

UC Berkeley

Working Words: New Approaches to Japanese Studies

Title

Ongaku, Onkyō / Music, Sound

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9451p047>

Author

Hosokawa, Shuhei

Publication Date

2012-04-20

Ongaku, Onkyō / Music, Sound

Shuhei Hosokawa

Introduction

Ongaku (music) is a word that underwent a great transformation in the process of modernization. This article will illustrate a lexical history of this word in order to grasp how the conceptualization of what John Blacking has termed “humanly organized sound” differed between pre-modern and modern Japan.

The word consists of two characters, 音 (*on* or *oto*, sound) and 楽 (*gaku*, a species of human sound expression). It is documented in one of the oldest books in Japanese, *Hitachinokuni Fūdoki* (History and Geography of the Hitachi Region), compiled in 713. Since the Japanese phonetic scripts had not yet been invented, the text was written exclusively in Chinese ideograms, resulting in endless controversies among scholars on how to read it. While one annotator reads the two characters in question as *utamai* (song and dancing), another chooses *mononone* (sound of things, sound of instruments).¹ Both of these are vernacular words concerning sound.

¹ Kikkawa Eishi, “‘Ongaku’ to iu Yōgo to sono Shūhen” (on the term of “ongaku” and its related topics), Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku Ongakugakubu Nenshi, vol. 2, 1975, 37-62. I will consult it throughout the following section. See also Hirano Kenji, “Nihon ni oite Ongaku towa Nanika” (what is ongaku in Japan?), in Gamō Satoaki et al. ed. *Nihon no Ongaku Ajia no Ongaku: 1 Gainen no Keisei*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988, 17-38. On the concept of “humanly organized sound,” see John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973, chapter 1.

Like many non-European cultures, before contact with the West Japan had no all-embracing term referring to any humanly organized sound, religious or secular, vocal or instrumental, aristocratic or plebian, solo or group, vernacular or non-vernacular, national or foreign. Instead of the generic term, Japanese used specific genre names.² The lack of lexical equivalents for “music” can be explained by the socio-cultural dividing of “musicking” practices according to class, use, instrument, and school (*ryūha*).³ There were no common notations, terminologies, spaces, or teaching and performing institutions. This institutional separation made the world of individual genres almost self-contained. Without the cognitive power of an all-inclusive concept, Buddhist chant and Shintoist ensemble remained only functional in their religious context, while the *nō* music of the samurai class could not be discussed in the same terminology used for the shamisen genres of the plebian class. Japanese music historiography is more a bundle of parallel developments of distinct genres and schools than the kind of dynamic succession of stylistic change that characterizes music in the West.⁴

The written word that is today read as *ongaku* first designated foreign (Chinese) music around the eighth century. Jesuits as well as Dutch traders (sixteenth to nineteenth century) used it as a translation for “music,” though the word hardly entered everyday language until the Meiji government launched Western-oriented music education in the

² Western concepts of genre do not necessarily correspond to the vernacular classification of Japanese music (*shumoku*). Here I use the term of “genre” for convenience.

³ The term “musicking” is taken from Christopher Small.

⁴ Kikkawa Eishi, *Nihon Ongaku no Seikaku*, Tokyo: Ongakuno Tomosha, 1974, 19ff.

1880s. Although unnoticed by Meiji intellectuals, the epistemological gap between the foreignness implied in the vernacular conceptualization and the humanism and abstraction in the Western one was immense. Modern education has today successfully established the equivalence of *ongaku* and music. Yet, in recent years the concept of music/*ongaku* has become obsolete for some contemporary electronic improvisational artists, who redefine their sonic artifacts simply and polemically as *onkyō* (sound, the sonic). Following an examination of the semantic formation and transformation of *ongaku* in the process of modernization, I will thus examine the circumstances of its annihilation.

A Foreign Sound

According to the music historian Kikkawa Eishi, the word that can be read as “ongaku” appeared for the first time in the official history *Shoku Nihongi* (794-97). Kikkawa presumes that the *ongaku* in this national history designates the music of the imperial court and Buddhist temples, namely music from China and the Korean peninsula as distinct from indigenous songs and dances (*utamai*). Kikkawa believes that the word *ongaku* rarely entered into even aristocratic parlance. He adds that the two-character word in question appeared in a Chinese chronicle dated B.C. 239, but that it was merely a juxtaposition of two characters *on* (*yin* in Chinese; sound of voices and things belonging to the lower social strata) and *gaku* (*yue*, sound of instruments, practiced by the upper

strata), which may have resulted in the sense of “vocal *and* instrumental, upper *and* lower sounds.” The Japanese *ongaku* emerged around the Kamakura period as a substitute for *gaku*, since Japanese literati historically preferred two-character terms to one-character ones, occasionally inventing combinations of characters almost non-existent in China.

The word *ongaku*, however, remained on the margins of Japanese vocabulary. During the Edo period there was not a single book among the numerous publications on the instruments, anthologies of lyrics, and other music-related works that used the word *ongaku* in its title. Instead of *ongaku*, the word 音曲 *ongyoku*, which consisted of characters meaning “sound” and “tune,” was usually used to refer mainly to shamisen music, that is to say, popular music. *Ongyoku*, however, was not as inclusive a concept as music because it usually excluded religious genres, lower-class (rural) songs, children’s songs, and other genres.

One of the rare contexts in which the term was current in the Edo period was in kabuki backstage music. Theater musicians used *ongaku* to refer to certain sound effects used specifically for scenes at Buddhist temples, for the appearance of a heavenly lady of Chinese legend, and other special scenes. It was a *gagaku*-flavored sound (*gagaku* being the ancient music of the imperial court imported from the continent). In other words, *ongaku* was almost exclusively associated with foreign sound over the centuries, though the term was a sort of technical term deployed among specialists. The lexical connection of *ongaku* with *gagaku* is also evidenced by the first book title using the word: *Ongaku*

ryakkai (Brief notes on *ongaku*), published in 1868 by the Gagaku-kyoku (Gagaku Department of the Ministry of Imperial Affairs), which deals exclusively with *gagaku*.

The Western Impact on *Ongaku*

The oldest Japanese-European language dictionary, *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapam com a Declaração em Portvgves* (1603), has an entry reading, “Vongacu. quanguen: song, or music together with musical instruments.” It suggests that at least for Western lexicographers the Japanese word *ongaku* had certain currency and that it was almost synonymous with *kangen*, a Chinese word (*guan xian*) for orchestra found in Heian-period Japanese literature. A contemporary Spanish dictionary (*Vocabulario de Iapon Decalarado Primero en Portvgves por los Padres de la Compañia de Iesvs de Aquel Reyno, y Agora en Castellano en el Colegio de Santo Thomas de Manila*, 1630, Manila) kept this translation. Dutch-Japanese dictionaries compiled during the Edo period, following the Portuguese and Spanish precedents, translated *musiek* as *ongaku* (for example, *Haruma Wakai*, or *W.T. Halma Nederduits Woordenboek*, 1796). This lexical correspondence was taken over by the earliest English-Japanese dictionary, *Eiwa Taiyaku Shūchin Jisho* (1862). The transparent relationship between (Western) music and *ongaku* was thus becoming established as Western-Japanese language contact strengthened.

The word *ongaku* entered into common vocabularies beginning in the 1870s through bureaucratic documents related to the inauguration of the school curriculum.

Knowing that primary schools in the West had singing classes, the Ministry of Education mandated an officer to investigate them in Boston. Upon the officer's return, the Ministry laid plans to establish the Institute for Music Research in Tokyo (1879), which later became the Tokyo Music School (1888), the premier conservatory in the country.⁵ One of the first tasks of Meiji cultural leaders was to formulate a concept of *ongaku* modeled after the Western concept of music. *Ongaku* often denoted simply Western music. Many publications by the staff of the Institute for Music Research and Tokyo Music School were titled *ongaku*-something, and discussed Western methods of teaching singing, how to play Western instruments, the virtue of Western music and other issues concerning Western music. By contrast, contemporary journals specializing in Japanese music were titled *Kabuongyoku* (1907-1909) and *Hōgaku* (1915-1920). It seems that the editors felt uncomfortable with the word *ongaku*.⁶ The semantic contradiction between literal meaning and common usage suggests the difficulty of including the traditional genres in the concept of music/*ongaku*.

Ongaku's association with the West continued to imbue the word with highbrow connotations. In his 1922 expedition to Taiwan, the ethnomusicologist Tanabe Hisao asked a local Japanese officer if the aboriginals had *ongaku*. The officer's reply was

⁵ See Luciana Galliano, *Yogaku: Japanese Music in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Martin Mayes, London: Scarecrow, 2002.

⁶ The former (*kabuongyoku*) is a term embracing the shamisen, koto, shakuhachi and the related vocal and theatrical genres popular in the Edo period (combination of *kabu*, "singing and dancing", and *ongyoku*, "sound and tune") while the latter (*hōgaku*) is a Meiji coinage whose referents usually overlap with Edo music, though its literal meaning is "our country's music."

categorical: “they have songs but no *ongaku*.”⁷ As an ethnomusicologist, Tanabe of course conceived the aboriginal sound expressions as *ongaku*, yet the officer did not. For him *ongaku* was exclusively connected with the civilized (and instrumental sound). Episodes like this reveal the discrepancy between scholars’ and ordinary people’s conceptualizations of *ongaku* and show how Western music was a paradigm for *ongaku* in many people’s minds.

“Pre-music”: Takemitsu Tōru and the Aesthetic of the Non-developmental

“Pre-music (*ongaku izen*)”: this was the review the young Takemitsu Tōru (1930-96) received for his first public appearance in 1950 (December 12, 1950, *Tokyo Shinbun*). The music critic Yamane Ginji’s negation of Takemitsu’s *Lento in Due Movimenti* is probably the best-known statement in the whole body of criticism on Takemitsu. This work for solo piano was once lost yet “recomposed from memory” in 1989 with the new title of *Litany*. The two movements of *Lento/Litany* show little consequential dynamism or contrast (like fast and slow movements, development of shared motifs, variations on a theme), but flow without orientation.⁸

The work begins with a single sustained tone in *pianissimo* that is followed by a melodic figure in unstable rhythmic patterns with triplets and pauses. Unless they pay

⁷ Kikkawa, “Ongaku toiu...”, op.cit., 58.

⁸ To what degree the recomposition is faithful to the original is a matter of conjuncture. See Peter Burt, *The Music of Tōru Takemitsu*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 28ff; Konuma Jun’ichi, *Takemitsu Tōru: Oto, Kotoba, Imēji* (Takemitsu Tōru: sound, word, and image), Tokyo: Seidosha, 27.

close attention, listeners will miss the first note that emerges from the silence. For a critic attuned to German music, Takemitsu's work was too static and monotonous to be called music. "Pre-music" was the ultimate sentence with which to exile the work from the garden of art.

The bleak phrase of an authoritative critic, despite the disappointment it caused the composer, unintentionally pointed out the essence of Takemitsu's aesthetic. For Yamane, the suffix *izen* ("prior to") implied "less than" (*ika*) but Takemitsu elaborated an aesthetic in opposition to this: the quality and complexity of each note was more significant than the syntactic organization of a series of notes. In *Lento/Litany* the composer, who was not yet established, showed what would prove to be his lifetime penchant for the decaying sound shape, for the slow indefinite flow of a sound bloc, and for slowly changing tone colors. He seems to make a step toward the primordial state of sound, music before music, or sound-making before music.

About twenty years later, he articulated his quest for the primordial in an essay titled "A Stammerer's Manifesto" (*Kitsuonsha sengen*).⁹ In this allegorical essay, stammering is not a clinical malfunctioning of the vocal organs but a metaphysical "revolutionary song." It is a return to the act of pronunciation prior to the point at which

⁹ *Takemitsu Tōru Chosakushū* (writings of Takemitsu Tōru), vol. 1, Shinchōsha, Tokyo, 2000, 68-88. I once interpreted Takemitsu's poetics of primordial language through the lens of Octavio Paz (*The Bow and the Lyre, The Grammarian Monkey*) and J. M. G. Le Clézio (*Hai*). See Hosokawa, "Mekishikofū Takemitsu Tōru" (Takemitsu Tōru a la mexicana), Various Authors, *Ongaku no Techō: Takemitsu Tōru*, Tokyo: Seidosha, 1981, 150-54.

semantic communication intervenes in language. The stammerer, in his metaphysics, needs heavy bodily investment to pronounce each phonetic element, and his act of voicing a word is never repeated. To be precise, the same word is pronounced in hundreds of ways that slightly differ one from another. This represents a jump from routine enunciation based on the communication of meaning to primordial vocal delivery based on bodily action. The stammerer is keen to the discrepancy between the signification and the word, and sublimates it to bodily enunciation. The language pronounced by the stammerer therefore has a body. When stammered, the superficial meaning of language is decomposed and the “naked meaning” emerges from beneath. Stammered language then comes closest to the truth.

Takemitsu’s aesthetic of the non-developmental is clearly summarized in his oft-quoted essay titled “One Sound” (1969). It was written as a footnote to his compositions for Japanese traditional instruments (*Eclipse, November Steps*). In this essay, he makes an explicit contrast between the structure-oriented aesthetic of Western music and the *sound-*oriented one of Japanese music. What he sought was more the sound-event: the sound-occurrence rather than the sound-structure. “One sound” from a Japanese instrument is more than a note in a larger structure, he asserted; it is complete in itself and connected more with the absence of sound than with other serial sounds; it belongs to Nature rather than the shallow “originality” of a single composer:

The sounds of a single stroke of the biwa plectrum or a single breath through the shakuhachi can so transport our reason because they are of extreme complexity; they are already complete in themselves. Just one such sound can be complete in itself, for its complexity lies in the formulation of *ma*, an unquantifiable metaphysical space (duration) of dynamically tensed absence of sound. For example, in the performance of *Nō*, the *ma* of sound and silence does not have an organic relation for the purpose of artistic expression. Rather, these two elements contrast sharply with one another in an immaterial balance.¹⁰

Here the composer suggests a passage from music to sound, from sound to silence, from virtuosity to anonymity, and from structure to Nature. In this aesthetic thought, silence is as polysemic, complicated and infinitely vital as sound. Sound makes silence as expressive and meaningful as the sound intended by the composer and performed by the player. *Ma* (silence, interval, timing) has been “perceived as a space made up of infinite inaudible but vibrant sounds, as the equal of individual complex audible sounds.” In relation to *ma*, “sounds themselves have no pre-eminence of expression” and “move toward an unnameable point beyond the personal,” that is Nature. As a Japanese composer with Western training, Takemitsu’s direction was less to express an illusory individuality by novel techniques than to “return to a condition of equality with nothingness.”

The references to *ma* and *shizen* (Nature) in “One Sound” may appear banal to today’s readers, yet few Japanese composers had discussed them clearly before Takemitsu (Mayuzumi Toshirō was one exception). In fact, the concept of *ma* was

¹⁰ Takemitsu Tōru, “One Sound” (translated by Hugh de Ferranti), *Contemporary Music Review*, 1994, vol. 8/2, 3-4.

“aestheticized” from the 1960s when the *zen*-influenced interpretation or (self-) mystification of Japanese culture became popular among those who had started questioning the superiority of Western culture. *Ma* thus became one of the most recurrent tropes in the discourse on Japan’s particularity by Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

***Onkyō*: No Music, (Almost) No Sound**

Takemitsu’s quest for the primordial state of music, or the sounding before structured “music,” was unexpectedly taken up just after his death by Japanese underground improvisers—in spite of a clear distance between them in modes of expression, audience, performance spaces, and instruments. These improvisers usually play in small galleries and rooms, creating sound with electronic devices. For average concert music and popular music listeners, their performances are likely to appear as “pre-music” because of the lack of perceivable sonic units appropriate for the current concept of “music.” Their performance was tentatively categorized as the “sound” or *onkyō*.

Throughout the twentieth century the semantic territory of music has been constantly challenged and contested by experimental artists. Among several options to label the new sound productions in Japan toward the end of the century, *onkyō* became the most salient. Like the majority of genre names, no explicit agreement on the meaning has been reached, but the disagreement itself has made the term viable. Most members of the *onkyō* scene, if one can speak of such a thing, know the elusiveness of the genre and

prefer to be unlabeled. Very few users of the word *onkyō* believe in its stability and clear-cut definition. For all the distrust in the genre name, naming has the advantage of reflecting coherently upon a cohort of performers otherwise disparate.

This word consists in the two *kanji* characters: 音 (*oto*, *on*, the first character of *ongaku*) and 響 (*kyō*, *hibiki*). Both characters signify sound in general but the latter means more specifically “to transmit the vibration of sound by means of air; to move something by vibration.”¹¹ In other words, it refers to the vibration of air and its consequences (echo, reverberation). The word *onkyō* is composed of the coupling of two almost-synonymous characters and denotes literally and redundantly “sound and vibration.” The word was not used in Japanese writing before the Meiji period. It was Western-trained physicists who adopted it for the translation of acoustics. The first appearance of *onkyō* is documented in *Butsuri Kaitei* (Steps in physics) edited by Katayama Junkichi and published by the Ministry of Education in 1876. The 1886 *Vocabulary of Engineering* (*Kōgaku Jii*, supervised by Kōgaku Kyōkai [Association for Engineering]), translates “acoustics” as *onkyōgaku* (study of *onkyō*).¹² In short, *onkyō*, unlike *ongaku*, has an explicit connection with science and technology. It is concerned with physics rather than with human expression. *Onkyō*, by definition, is all-inclusive, without distinction of music or non-music, noise or non-noise.

¹¹ Tōdō Akiyasu, *Kanwa Daijiten* (grand dictionary of kanji), Gakken, Tokyo, 1980, 1468.

¹² See *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (Great Dictionary of Japanese Language), Shōgakkan, Tokyo, 2001 (third edition).

In 1908, Tanabe Hisao (1883-1984) published *Onkyō to Ongaku* (Acoustics and music) under the supervision of Tanaka Shōhei (1862-1945), a student of Helmholtz in Berlin, the first Japanese scientist to specialize in acoustics, who was also famous for his invention of an organ in genuine tuning. Tanabe, who graduated from the Department of Physics, Tokyo Imperial University, later became one of the most prolific Japanese music scholars before the war. Tanabe's book first outlines the basic notions of acoustics such as wavelength, frequency, and auditory sense. These are applied in the second part of the book to the mechanisms of Western instruments. The third and final part briefly introduces the fundamentals of Western music theory (scale, rhythm, harmony, dissonance/consonance, form, composition). In Tanabe's words, music art has subjective (aesthetic) and objective (physical) aspects. Without comprehension of the latter, the former cannot be fully grasped. *Ongaku* is structured from *onkyō*. The book was intended to bridge Western science and art, the two Meiji novelties.

It is already a mystery who first applied *onkyō* or *onkyō-ha* (the acoustics scene, circle or orientation) to certain new trends in Japanese improvisation. Some attribute it to an owner of the underground record shop Paripekin in Shibuya, Tokyo, around the mid-1990s.¹³ Like "J-pop" (Japanese pop), which was coined at HMV Shibuya around 1990 to call public attention to the rock/pop music made by Japanese artists, *onkyō* was

¹³ Nagata Kazunao's statement. Nagata, Otomo Yoshihide and Nakahara Masaya (dialogue), "'Gendai ongaku' kara tooku hanarete", *Yuriika*, March 1998, 202.

presumably put in use first by a record shop. In *onkyō*, new trends that were difficult to categorize either as music or as noise finally found a convenient name. Because of its phonetic freshness and semantic openness, the word spread rapidly.

One of the principal venues for *onkyō* artists was Off Site (2000-2005), a tiny room in an old apartment building in Tokyo. Mainly due to spatial restrictions, performances had to be kept as quiet as possible and this acoustic imperative gave rise to an aesthetic of quasi-silence. One of Off Site's regular groups was Filament (a duo of Ōtomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M). Filament's performance consists in a sine wave generated by a sampler and the dim sound/noise generated by electric/electronic apparatuses including turntable and stylus, CD player, and MD player without discs. Filament refuses the emotional uplifting and communicative exchange of other improvisational forms (free jazz and psychedelic music, for example) and "unmakes" sound so extremely that casual listening will not capture anything (though the drone of the sine wave is almost omnipresent and the occasional click and hum noises can be perceived if one is very attentive to the sound). According to Ōtomo, who respects Takemitsu as one of his numerous and eclectic sources for inspiration, the musician is not the medium of emotion or individuality expressed in sound but an "impotent someone who makes sound."

Filament attentively provides a foreground sound almost indistinguishable from background sound, exploiting the electronic apparatuses in their primal state, or in the

state unloaded by the disc. Filament goes a step beyond the turntablists who invented a new function for an instrument usually used for playing the analog record. The aesthetic behind Filament is not far from that of ideal sound of the shakuhachi explained in Takemitsu's "One Sound": the sound "which the wind draws from a grove of rotted and dried bamboo." Instead of the wind blowing through a grove of bamboo, Filament produces the sound made by the physical vibration of the speaker units transduced by the electrons dancing in the circuit. This purely electronic and mechanical sound is probably *shizen* (Nature) for them. The sound volume is so imperceptible that the clicking of a wristwatch or the hum of an air duct can occasionally be perceived, sometimes to the extent that it becomes disturbing. In other words, the audience pays acute attention to the existence of all sound in the performance space. In the process of capturing the minimum volume of sound deliberately made or incidentally generated, the listeners submit themselves to "deep listening" (to use Pauline Oliveros' term) of acoustic space.

Crucial for their performance, in Ōtomo's explanation, is not the resulting sound itself but the acoustic condition of the space where the performers and listeners are. The sound they make is not always what the listeners listen to, and it is the latter that Filament is more concerned with. For Ōtomo, none of the existing concepts of music making such as composition, improvisation, performance, playing, or composition-in-improvisation are appropriate to define Filament.¹⁴

¹⁴ On the detailed discussion on Filament, see Sasaki Atsushi, *Tekunoizu Materializumu* (technoise

The aesthetic core of *onkyō* lies, according to the perceptive critic Sasaki Atsushi, in the priority of texture over construction, listening over performance, and sensation of the sounding world over the sound of a tangible source. To paraphrase, the performers are more attentive to the timbre of each moment than to the cohesive or non-cohesive structuring of sound along a temporal axis, concentrating on the whole sounding environments rather than on the sound intentionally made for the sake of expressing their subjectivity. The most admirable thing for *onkyō*, according to Sasaki, is recognition of the fact that sound exists in our sensory world rather than the identification of particular sounds as better or worse, more or less beautiful than others. It is easy for us to recall the aesthetic after John Cage's *4'33"*, La Monte Young's eternal drone, Stockhausen's electro-acoustic collage, and, for that matter, Takemitsu's "one sound."

From the beginning, the category of *onkyō* was applied to non-Japanese acts. One music critic, for example, calls Throbbing Gristle's 1986 album *TGI* its distant precursor. For him, *onkyō* requires a "hard listening" (Throbbing Gristle's slogan) that contrasts with the "easy listening" of ambient music. *Onkyō-ha*, in his conceptualization, is characterized by the cut up, collage, sampling, dense, tense and harsh texture of disparate sound fragments, and "claustrophilia" (like John Wall's *FRCTUUR*, 1997) in opposition to smooth sound flow, relaxed mood, and "agoraphilia" (as in Brian Eno's *Music for*

Airports, 1979).¹⁵ This interpretation is only one of many ways of understanding *onkyō*.

In the Japanese press there are also the Chicago *onkyō-ha* (Jim O'Rourke, etc.) and the Argentine *onkyō-ha* (Fernando Cabusacki, etc.). The arbitrariness of terminology here is quite obvious.

The music critic Kitazato Yoshiyuki questions whether local specificity is relevant in the aesthetic of *onkyō-ha*, which is to him a transnational coeval movement without hegemonic center and common direction. At the same time, however, he also recognizes unique qualities in local Japanese musicians not found in French, American or Italian improvisers. He does not explain what this 'Japaneseness' is, and he is wary of the implied nationalism of his statement. He is conscious of the contradiction between the singular aesthetic of experimentalists around the world and aesthetics based on locality or the nationality. Kitazato's sense of Japaneseness does not draw on mysterious traditional aesthetic categories such as *ma* but on the highly hybridized life in contemporary Japan. Asked by a French critic about the influence of the Japanese tradition, Ōtomo replied that so-called tradition is often a recent invention and that he had had no direct contact with or knowledge of it in his past (he only studied it through books and recordings). The so-called music tradition, he continues, became familiar to him largely through the filter of Japanese pop songs in the 1960s that mixed and transformed folk ingredients. In a similar sense we may note that Takemitsu, having grown up with Western classical music, French

¹⁵ Igarashi Gen, "Ambient/Onkyōha", *Yuriika*, March 1998, 246-47.

chanson and jazz in his adolescence, only came to traditional Japanese music when he consciously took it up in his thirties.

According to Kitazato's critique, the terminological abuse of *onkyō* derives from the fact that it was initially promoted as a newly emerging genre. In 2003, he recognized that *onkyō-ha* was rushing to two extremes: in the inclusive (maximalist) definition, it had come to refer to any electronic/improvisational practices (any music/sound is physically *onkyō*); in the exclusive (minimalist) one, it only denoted the Off Site artists. The explosion of *onkyō-ha* in music journalism implied for him the "loss of orientation in the limitlessly expanding globalization" and a "reality and perspective that have minimum depth" in today's totally disoriented world.¹⁶ The chaos surrounding *onkyō* is therefore homologous to the messy world from which the term and its sonic referents were born.

The foreign press soon adopted the Romanized term *onkyō* to designate new trends in the Japanese experimental music scene. This may have resulted from the frequent international tours of Japanese artists and the English-language cyberspace shared by the worldwide scene. *Onkyō* as a new word may be catchy for those who are impatient to know about the Tokyo scene. It was circulated abroad not as an alternative for *ongaku*, but as a new cryptic brand coming from the Far East. Just as borrowed

¹⁶ Kitazato's front-page columns in *News Ombaroque*, vol. 56 (February-March 2003) to vol. 58 (June 2003).

katakana words do in Japanese, it packages and conveys an exotic touch overseas. Such terminological exportation usually stimulates Japan's cultural nationalism because it proves the universal appeal of national artifacts that are usually regarded as viable only domestically. *Manga*, *anime* and *butoh* are among the recent examples of this transnational spread of Japanese cultural forms with original tags. Can *onkyō* achieve a triumph such as *anime* and *manga* have achieved? Probably not. For its magical power has already declined within a decade of its birth and it has enjoyed limited commercial success. What is surprising about *onkyō* is its extreme ephemerality. As early as 2001, Ōtomo, who had somehow contributed to the promulgation of the word abroad, refused the label, probably from an awareness of the Orientalist connotation that arises when a Japanese word is borrowed in a Western text.¹⁷

Two years later the term no longer seemed relevant to the latest sound-making practices. In the words of Nakamura Toshimaru, another central figure in Japanese *onkyō*, "I wouldn't use that term myself. It describes too much. I prefer the more neutral words like improvised or experimental."¹⁸ *Onkyō* came to denote a certain style (low volume, electronic devices, anti-climax, relevance of no-sounding sequences, concentration on timbre, tense stillness, etc.) that meant artistic stagnation for him. The term *onkyō* was once accepted for its all-embracing semantic range concerning sound, but within a half

¹⁷ Quoted from Otomo's interview for the French magazine *Revue & Corrigée*: (<http://japanimprov.com/yotomo/yotomoj/interviewj01.html>, as of October 6, 2005).

¹⁸ Quoted from Clive Bell, "Site for Sore Ears", *Wire*, July 2003, 44.

decade it became too “descriptive” for him. It is a familiar story that labeling is a concern of writers and the market, not musicians themselves. Just as many eminent musicians have rejected the genre names attributed to their performance and preferred to have their work labeled simply “music,” *onkyō* performers would rather be labeled by the mode of sounding practice (improvisation), by their position in the cultural map, or by the emphasis on process rather than result (experiment). This suggests that “music” is no longer an appropriate option for self-recognition. *Ongaku* is dead, but *onkyō* is dead, too.

What name will be given to those experimental improvisers who are radically cut off from the existing institutions and who refuse any name? Naming the shrewd is hard to do for any music/sound critic. Who dares baptize the latest mavericks with a new name that will sound merely nostalgic in a few years? Judging from the general absence of the “struggle for meaning” concerning *onkyō* (Kitazato was among only a few music critics sensitive to definitions), I sense that the very act of naming is dead. The audience of experimentalists, having an acute historical consciousness of avant-garde and underground scenes, is already wise enough to know the futility of a name. The name *onkyō* will be kept only in the record shops, which put priority on easy classification for the utility of consumers regardless of aesthetic justification or the artists’ self-identity.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to highlight several moments in Japanese history when the terminology concerning human sound-making was problematic. From *mononone* and *utamai* in the early written Japanese of the eighth century to *onkyō* in the early twenty-first century, several terms have been applied to certain types of sound-making. They are not always interchangeable, not only because of the different processes of making sound and the sounds resulting from them, but also because of the different ideas invested in each regarding the human, performance, and sound.

The word *ongaku* came from compounding Chinese characters, but the meaning and usage have been changed in the course of its linguistic travels. *Ongaku* downplays the Confucian cosmology implied by the Chinese concept of *gaku*, while establishing a new signification of musical “Chineseness.” It is natural that in the tradition of kabuki, the same word still denoted genres deriving from Chinese music. Despite little currency in everyday language before Meiji, the word was almost the only option for early Meiji bureaucrats and educators to translate the Western concept of music.

Ongaku for postwar experimentalists was a yoke, the institutions and conventions they fought against. The first detractor of Takemitsu assumed that concert “music” should follow a certain canon. The natural-scientific word *onkyō* was re-formulated to designate the semantic terrain outside of institutionalized *ongaku* with a hope of embracing the whole or some fringes of *ongaku*. But the fluidity of the electronic/improvisational scene

has been too rapid and amorphous for words to pin down. The refuting of all labels reflects the aesthetic habitus of members of the scene, too. The word *onkyō* was from the beginning doomed to be short-lived.

How to name humanly organized sound appears to be a matter of trifling concern compared to the discussion of music/sound itself. Language is, however, not extrinsic but intrinsic to cultural cognition. The conceptualization of music/sound itself is indeed a key component in modern European aesthetics. It is through language that one charts the sounds one hears, performs, dances to, and composes. This essay has shown the historiographical relevance of conceptualizing music/sound on a generic level. Historians of Japanese music, regardless of the periods and genres they examine, have to be conscious of the historicity of the most basic concept of their research, *ongaku*. To the extent that they choose to use it, they are forcefully configured, at least in part, by a Western knowledge system. *Ongaku* study free from it is not possible. Writing about *ongaku* is already part of “translation culture” (to use Kobayashi Hideo’s term) in a way similar to writing about *bungaku* or *rekishi*.¹⁹ The question of translation is therefore fundamental for any Japanese *ongaku* historiographer.

¹⁹ See Dennis Washburn’s essay on “Bungaku” in this collection.