. Described by musicologists as one *"of the oldest orchestral musics in the world"* (Malm, W., 1996, p.235), *gagaku* originates from the court music of China which was imported and established in Japan in the first half of the ninth century. One of the primary concepts evident in *gagaku* is getting the maximum effect from a deliberately restricted amount of material. In Malm's description: *"The many techniques possible on various gagaku instruments are generally not all*

exploited. Rather, there is a concentration on only a few basic sounds in order to enhance their effectiveness." (Malm, W., 1996, 235). Therefore unlike the chamber music that made its appearance later in the West, *gagaku* seems bare, almost simplistic. In *Etenraku* for example, one of the most famous *gagaku* pieces, the *biwa* [1] and *koto* [2] despite they virtuosic ability, are limited to playing short stereotyped patterns that mark off time units in the music: *"This lute is capable of many lively and complicated sounds and there are indications that fanciful improvisations may originally have been common in the playing of the biwa within the gagaku ensemble. The part books for the biwa, however, give only the barest outline of what is to be played, and today the performers play only what is notated. This produces a simple strummed arpeggio plus one or two afternotes. One could certainly call this a decay of the tradition, but the musicians have turned it into an aesthetic experience by playing their few notes with great seriousness and style. The manner in which the arm rises and the plectrum crosses the strings is carefully devised so as to indicate that the sound produced is important and also that the gesture used is beautiful."* (Togi, M., 1971, p.22).
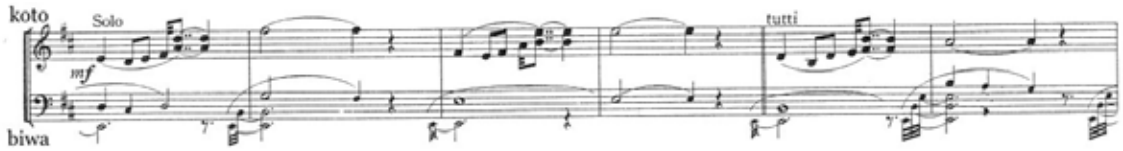


Figure 15: An instance of simplicity in the *koto* and *biwa* parts taken from *Etenraku*. This type of simplicity enhanced by the very slow tempo is not a result of the instrumental technical limitations but a conscious aesthetic choice that contributes to the ceremonial quality of *gagaku*
(Shiba, S., 1971, p.67).

Another significant difference between *gagaku* and the western orchestra lies in is synchronicity of parts. In *gagaku,* players perform without a score and without a conductor. Their interpretation of the music, which is usually very slow, is based primarily on the individual characteristics of the instruments and the human breath. Thus according to its sustaining ability, each instrument adds not only its own colour but also its individual interpretation of the same melody resulting in the effect of *tsure* and *zure* (literally meaning 'drag' and 'rhythmically disjunctive' respectively). The resulting rhythmic discrepancy leads to a flexible soundspace (*ma*) where time loses the objectivity usually imposed by a conductor or a metronomic pulse. According to Malm *"gagaku makes use of a common Japanese principle of elastic or breath rhythm. The melody moves from beat to beat in a rhythm more akin to that of a breath taken deeply, held for an instant, and then expelled"* (Malm, W., 1996, p. 234). This sense of subjectivity supports an organic type

[1] Four-stringed vertical lute originating from the Chinese *pipa*.

[2] 11-stringed zither with movable bridges..

of heterophony through the variations of a mother tune through the individuality of breathing and instrumental differences in register, timbre, sound projection, sustaining ability etc). The resulting absence of a vertical synchronicity which would normally sound wrong in the interpretation of the classical western repertoire becomes an indispensable asset in *gagaku*'s unique spatial character and subtle multiplicity.

The Western transcription of *Etenraku* only partially shows the effect of rhythmic disjunction between parts (Figure 16).
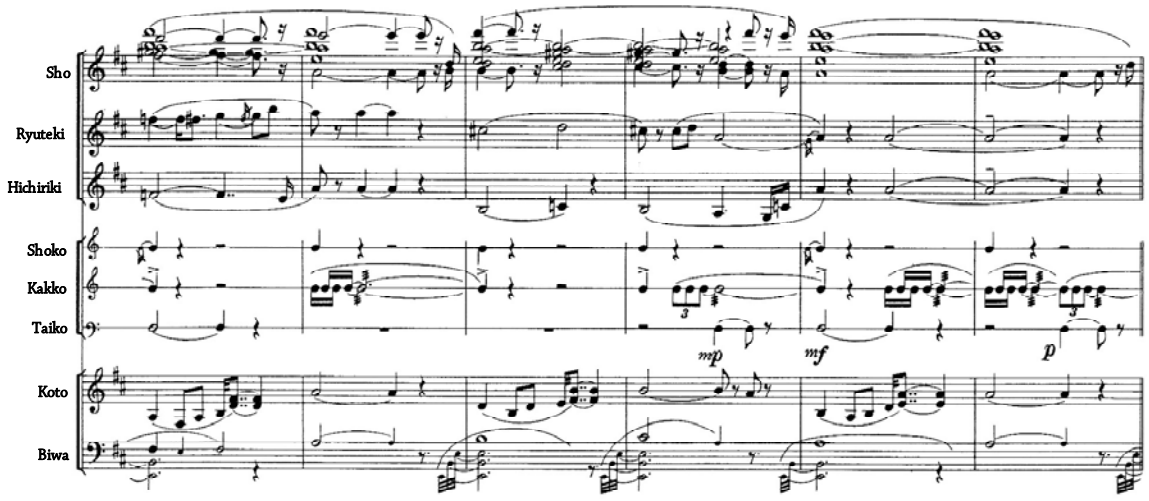


Figure 16: Excerpt from the western transcription of *Etenraku* (Shiba, S., 1972, p.9) (reference CD, track 2).

Despite the impression of synchronicity conveyed in the score, in performance, the two winds (*hichiriki* and *ryuteki*, staff 2 and 3 respectively) are never strictly synchronised. Similarly the chords of the *sho* (mouth organ, staff 1) whose bottom notes follow the melodic part of the two winds seem to move along with the main melody but never strictly with it. The same principle applies in the interpretation of the percussion parts (staves 4-6). An extreme example of non-synchronicity, a type of 'chaophony' (*ghoshi*), is used to accompany the entrance and exit of the *gagaku* dancers (Figure 17) (Shigeo, K., 1984, p. 27). Although this type of instrumental succession resembles the western canon, it is based on the same elastic discrepancy that rules *Etenraku* and the entire *gagaku* repertoire.

More than *noh*, *gagaku* demonstrates a remarkable lack of dramatic substance. The music, unravelling slowly in moderate dynamics, is in keeping with the concept of *jaku* (quietness) contained in *sabi*. Dramatic gestures are altogether absent and the musical interest is channelled towards the spatial aspects of the irregular instrumental entries, their timbral

qualities and distilled microcosmic gestures. Even through the last simple sounds of *Etenraku*, in the space between the pluck of the unaccompanied *biwa* and *koto*, one can feel a powerful intensity, a meaningful rest, the Japanese aesthetic pause (*ma*) (Figure 18).
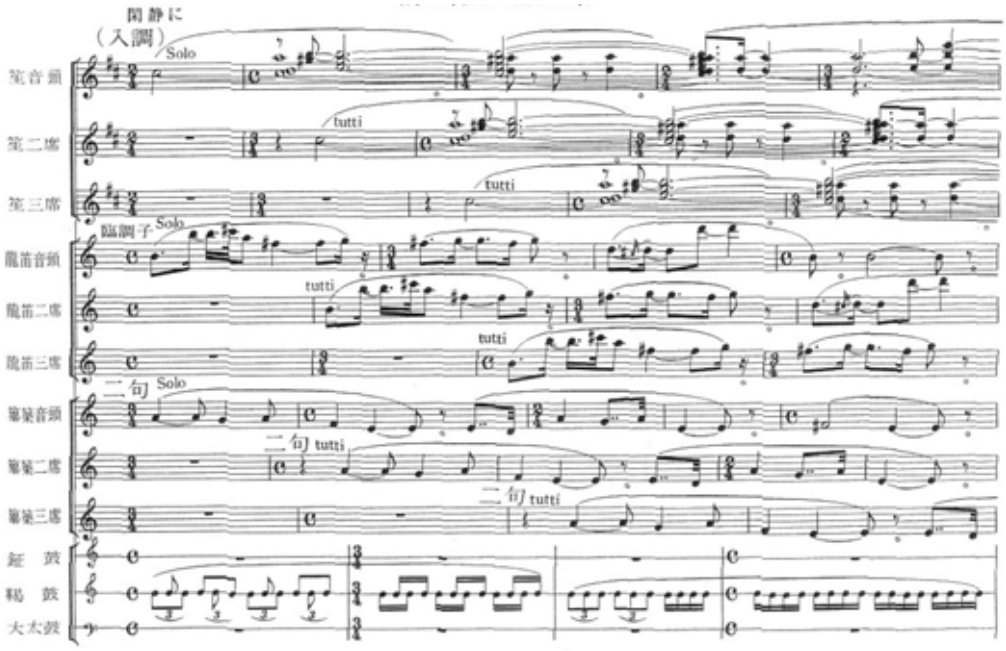


Figure 17: An extreme instance of *tsure* taken from *Nyûjō*. Here, one instrument is followed by the second, the second by a third and so on. This process resembles the Western canon but here, the actual performance is much freer and rhythmically elastic
(Shiba, S., 1972, p.172) (reference CD, track 3) .
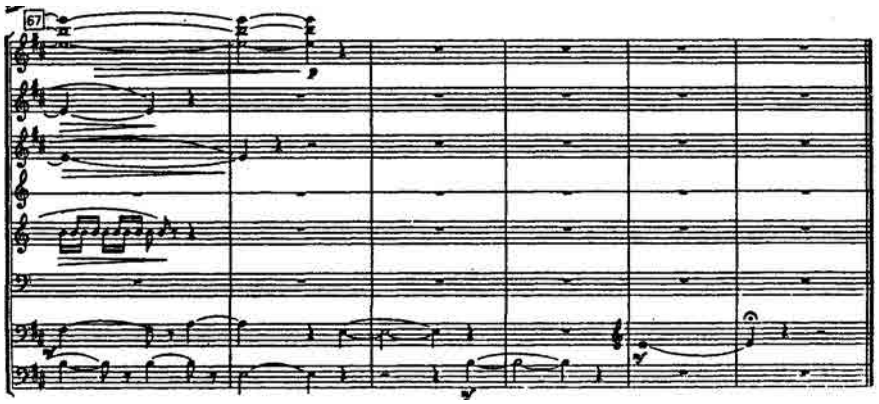


Figure 18: Transcription of the closing bars of *Etenraku*
(Shiba, S., 1972, p.12) (reference CD, track 2).

C. Shakuhachi—Reibo

Shakuhachi, the five-hole vertically blown bamboo flute, is one of the most revered instruments in Japanese traditional music (Lependorf, J., 1980, p.232). Due to its immense expressive capability and soothing tone it became the favourite instrument of Zen monks, who used it as a meditation tool. Each Zen temple developed their own 'secret pieces' for the daily use of monks belonging to a given temple. Those pieces named *honkyoku* (true, original) were not intended for entertainment but used as disciplined, spiritual exercises. Today only 36 of those compositions have survived. (Tan, H., 1989, p.53).

The *shakuhachi* can produce with ease the five pitches of the pentatonic scale throughout its register (low, medium, high). All the other tones can derive from those basic pitches but differ significantly in terms of dynamics and timbre. Its sound can vary from clear and bell-like, to windy and breathy creating a very pronounced association of pitch with timbre (Samuelson, R.,1994, p. 86). In more technical terms, the production of other than the pentatonic tones, require the performer to lower or raise the head at different degrees so as to alter the angle that the air-jet hits the bamboo tube. Therefore, the production of fast chromatic passages can be very awkward to execute.

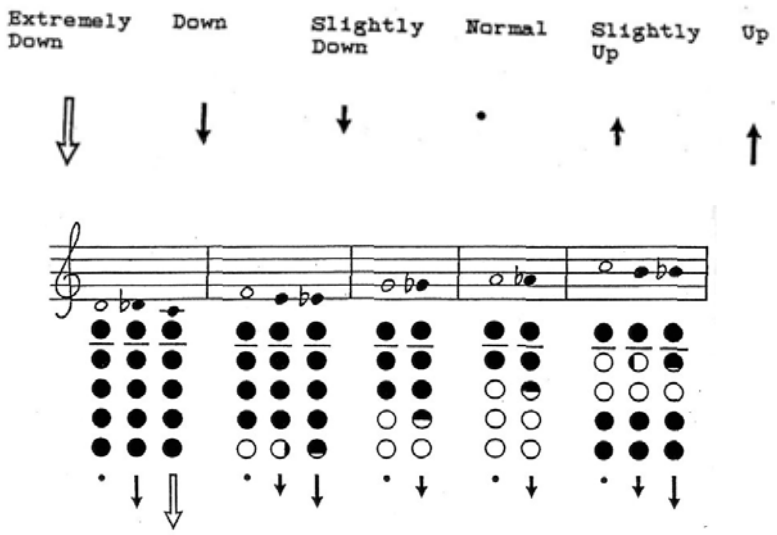


Figure 19: Top: the different jaw positions and their notation
Bottom: Secondary tones and the way of their production by combining jaw position and partially covered holes
(Yoshihazu, I., 1994, Vol. 8, p.18).

The *shakuhachi* is also characterised by a significant lack of dynamic and timbral homogeneity throughout its register. By definition the five tones of the pentatonic scale sound louder than

the artificially induced 'secondary' tones. Also depending on the fingering and the head/jaw position the tone, timbre, loudness and intonation can change dramatically. In western terms, such an instrument would be considered as primitive especially when compared with the modern flute with its unique projection, homogeneity and virtuosic agility. However the Japanese have strongly abstained from 'improving' the instrument.[1] Instead, by incorporating these very 'imperfections' into music, they developed a significant repertoire (traditional and contemporary), rendering *shakuhachi*'s acoustic discrepancies into a highly sophisticated expressive tool.

One of the examples in the traditional repertoire is the wide variety of well-defined types of vibrato, varying in speed, range or their combination, probably much more that one encounters in Western music. Pitch inflection also is another important characteristic in shakuhachi technique. Through the use of alternative fingering (by partially shading an open hole) or by altering the head position (lowering or raising the head) or most frequently by combining these two methods, effective glissandi, unusual vibrato effects, but also a tantalising variety of pitches even within an equal-tempered environment are produced (Figure 20) (Lependorf, J., 1980, p.239). A wide variety of trills (multiphonic, timbral, vibrato, tremolo and double trills) is a common practice on the instrument. Supported by the aesthetic tendency towards refined imperfection (rustic patina) and natural beauty, and based on the natural ability of the instrument to produce a wide spectrum of sounds, ranging from pure noise to pure pitch Japanese incorporated noise in the music and elevated to a status of equal importance as the pitched sound.



Figure 20: *Shika no Tone* (*honkyoku* transcribed). Vibrato, glissando and overblowing effects. (Lependorf, J., 1980, p.245).

Such is the variety of techniques, colours, microtonal inflections and other effects employed in the *shakuhachi* performance, that the task of transcription of its traditional repertoire into Western notation is almost impossible.

[1] The Japanese have refused to develop the imperfections of their traditional instruments, unlike the Chinese who have transformed certain instruments beyond recognition in comparison to their original versions (e.g. the Chinese mouth organ *Zheng*).

The example below (Figure 21) shows side by side the original score and transcription of an excerpt from the *honkyoku* piece (*Futaiken*) *Reibo.*[1]

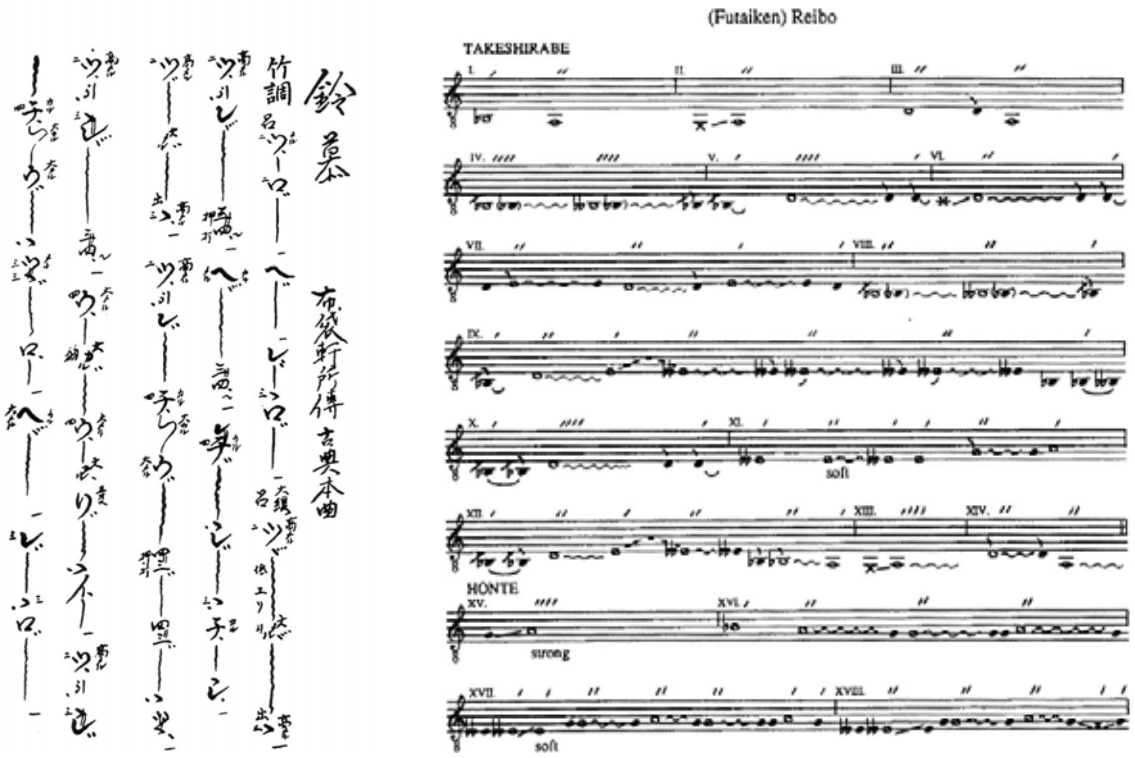


Figure 21: Futaiken Reibo (left: the first page of the original score[2]; right: its Western transcription) (Tann, H., 1980, p.53 and 70) (reference CD, track 4).

The right hand side shows the western approximation of the original Japanese score on the left (read from right to left and from top to bottom). In comparison to *Chu-No-Mai* or *Etenraku*, *Reibo* seems to foster a much greater level of indeterminacy. Although pitch is fixed, musical parameters such as rhythm, tempo and dynamics have been left to an extent open to interpretation, potentially leading to a number of versions of a piece as many as its performances.

Despite the notational flexibility, *Reibo* has a distinctive identity. Its constituent phrases (marked as short horizontal lines in the original or half bar lines in the transcription), have a more or less a self-absorbing quality, described by Hillary Tan as *"non narrative, nonlinear continuities concerned as much with closing and enclosing as with reaching forward and opening out."* (Tann, H., 1980, p. 69). Their span is regulated by the breath length and a vague rhythmic indication is

1 One of the many versions of *Reibo,* assembled by priests and master of the *Futaiken* temple in the Northern area of Japan in mid-eighteen century.

2 The Japanese score is read from right to left and from top to bottom.

provided through the vertical dashes to the right of the original and above the staff. The vast timbral variety of *shakuhachi* is better represented in the original score which due to its graphic nature demonstrates a remarkable eloquence in this respect whilst still maintaining a notable interpretational flexibility. Lines of different thickness represent different note strengths and line shapes provide an immediate virtual representation of sound parameters such as colour, gain, volume, vibrato, dynamic fluctuations and attack.

Although in *Reibo* there is far less investment towards the continuity between breath-phrases and across breath-phrases, there is a clear sense of a large scale arc as the melody rises slowly from the opening bottom A towards the high B flat and then quickly recedes back to the initial state of silence towards the end. The connection between the five sections is achieved mainly through flexible links. In the first movement of *Reibo* (*Takeshirabe,* Figure 21) a registral plateau (pitch A) is momentarily established in XI. The weak fingering on the A and brevity of its occurrence though is an indication that that this territory will remain presently unexplored. However the following section *Honte* (bottom of Figure 21) from the outset, reclaims this territory. The phrase XVII clearly echoes XI, this time the stronger fingering on the A and its longer length establish the new section. The function of XI is very similar to the *kireji* particles in *haiku*, as not only connects and delimits different sections but implies subtle interrelationships between sectional ingredients. The rise of major third followed by the additional upwards step towards the ultimate A in XI is crammed with echoes partially resembling to the ghostly vibrato in IV, the upwards leap in V and the major second step in VII. A subtle sense of acceleration and intensity is implied here as material scattered across more than three phrases is compacted into a single breath further heightened by its upwards transposition. Simple in nature, limited to the pentatonic scale, the phrases have an open quality, often mere fragments pregnant with suggestiveness like the single-word phrases of Japanese syntax.

The meaningful silences (*ma*)of irregular lengths that surround the individual phrases relate closely to their immediately preceding and following phrases regulated by their intensity (soft, loud, soft and loud, crescendo, diminuendo etc.), attack (fade in and out, hard attack, after attack etc.), duration (short, medium, long) and register (low, medium, high). The sense of *ma* here is omnipresent and unpredictable connected as it is with sound events of a relatively indeterminate nature. These silences not only define the physical melodic borders, but provide a vital space within which melodic phrases are transformed into a living sound both self-contained and continuous. The irregular and transformed reoccurrence of gestural and timbral cells, underlines this subtle interconnecting thread without the need of any of the western mechanisms of development and variation. Unpretentious and subtle yet of a quiet authority

Reibo is reminiscent of Juniper's description of wabi sabi's *"understated beauty that exists in the modest, rustic, imperfect, or even decayed, an aesthetic that finds a melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things."* (Juniper, 2003, p.51).

IV. IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

As *wabi sabi* is a living aesthetic, its study would be incomplete without examining some its applications in contemporary music, which is the focus of the present thesis.

Undoubtedly there is an increasing number of Western composers who, at least once, have used elements of Japanese culture as the main subject, or inspiration for their compositions. In some instances, these elements have become an organic part of their expressive resources through their consistent application on their works. On the other hand we have the example of Japanese composers whose music inevitably features elements of their native culture.

Analysis of a certain number of such works has revealed a closely-knit relationship between the aesthetic/expressive vocabulary of the inspiration source and the original work. Although it is obvious that such a relationship can greatly vary between different compositions, undeniably the most important aesthetic principles of Japanese classical arts and music (e.g. asymmetry, simplicity, sobriety, fluidity, noise etc.)—and prime characteristics of *wabi sabi*—can also be observed in such compositions, obviously transferred from the source to the new work through a subjective process of inner osmosis. This process is not easily identifiable but there is direct analogy between the magnitude of its effect and the composer's sensitivity, respect and understanding for the object of inspiration.

The impact of such aesthetic and expressive osmosis on an original composition can be identified through the simple comparison of two works of a common source of inspiration. Both, *Mortuos plango, vivos voco* by Jonathan Harvey and *Kane No Koe* ('The Voice of the Bell') by Roderick Watkins use the bell as their main formal model. However while Harvey's piece is based on the sound of a bell from Winchester Cathedral (Murail, T. 2005, p.203), Watkins has chosen the virtual sound of the Japanese temple bell instead, electronically synthesised by the IRCAM software *Modalys*. The aural comparison of both works yields some significant observations: compared to *Kane no Koe*, *Mortuos plango, vivos voco*, has a far more harmonically fixed and timbraly vivid character. On the one hand this discrepancy can be merely attributed to the difference of sound resources between the two works (voice and electronics vs. voice, instruments and electronics respectively) or merely the composers' stylistic individuality. However the fact that both composers' expressive output features a wide stylistic diversity renders this above assumption incomplete. A far more convincing explanation can be extracted from the semantic and associative variations of the concept of 'Bell' quoted in each of the works. In *Mortuos plango*, Harvey creates a modal language, consistent with the associations of the Western Church bell with plaint chanting and harmonic singularity, counterbalanced by vivid,

colourful electroacoustic expressive gestures. On the contrary, *Kane No Koe*, through the allusion to the Japanese temple bell, captures the aharmonic and variable melodic character of Japanese music (Figure 22). Though deeply harmonic in essence, *Kane no Koe*'s frequent harmonic shifts loosen the sense of the harmonic stability creating a variable, elusive harmonic tapestry in contrast to *Mortuos plango*'s intentional modal fixity. In terms of tone colour, the modest instrumental treatment in Watkins' work yields textures closer to the monochromatic shades of the Japanese *sumie* (ink painting) rather than the colourful stencils of the Western Cathedral. In that sense the sonic identities of both works function as distinctive aural blueprints of the aesthetic and expressive framework of their source references.
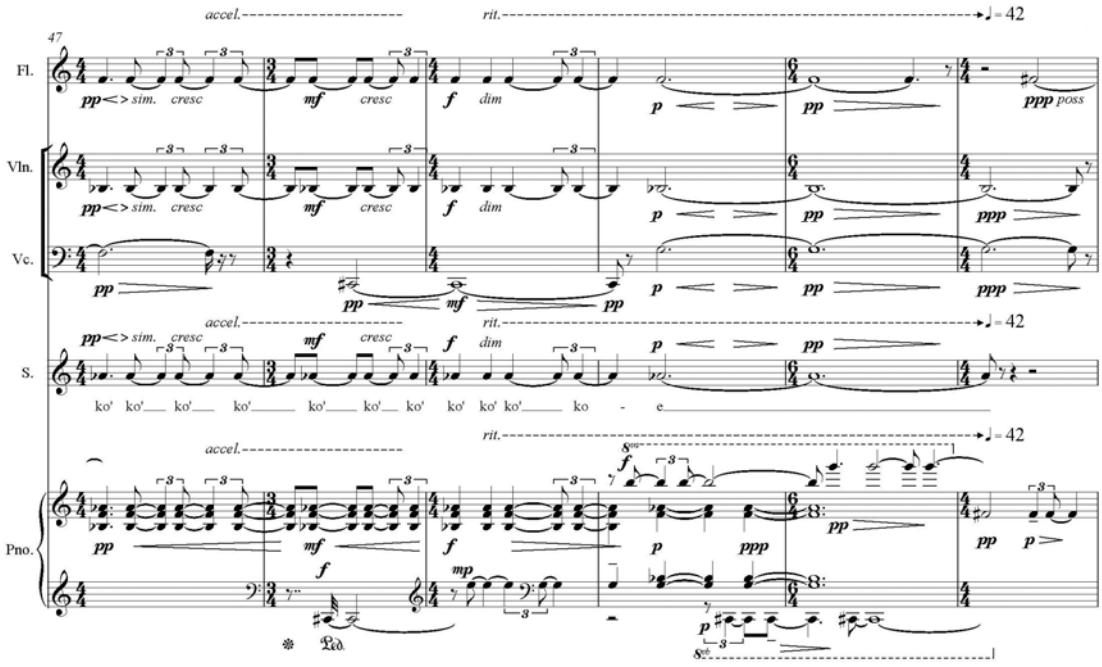


Figure 22: Excerpt from *Kane no Koe* (Watkins, R., 2007, p.11).

Although providing a complete list of works influenced by aspects of Japanese music and culture is not among the objectives of this thesis, purely for purposes of general referencing, it will suffice to mention examples of a few composers whose works reveal strong references to Japanese aesthetics. Among others Olivier Messiaen, Henry Cowell, Alan Hovhaness, Zhou Long, Isang Yun, Yoritsune Matsudaira, Toru Takemitsu, Maki Ishii and Yoko Kubo have all produced works influenced by elements from *gagaku* (e.g. instrumentation, heterophony, etc.). Messiaen was also interested in the terseness and brevity of *haiku* and Japanese poetry in general, alongside composers such as Igor Stravinsky, John Cage and Roderick Watkins and Evelyn Ficarra, whereas certain works by Benjamin Britten, Akira Tamba, Jo Kondo, Kei Kondo and

Iannis Xenakis show a strong interest in the dramatic substance of *Noh*. Japanese gardens have frequently been a vivid source of inspiration for Toru Takemitsu, John Cage and Kaija Saariaho, whereas the flexible architectural space (*ma*) and simplicity (*kanso*), can be identified in works by Jonathan Harvey, Morton Feldman, George Crumb, Gyorgy Kurtag, Sato Somei, Joji Yuasa, Maurice Ravel etc.

The focus of the current chapter is limited to the analysis of two works in particular: *Ryoanji* by John Cage and the *Cadenza* from *November Steps* by Toru Takemitsu.

A. John Cage – Ryoanji

In 1983 Cage created a series of drawings entitled *Where R = Ryoanji* (Prichett, J., 1993, p.189). He placed fifteen smooth stones on a paper and drew around them their outlines. The stone density (their relative placement on the paper surface), the type of pencil, the amount of pressure, the number of tracings and so on, were controlled by chance operations determined with the use of *I-Ching*.[1] The principle behind the composition of *Ryoanji* was simple: by placing the rock outlines on graphic paper, Cage converted them into pitch-specific melodic outlines. In the version of *Ryoanji* for oboe and percussion, the oboe interprets the stone curves by sliding smoothly between the pitches that demark the beginning the ending of the curve (Figure 23).

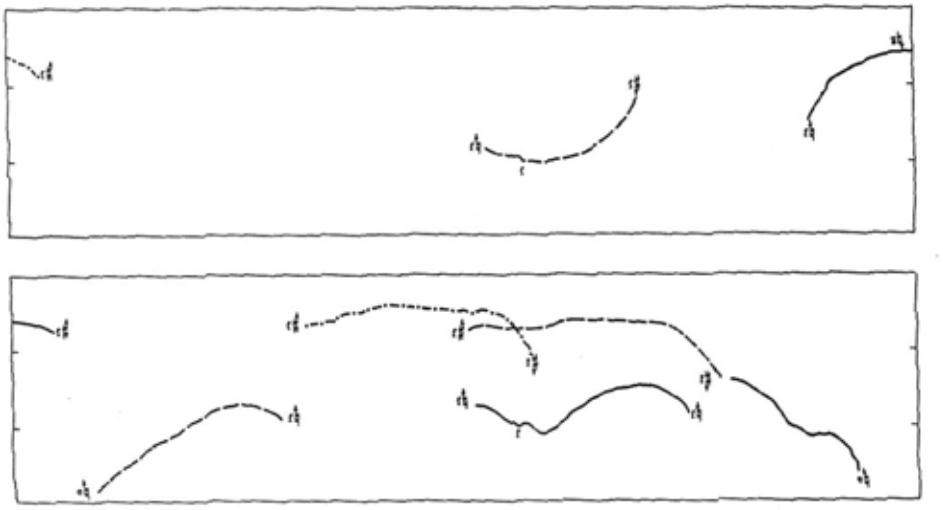


Figure 23: John Cage's *Ryonji* for oboe (excerpt)
(Prichett, J., 1993, p.189).

[1] *I-Ching* or the Book of Changes is the famous collection of ancient Chinese texts used extensively by John Cage as a composition tool.

Cage's instructions include the following: *"Each two pages are a garden of sounds. The glissandi are to be played smoothly and as much as is possible like sound events in nature rather than sounds in music. The dynamics, not given, are to be soft rather than loud, as a rule, a rule that has exceptions."*

Unlike the indeterminacy of the melody, the percussion is precisely notated and unchanging. The score reads: *"At least two only slightly resonant instrument of different material (wood and metal, not metal and metal) played in unison. The playing begins anywhere about two measure before the instrumentalist or vocalist, continuing during silences between songs or pieces, and ending about two measures after the instrument or voice has stopped. These sounds are the 'raked sand' of the garden. They should be played quietly but not as background. They should even be imperceptibly in the foreground. They should have some life (slight changes of imperceptible dynamics) as though the light on them is changing."*

It seems that in Cage's *Ryoanji* the correspondence of image and sound is so tight that the music ceases to be merely a subjective interpretation of the original idea. Instead this idea is preserved with a mathematic accuracy through the adoption of a largely 'objective' method of composition where every single parameter of a stone garden, (the rocks, their spacing, their size etc.) has been transported into music by means of a strict methodological process. Although this method of composition seems quite at odds with the intuitive character of *wabi sabi*, at the same time it ensures an almost 'absolute' transference of the architectural design into music, a type of musical blueprint of the actual garden, hence sharing the same aesthetic language as the original model.

Simple in essence and flexibly notated *Ryoanji's* score relies heavily on the interpretative skill and sound control of the performer who is required to 'brush' (for the oboist himself) with slow glissandi the curves traced from the perimeters of the stones used for the etchings and drawings. The percussion part is even simpler consisting of a single complex of unspecified sounds played in unison. The indeterminate character of the parts makes their interpretation prone to variation and alteration in terms of dynamics, timbre and duration according to idiosyncratic choices, as many in number as its performances, reflecting the inherently impermanent nature of the work.

An analogous focus on the imperceptibility of sonic changes is also one of the main expressive goals of the music by Morton Feldman. However unlike Cage, Feldman rarely resorts to a notational indeterminacy. And yet his accurately notated scores yield interpretations characterised by a similar sense of timelessness and sonic fluidity as in *Ryoanji* suggesting a methodological alternative to Cage's 'chance operations' (Figure 24).

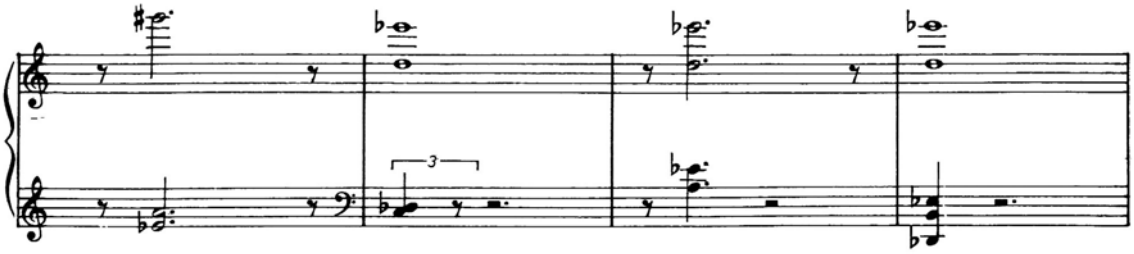


Figure 24: An excerpt from *Piano* by Morton Feldman
(Feldman, M., 1981, p.1).

The careful selection of the musical ingredients and their closely-knit correspondence to their raw physical model is a reference to the natural organic beauty of the *wabi sabi* where not a single detail is superfluous to the design. And yet in the effort to create the perfect music analogy of the chosen physical model, Ryoanji's design reveals another paradox. Unlike the concept of purposelessness fostered by *wabi sabi*, *Ryoanji*'s strict methodological approach of the transformation of an actual garden into a 'garden of sounds' is a clear sign of deliberation. Yet here the analogies between the 'physical' and 'musical' gardens are far less triggered by the composer's idiosyncratic preferences rather than by specific objective delimiters. Musical parameters, such as duration, pitch, dynamics etc are determined by the physical characteristic of the stones or the use of chance operations thus creating a musical reality that conveys faithfully and in its totality the artlessness and purposelessness inherent in *wabi sabi*. As James Prichett's describes: *"in Cage's Ryoanji the union of mystery and sensory exactitude makes music a possible metaphor of reality."* (Prichett, J., 1993, p.191).

The distribution of the sound events in space is irregular. Asymmetry permeates every musical aspect: like the asymmetric sizes, shapes and placing of the rocks, the oboe delivers melodic phrases of varying durations, dynamics, timbral nuances and microtonal inflections—largely left to the performer's discretion. Asymmetry also describes the relationship and function between the melodic and rhythmic material: the oboe's sustaining, fluid and largely indeterminate character versus the dry, sparse, largely static, monotonous percussion part.

As seen on the performance notes, Cage's preoccupation with detail is immense. Though little of this detail is actually notated in the score, the subtleties of interpretation expressed in the form of performance notes, require a meditative-like inner concentration. And yet paradoxically there are instances where drowned line-contours overlap in the score, rendering their performance by a single oboe impossible. Cage chooses to incorporate this imperfection into

the design, in an act of unconditional acceptance of the natural flaws inherent in *sabi*: *"tape recordings are to be used to allow a single performer to play duets or trios"* (J. Prichett, 1993, p. 189).

The slow tempo, use of space and the irrational, chance-based processes of linking melodic cells contribute to *Ryoanji's* distinctive lack in dramatic gestures, evocative of the aesthetic of *jaku* (quietness). Surprisingly *Ryoanji* is not devoid of inner suspense. Subdued in substance (if non-existent by Western standards) *Ryoanji's* drama is largely channelled in the dimension of time (in analogy to the garden's physical space) defined as the distance between the sound events. In this analogy the garden's empty spaces, assume in music the role of silences: the larger the space the longer the silence. Here silences seem to share an equal importance as sound and their presence create a music discourse where at times sound emerges from silence whereas at others silence seems to emerge from sound. Like the flexible, variable space that surrounds the rocks, the percussion delineates the irregularity of the time continuum by delivering the beat in unequal time increments. This irregularity of pulse combined with the unpredictability of the melodic occurrences and the incomplete/flexible design, create a dynamic tension between what is present and what is not.

The work *Rock Garden of Ryoanji* by Kaija Saariaho for percussion and electronics reveals a somewhat different approach. Unlike the aridness and intimacy conveyed by Cage's work Saariaho's musical garden creates an exaggerated three-dimensional sonic impression of the original garden where the employment of reverberant low-frequency drones depicts vast imaginary soundscapes quite at odds with microcosmic reality of the garden. The percussion part has also a sustaining quality but is substantially more variable than the unchanging background creating distinctive music punctuations. Compared to Cage's unchanging landscapes, Saariaho's work has a greater dramatic and colourful presence as the concentration of accent gestures is more frequent. However the sense of drama is weakened by the piece's brevity (three and a half minutes in total).

We can never tell with certainty, what is the inner purpose for Saariaho's *Rock Garden* or Cage's *Ryoanji*'s composition composed twenty years or so after the composer's visit to the Zen garden in Kyoto, as often even the composer's interpretation of his intentions is misleading and subjectively biased. However what can be observed with certainty, particularly in Cage's work, is an unmistakeable echo of all the fundamental principles of Japanese aesthetics collectively known and recognised as *wabi sabi*.

B. Toru Takemitsu – The 'Tenth' Step

Toru Takemitsu was also particularly interested in the structure of Japanese gardens and their possible transformation into musical structures. Unlike Cage's preference for an arid, scroll-type of landscape, Takemitsu modelled a naturalistic and more variegated stroll-type of tea garden into his piece *Arc for Piano and Orchestra* (1963). As he describes it: *"Imagine someone strolling through a garden … when writing for orchestra I often use a solo instrument—piano, cello, or violin, for example, or different groups of instruments against the orchestra. This is usually referred to as a concerto idea, but in my case it is not a concerto in the sense of a competition or contrast between soloist and orchestra."* (Takemitsu, T.,1995, p. 120). Paradoxically this statement seems to describe not only *Arc* but also *November Steps* for *biwa*, *shakuhachi* and orchestra composed in 1967.

The word 'Step' used in the title, *dan* in Japanese, is a reference to the Japanese *danmono*, the equivalent of Western variations whereas '*November*' (eleventh month), corresponds to number eleven suggestive of the number of variations/sections in the work. Here the variations do not follow any special melodic scheme but have the character of *'constantly swaying impulses'* (Takemitsu, T., 1995, p.88) the changing perspectives of an imaginary scroll garden. The relationship between the soloists and the orchestra is based more on their opposition than affinity. Intensification of such opposition has created in *November Steps* the paradox of an autonomous music entity within the main body of the composition, a garden within a garden: the cadenza.

The score of the cadenza consists of two pages (one for each instrument) and each page consists of number of sequences (nine and seven respectively). Both instruments play their sequences independently from each other and in any order. The simplicity of the notation and the flexibility of the writing are striking. In the *biwa* part for example, Takemitsu makes use of a tabulature-like notation where both the fret and string number are indicated alongside the sound intensity and the right hand playing techniques (Figure 25). The determination of both temporal and the rhythmic aspects have been largely left to the player's choice.

The notation of the melodic material of the *shakuhachi* part is rather less precise. A variety of symbols indicate the desired idiomatic instrumental effects associated with its traditional performance practice and unlike the *biwa* part, there are no precise indications of pitch, tempo or rhythm. Its part resembles more a diagram of improvisation of mnemonic character rather than a complete description of the actual desired musical effect.

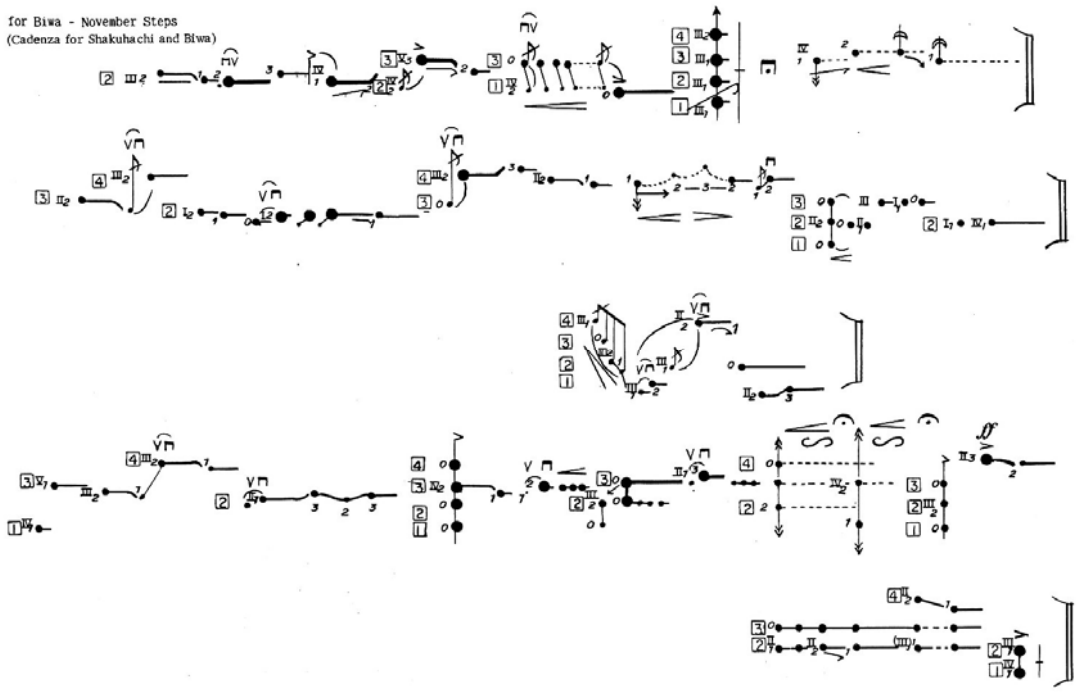


Figure 25: An excerpt from Takemitu's cadenza. The *biwa* strings and the fret numbers are indicated as 1, 2, 3, 4 and V, IV, III, II, I respectively (Takemitsu, T., 1967, p.17).

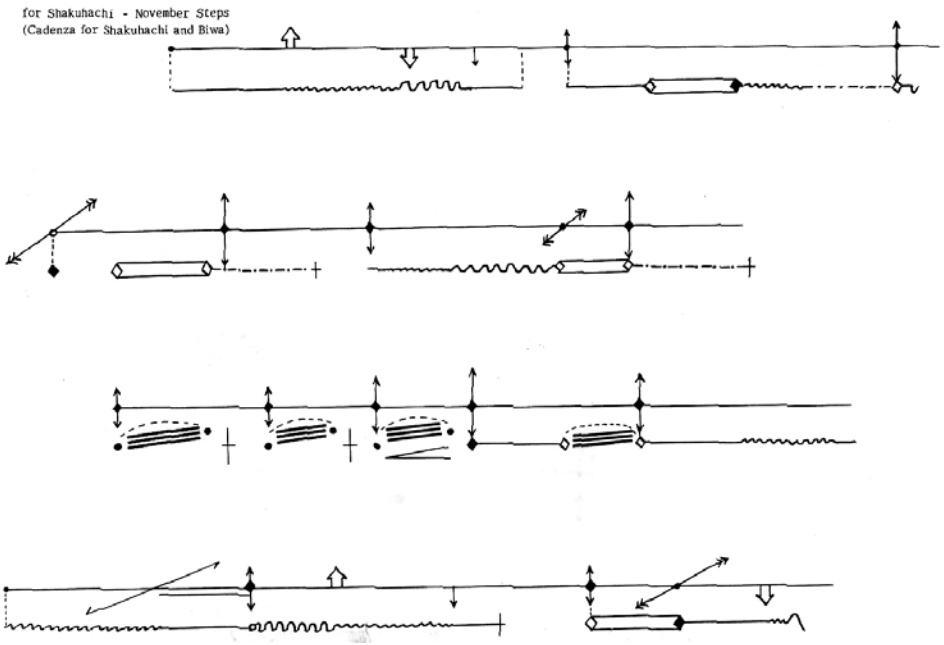


Figure 26: Four sequences from the shakuhachi part. The various lines and symbols describe the melodic contour, the articulation, the vibrato type, and the general ambience. A key of those symbols appears on the performance notes (Takemitsu, T., 1967, p.18)

Considering the deep historical associations of both *biwa* and *shakuhachi* with improvisation and their reliance on oral transmission, the notation appears here highly appropriate and idiomatic. Takemitsu uses his instinctive awareness of the Japanese tradition as a tool for an interpretive refinement. By means of a simple, uncluttered score, in a similar manner as in *Ryoanji's* deliberate minimalism, he encourages the performers to take interpretational liberties and use their mastery to 'compose' the missing elements. The piece's success more than any Western equivalent, depends on the performers' skill and their ability to breathe life into it. As would be expected, both players (originally Kinshi Tsuruta and Katsuya Yokoyama) were previously involved in the realisation of *Eclipse* (also for *biwa* and *shakuhachi*), becoming gradually acquainted with the required approach of a composition of a similar nature. As a natural consequence the cadenza's notation, may seem quite impenetrable to anyone but the soloists.

Though there is no concrete evidence that cadenza is a specific reference to the *wabi sabi* concept of incompleteness, it is undeniable that the Japanese instrumental medium has had a profound effect on the shape and style of the work. Reminiscent of the meditative *honkyoku* pieces and the narrative biwa accompaniment of the 12th century epic *Heike Monogatari*, the cadenza creates a soundspace disconnected from the orchestral medium and present reality.

As in *noh* music, the two instrumental layers function as autonomous entities that evolve slowly at their own time resulting in textures of an unprecedented fluidity and unpredictability. Such independence in temporal structures is suggestive of the concept of circular time as opposed to liner time defined by Joji Yuasa as: *"… linear time and circular time are conceptually different. The former is found in Western music in general and the latter is found in the Japanese traditional music affiliated with Buddihism. In circular time there is no distinction between past, present and future. These are clearly delineated in linear time. In circular time, in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, the future arrives suddenly."* (Yuasa, J., 1989, p.178). A similar but more controlled example of independent temporal strata can be observed in Yuasa's *Interpenetration for 2 Flutes*. In the first movement of Yuasa's work, the temporal axis of each of the flute parts is controlled by means of angled lines placed below each part, that designate *accelerandi* and *ritardandi*. With the exception of sparse moments of vertical synchronisation denoted by the use of vertical dotted lines, the two instrumental lines remain unsynchronised (Figure 27). However more than Yuasa's *Interpenetration*, the two instrumental lines Takemitsu's cadenza seems to attain an absolute independence.

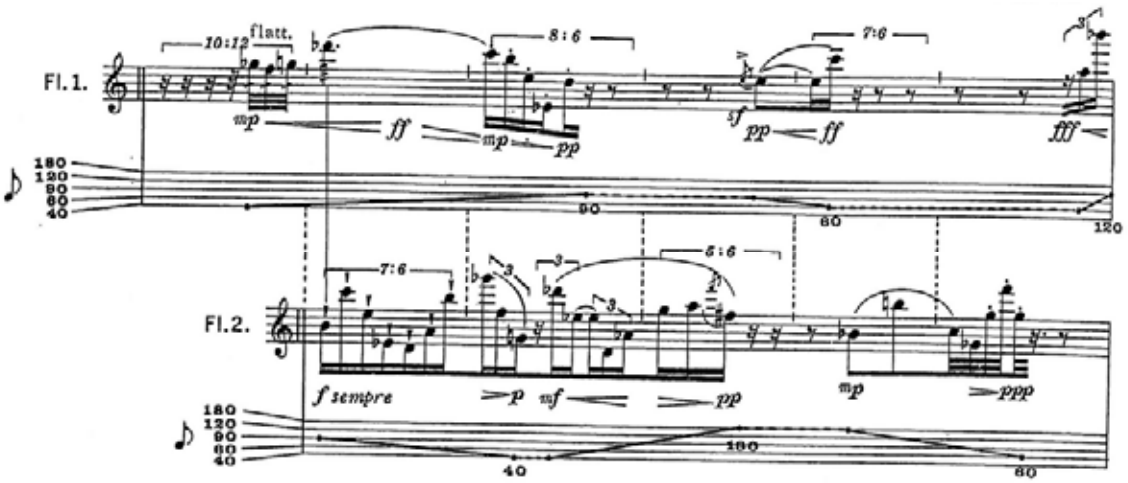


Figure 27: Opening of the first movement of *Interpenetration for 2 Flutes* by Joji Yuasa (Yuasa, J., 1966, p.1).

The sense of flexible space is ubiquitous: the pauses highlight the fragmented character of the melodic sequences enhancing the flexible connection of sections and parts. From a wider perspective the cadenza is a large scale statement of *ma*, a piece within a piece, a solitary duo competing with an entire orchestra (or vice versa?).

And yet despite its unbalanced proportions in relation to the large scale structure, the cadenza feels neither long nor disconnected from the rest of the work. Indeed, its interpretation creates a finely balanced and effortlessly flowing aural impression. The secret behind its successful writing, beyond the interpretational contribution of the soloists, lies in the careful balancing of two diametrically contrasting ideas: the relative fixed *biwa* part versus the improvised line of *shakuhachi*. This contrast is further heightened by the complementary function of the instrumental timbres: the dry, quickly decaying *biwa* sound versus the airy, sustaining *shakuhachi*. At a higher level the Japanese instrumental duet creates a field of contrast with their orchestral instrumental surroundings in terms of aesthetics, expression, notation and notion (intimate versus great).

Although the cadenza of *November Steps* aims to augment the polarisation of the two instrumental mediums, Takemitsu does not omit employing the familiar *kireji* technique as a discrete aural link for their connection. Peter Burt, in his effort to map the exact borders of the each of the 'eleven steps' remarks: *"Similarly, the description of the soloists' unaccompanied cadenza as the work's "tenth step" when it was issued independently on CD recording again suggests a slightly different segmentation from that implied by the rehearsal numbers, since the tenth of these actually appears in the orchestral passage four bars before the cadenza begins. Perhaps the most that one can*

assert with any certainty, then, is that the work –as Ohtake cautiously expresses it – consists of 'eleven ambiguously separated sections' " (Burt, P., 2001., p. 114). The discrepancy Burt refers to, between the orchestral marks (1–11) Takemitsu himself used to denote the commencement of each step, and the moments in music based on the listener's subjective expectation, seems of an inexplicable nature when examined from the Western viewpoint, creating without doubt a certain analytical puzzlement. Seen though through the perspective of *wabi sabi*, this discrepancy is perfectly natural. Like the tea garden whose function is to separate the teahouse from its external surroundings and at the same time prepare the visitor for the humble interiors of the tea hut, Takemitsu uses the orchestra to both blur and prepare the entry to his cadenza. Devoid of a music discourse built on the rules of cause and effect, the music unfolds as an unpredictable succession of solo and tutti, leading imperceptibly into the actual cadenza. The four bars mentioned above that precede the cadenza, simply prepare the listener for the appreciation of the intimate sound of the instrumental duet by providing the necessary contrast in terms of volume and intensity. The continuous presence of either *biwa* or *shakuhachi* during these bars (with the exception of the expressive pause at figure 55) as well as in the preceding sections, provide the necessary thread for the seamless integration of the cadenza within the structure. From this point of view, the first nine steps can be interpreted as levels of psychological preparation that lead towards the humble cadenza, reflecting musically a perfect analogy with the relationship of the stroll garden and the tea house.

Although the cadenza due to its aleatoric character does not support a Western traditional dramatic discourse, at moments is sounds highly dramatic whereas at others immensely meditative. The indeterminate juxtaposition of these contrasting states as well as all their intermediate stages create an imminent unpredictability. In this unstable temporal, timbral and dynamic context the future seems indeed *"to arrive suddenly and without warning"* in a similar way as in the organisation of the rest of the sections and the introduction of the cadenza itself. Indeed, the placing of the cadenza just before the brief final tutti has a significant dramatic impact that works largely counter to the Western climactic approach. For nine minutes, almost half of the duration of the entire work, the unaccompanied sounds of *biwa* and *shakuhachi* carry the listener to another musical dimension, disconnected from the preceding established musical reality. In contrast to the Western tendency to reserve the densest and loudest sections towards the end of the composition, Takemitsu chooses the solidarity of the two soloists instead.

The use of anticlimactic structures is not an exclusive feature of Japanese music. Jonathan Harvey's *Flight-Elegy* for violin and piano is an instance of a Western composition of this type.

Composed in 1989 as an elegy for the violinist and aviator Peter Gibbs, the work unravels mostly in a sober and introvert mood. The fluid, quasi-pentatonic violin part at times sounds overtly oriental whereas the extensive nondescript clusters played created by brushing the piano stings, create a subtle sonic substratum that connects more with the Japanese concept of *sawari* than Western harmonic thought (Figure 28).

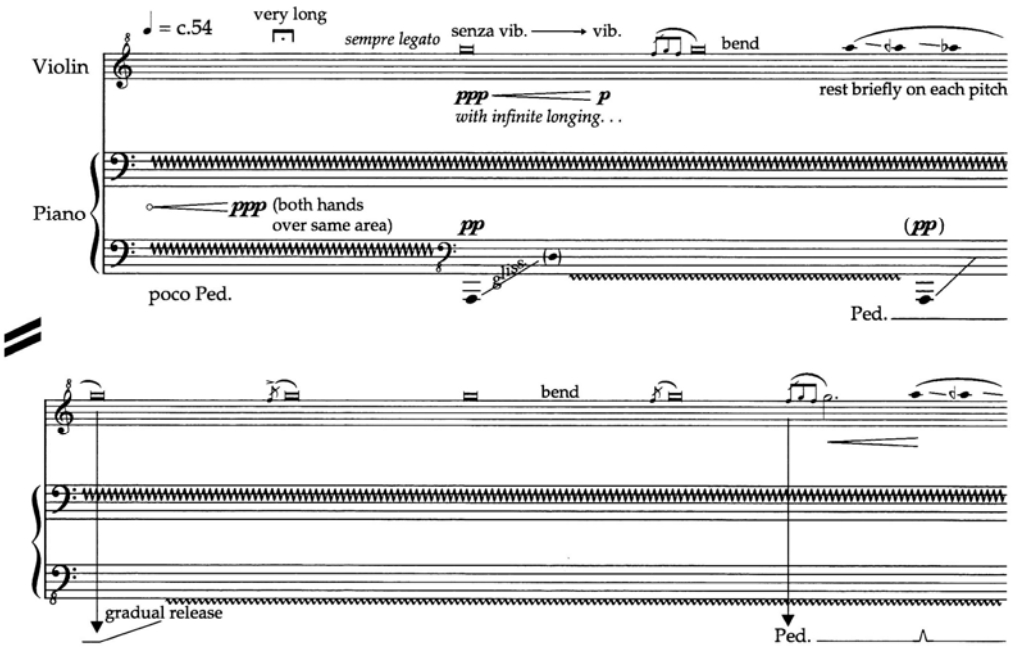


Figure 28: Opening of Flight Elegy
(Harvey, J. 1996, p.1).

As in Takemitsu's cadenza, the individual instrumental lines feature an independent evolution, pinpointed in their largely flexible vertical alignment. Their opposition is further heightened by the registral and timbral distance as the legato lines in the high register of the violin hover over the clusters of the piano's lowermost register. The drama in *Flight-Elegy* focuses on the momentary coincidence of the two contrasting sonic planes expressed through their brief but violent registral and dynamic collision (Figure 29).

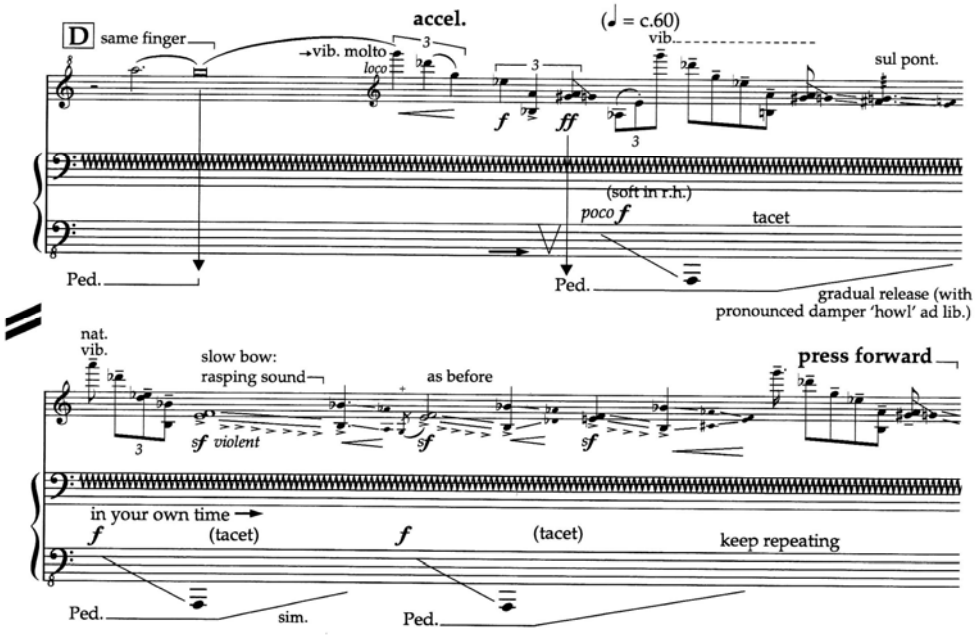


Figure 29: (Harvey, J. 1996, p.4).

Although different in style and instrumentation, both *November Steps* and *Flight Elegy* seem to interconnect through the notion of opposition that both seek as their main expressive goal. Takemitsu's cadenza in particular through its disproportionate prominence within the work creates more questions than provides answers. In *November Steps* Western musical tradition and the eastern aesthetics of *wabi sabi* are placed side by side. Their co-existence is not a matter of competition but of mutual respect and consideration. There perhaps lies the future of contemporary music.