

## NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

*Using Takemitsu's Equinox for solo classical guitar to explain why cultural relativity isn't always relevant*

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An authentic performance—and authentic here is judged on the interpretation's relationship to the composer's idea—is not simply a direct realization of the sounds and silences indicated by a score. Just as a sentence read aloud according to the dictates of a text's phonemic groupings would lack the communicative power lent by the inflections of meaning, the performer is expected to illuminate a score with certain nuances of style that are implied in the score. To creatively engage with the aesthetic ideas that a composer intends to express, the performer must form an understanding of the semantic system that the composer uses to communicate his or her ideas. The following discussion of Toru Takemitsu's *Equinox* explores the hypothesis that the chosen semantic system of communication is not definitive of the composer's aesthetic idea, but simply a mode of communication for a more universalised aesthetic truth, thereby diminishing the need to refer to a secondary system of authentication when interpreting the composer's intention.

Although the problems of musical meaning, understanding, and communication are a wide and thorny field of ongoing debate, this discussion begins from the premise that separate genres of music can be understood as forming individual structures of semantic meaning. These genre-specific 'languages' are formed around shared fac-

tors, such as conventions of style, historic progression, and instrumental technique. Although methods of communicating, identifying, and understanding musical phenomena may be idiosyncratic to specific genres, on a meta-level there remain features that are recognisably shared. Perhaps observable similarities between these structures hint at a wider, more universalised framework of aesthetic understanding.

The paper will look at the way Takemitsu communicates through his scores, both explicitly and implicitly, entirely within the context of the Western art music genre, enabling the performer to engage with and articulate ideas that would typically be associated with traditional Japanese music. I don't argue for the primacy of one semantic system over another; thus the argument could just as easily be reversed and look at one of Takemitsu's Western-influenced compositions scored for Japanese instrumentation. Ideas are not appropriated but translated; ideas can be interpreted with authenticity within individual semantic structures because what is important is their authenticity to a wider aesthetic ideal rather than to a culturally formulated truth.

## 1 Conventional means to unconventional sounds

Obscure technical demands, precise notation, and a soundscape that is both evocative and peculiar are just some of the features idiosyncratic to the classical guitar compositions of Takemitsu. The classical guitar is an instrument capable of accommodating subtle timbral qualities, and it would be wrong to claim that timbral possibility hadn't already been widely explored through the existing classical guitar repertoire—in particular we might think of the rapid expansion of extended technique from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. However, Takemitsu's exploration of texture and colour is particularly distinctive, as are the notational devices he employs to coax the guitarist into entering and sharing his unique perspective.

Guitarists interpreting Takemitsu's music are often taught that an authentic interpretation of Takemitsu's timbral intentions should be based on a thorough understanding of traditional Japanese instruments, whose exotic sounds are mimicked within his composition.

However, Takemitsu was anxious about having his music miscategorised as ‘exotic’, and this made him wary of “the dangers of using traditional Japanese instruments.”<sup>1</sup> After a brief flirtation with Japanese instruments in the mid 60s and early 70s, with compositions such as *Eclipse*, *November Steps* and *In an Autumn Garden*, such traditional instruments no longer featured in his concert works. In his 1971 essay *November Steps*, Takemitsu writes that combining traditional Japanese instruments with western style orchestras

was not as much an experiment with these instruments as it was an attempt to tap the demonic powers locked up in them . . . I found my world of sound widened and deepened.<sup>2</sup>

Takemitsu does not ask the guitarist to mimic the instruments of Japanese traditional music; instead of direct appropriation, the timbre is to be considered more abstractly. Japanese colouring, for example, influences Takemitsu’s aesthetic, and makes possible new ideas for shaping timbres on the classical guitar. He scores in a language that guitarists of the Western art music tradition can engage with, and it is the guitarists’ engagement with his translated ideas that creates such distinctive soundscapes.

*Box 1 — Abbreviations*

s.p. = sul ponticello

s.t. = sul tasto

p.o. = Position (or play) Ordinary

In *Equinox*, Takemitsu annotates the score with specific instructions for right hand attack (see box 1), allowing him to retain close control of the juxtaposition and combination of specific guitar-tone

<sup>1</sup>Takemitsu 1995a, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

colours.<sup>3</sup> For example, in bars 24–25 (see figure 1) Takemitsu combines natural harmonics on the twelfth fret with open string notes in natural position, then within the space of a quaver repeats the high Eb and B open strings—but this time indicating a sharper ponticello attack closer to the guitar’s bridge. The rapid interchange between the mellow and sharp sounds of ordinary and ponticello right hand attack, combined with the sweetness of mid-register natural harmonics, creates an effect seemingly alien to conventional guitar repertoire.



Figure 1: Bars 24–25

The left hand’s effect on tone colour is also taken into consideration: Takemitsu assigns specific left hand fingerings, fret board positions, and string choices throughout the score. It is common practice for classical guitar repertoire to be published with annotations for at least some left-hand fingerings, sometimes indicated by the composer and sometimes added by the editor or a credible performer. Because pitches can be repeated across the fretboard in up to six different positions, a multitude of fingerings are possible for most phrases. Conventionally, left hand fingerings are indicated to alleviate technical difficulties or to assist in maintaining the continuity of a phrase or voice; however, in Takemitsu’s guitar scoring this is not always the case.

The specification of left hand fingering can be manipulated to affect timbre. Pitches fingered in a higher position (towards the body of the guitar) sound sweeter, often with a muddier texture; pitches located in the lower positions (towards the headstock) are sharper and clearer; pitches on open strings have less clarity but greater length. Although *Equinox* initially seems to have assigned left-hand fingerings in accordance with ease of phrasing—unlike other

<sup>3</sup>Takemitsu 1995b.

Takemitsu guitar compositions, such as *In the woods*, and *Folios*, where the affective qualities of left hand phrasing are more explicitly exploited—Takemitsu does add some more specific and precise left hand positions. In bar 19 (see figure 2), Takemitsu indicates that the guitarist should play in a higher position on the fretboard, even though playing with more open strings or in a lower position would be possible. Here, his left hand specifications mean that the fingered notes are muddier, and are combined with the ponticello indication for the right hand. This makes for an interesting contrast against the sweet and sharp texture of the harmonics in bars 17 and 18.

Figure 2: Bars 16–19

As we have seen, the soundscape of *Equinox* is distinctive, but Takemitsu's scoring follows conventional classical guitar techniques. Although *Equinox* was written for a Japanese guitarist—Kiyoshi Shomura—Takemitsu's decision to write for a Western instrument presumes that the performer has a good understanding of Western technical and musical performance conventions. The repertoire and techniques that a performer absorbs when learning an instrument shape the relationship manifested between sound and score. As we saw above, the aesthetic choices Takemitsu makes in the score of *Equinox* sit entirely within the context and tradition of Western art music. Perhaps it could be argued that although the guitarist can engage with Takemitsu's scoring, an understanding of the tradition that *originally* influenced Takemitsu's translation would deepen the authenticity of their interpretation.

A possible response to this challenge might be the original hypothesis of this paper, namely that different genres of music are simply semantic systems for the localised comprehension of a more

universal aesthetic structure. The timbres that Takemitsu draws his influence from are not exclusively comprehensible within the semantic structure of Japanese traditional music, although this is a structure that explicitly identifies them as its own. Once these ideas have been translated into the language of Western art music, and are thus made coherent for the classical guitarist, the guitarist can then respond to these ideas intuitively using their own semantic structure; we might say that the ideas communicated are in fact shared within a far wider aesthetic structure. Furthermore, it could even be seen as simple appropriation if the performer were to reference their own intuitive understanding of Takemitsu's score to the semantics of Japanese traditional music.

## 2 Translation without appropriation

I have provided the hypothesis that a performer could engage with a score without reference to the composer's influences external to the semantic structure of the composition. We can test this hypothesis by applying it to implicit interpretation, rather than to the explicit score. When engaging with the implicit ideas of a particular composer, it is crucial that the performer and composer are speaking in the same language, so to speak. In accordance with the original hypothesis, if the composer has coded all their aesthetic views into the language the performer expects and understands, then the translation of implicit ideas should be as unproblematic as the translation of those that are explicit.

The hypothesis is complicated by the difficulty of pinning down implicit ideas and giving them any concrete definition. As an example, let's look at the Japanese concept of *ma*, which is controversial due to its dual function as a technical and abstract concept. Alison McQueen Tokita defines *ma* as a purely technical term, signifying:

rhythm (in *nagauta*, *uki-ma* implies a slight lengthening of the first of a pair of beats, while *tsume-ma* implies the

reverse), or timing (many dancers say that with *kiyomoto* narrative music, *ma go torinikui*, it is difficult to get the rhythm or timing right), or beat (*omote-ma* is downbeat and *ura-ma* is upbeat).<sup>4</sup>

This description defines *ma* purely in terms of its functional usage; it reflects Tokita's stance on the over-mystification of aesthetic concepts in Japanese traditional music, thus separating the meaning of *ma* in music from its other connotations in the Japanese language. Others, such as Richard Pilgrim, define *ma* as having both "objective and subjective meaning";<sup>5</sup> *ma* can also signify space, or negative presence. The more subjective sense of *ma* could refer to the room, in architecture, the blank canvas between images of the Japanese scroll painting, or the silence between notes in music. However, 'space' here also describes the relationship between the subjects that frame that space. Understanding *ma* not just as negative presence, but also as the dynamic relationship between existent subjects, gives it the living experimental quality that often comes to the fore in its representation in art.

The conflicting opinions on *ma* can be at least partially attributed to the uniquely refracted state of self-reflection in Japanese aesthetics. Japan adopted Western art music into its education system from the 1890s onwards. For children of this generation and later, experiences of western art music, and the understanding of Japanese music from a western perspective, often preceded their direct exposure to music of their own culture. Roger Reynolds observes, in *Perspectives of New Music's* series on contemporary Japanese composition, that "Japanese intellectuals were made newly aware of Zen through John Cage's work (which reached Japan in the early sixties)".<sup>6</sup>

In relation to Takemitsu and *ma*, it is unclear how heavily Takemitsu's *ma* is a romanticisation of Japanese technical concepts. If an authentic interpretation hinges on an informed knowledge of the external influences that shape the piece, then it would seem that

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<sup>4</sup>Tokita and Hughes 2008, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Pilgrim 1986, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup>Reynolds and Takemitsu 1992, p. 32.

Takemitsu's individual expression of *ma* is essential to the work, rather than that of Japanese traditional music. The composer's individuality, which exists in a constant fluctuation between influence and aesthetic choice, would then be something impossible to define. However, through the translation of the composer's ideas into the semantic structure of the performer's understanding, intention can be understood without reference to unstable external factors.

The opening bars of *Equinox* (see figure 3) have qualities that could be attributed to *ma*. Each phrase of the three opening bars seems to be moving towards silence rather than away from it. Each phrase begins abruptly, arriving from nowhere and then fading back into silence, from which a new phrase is born again. Here, phrases are born from silence and gravitate back to silence. The chord that announces the new phrase is accented, its indicated timbre alienating it from the tone colour that preceded it. After the declaration of the chord, the short arpeggio is directed to *morendo*, to fade into nothingness. These phrases contemplate the relationship between sound and silence, in much the same way that *ma* invites the contemplation of existence against absence. The sounding phrase can be understood as an interruption of silence, instead of silence simply being a pause between phrases.

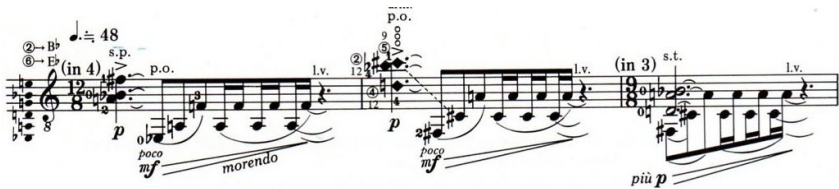


Figure 3: Bars 1–3

Although the realization of Takemitsu's phrasing is a phenomenon unusual in Western art music, the scoring of these phrases is within the semantic structure that shapes the musical understanding of the classical guitarist. Speculating from personal experience (although this would be an interesting study for further investigation), the score's sounds and silences seems enough to realize a soundscape that a lis-



tener could attribute to *ma*—based on intuition, that is, which here loosely refers to one’s musical understanding within the semantic structure of the culture one identifies with. This is not to advocate an appropriation of *ma* without respect to its original cultural origins, but to argue that *ma* can be intuitively engaged with because it is a wider aesthetic idea that exists across semantic structures, even if it isn’t explicitly identified within each structure.

Furthermore, it could also be argued that to define Takemitsu’s use of *ma* as something individual is to concede that Takemitsu’s usage of the concept is an appropriation of its position within Japanese tradition music. However, returning to the original hypothesis of this paper, I have speculated that *ma* indicates a concept that exists across a wider structure. Takemitsu is influenced by the Japanese form of *ma*, but his individual understanding of *ma* does not simply remove the idea from the context it requires to function. *Ma* can function across contexts; to be influenced by its form in one particular semantic system is to be influenced by just one possible perspective on a universal idea.

### 3 Relevent irrelevancy

Takemitsu’s soundscapes are distinctive, but these soundscapes are not the product of a simple translation of ideas from one structure to another. As we saw above, Takemitsu claims to have a meta-level of understanding over separate semantic structures due to his reflective position. He can see the concepts of Japanese traditional music from the position of an other; it is viewed to some extent through the eyes of the West. He can similarly see concepts of Western art music from the perspective of an other, viewed through the lens of traditional Japanese music. Timbres of Japanese instrumentation are not mimicked: the resonance of these timbres within their original context is considered and the contrasts of colour and flavour are sampled; their equivalents within the classical guitars timbral spectrum

are sought. Perhaps *ma* should not be seen as an exotic custom of an alienated culture. Instead its identification within the semantic structure of Japanese traditional music should be noted and identified as a concept that already functions within the semantic structure of Western art music.

It is this meta-level of understanding, the perspective that Takemitsu claims as a composer who breeches traditionally separate cultures, that allows ideas and functions to be translated across semantic structures. Regarding *ma* from a Western-centric position allows for a mystification of the subject, or an appropriation of *ma* in the form of identification rather than consideration of its function. A meta-level view lends itself to understanding *ma*'s function within Japanese traditional music and relating it to a meaning within Western art music which behaves in the same way but is not similarly identified.

In their realisation of the score, performers must interpret the piece through their own creative persona. They must understand both what is explicitly written in the score, and what is implied through the shared language of composer and performer. I have argued that the realisation of a piece of music involves a communication of ideas between the subjective perspectives of two individuals. The piece's initial conception in the mind of the composer can result from an array of influences and a broad structure of aesthetic meaning. In works such as *Equinox*, where the piece is scored with the expectation of a performer's comprehension of a certain semantic structure, communication depends on the composer's ability to translate idea into shared language.

This paper has been concerned with Takemitsu's compositional approach. While to an extent Takemitsu can be considered a unique case, my hypothesis could be applied more broadly. Cross-cultural sharing of ideas is but one way of exploring separate semantic structures and reaching for a wider aesthetic frame. It might be interesting to explore this hypothesis in relation to historical context, especially in regard to 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century works that seek to actively oppose expectations in their communication with both performer and

listener. It is only through understanding and engaging with aesthetic ideas as they are presented within a certain semantic structure, whilst understanding that this is only one possible structure and one possible translation of a shared idea, that the wider framework of aesthetic ideas in music can be approached.

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