

The Asian Music Festival 2010 in Tokyo: A Report by Dan Albertson

This inaugural festival, subtitled Japanese Sounds and Spirits, filled six days and nights, from 1–6 October 2010. Below is a summary of the entirety of the festival, based on notes recorded during, and immediately after, the events. I have not had access to scores during the festival, making the comments only about the pieces, not about their performances.

1 October 2010

The opening ceremony proved to be a surprise, much more than a simple or banal parade of platitudes. Isao MATSUSHITA talked in alternation with the musicologist Fuyuko FUKUNAKA, he in Japanese, she in English. Accompanied by six shakuhachi, the president of Geidai, Ryohei MIYATA, welcomed the audience, and indeed dazzled it, with his contemporary, obfuscating rendition of a kanji. When its traditional appearance was revealed, the audience seemed in disbelief. I often wished, during the concerts that followed, for a similar, bold approach in music, i.e. new views of tradition.

The first concert, Asian Vocal Sounds, was at Sogakudo, conducted by Takuo YUASA. An evening of varied soli ensued. Three excerpts from the cycle Songs of Solitude for mezzo-soprano and orchestra by P Q PHAN, a Vietnamese composer now teaching in Indiana, USA, initiated the festival, an unfortunate choice, their pleasantries never amounting to a distinctive commentary on the relationship between text and music. At least the orchestration was lithe. The next work, Scenery on the Bridge for soprano and orchestra by the Korean composer Jiesun LIM, suffered from a similar lack of personality and even more from a hefty orchestration, the voice often smothered. The high tessitura rendered diction difficult, as well. What followed, Tanabata by Japanese composer Hiroaki MINAMI, was the highlight of the night, a thoughtful set of three nocturnes, in which the soloist has accompaniment of great subtlety and transparency, not to mention a terrific sense of foreboding. The momentum has not carried forward into Ancient Voice for soprano and orchestra by Chinese composer HU Xiao, which passed without much notice after its two-minute introduction for unaccompanied voice. One could not help noticing MuGa for two traditional voices with Korean instruments and orchestra by Heejeong 'Cecilia' KIM, an uncomfortable monstrosity. The composer managed to achieve much more range of emotion and nuance from her two local soloists than from the Western orchestra that she employed alongside them, leaving one to wonder how much more successful the piece could have been without the insistence on "blending" disparate, and perhaps incompatible, traditions. A similar problem plagued the final work of the evening, also the most famous: Nagauta Symphony, 'Tsurukame', by Kosaku YAMADA, in which a bevy of traditional singers, shamisen and traditional percussion competed for auditory space with a Western orchestra. The enduring impression was that the composer felt more adept writing for Japanese instruments, with the orchestra adding an unnecessary, and distracting, gauze to the writing, which was otherwise vivid.

2 October 2010

The morning began with participation in a symposium, the theme of which was What Does the World Seek in Asian Art?. The question was a nebulous one and the fellow participants in the event, Joshua Kam-biu CHAN from Hong Kong, HO Chee Kong

from Singapore, Heejeong 'Cecilia' KIM from South Korea, and moderator Fuyuko FUKUNAKA from Japan, tried, to varying degrees of success, to offer possible answers. No consensus could be reached. Several small events followed, though attendance at every event proved impossible, due to my own event and the overlapping nature of these events. One part that was seen, however, was for children, comprised both of traditional music and contemporary music. An example of the latter, by Masakazu KAWASHIMA from Japan, was especially memorable, its on-stage children both bringing to life and reacting to an equal number of on-stage instrumentalists.

The main event of the day was the night concert, Digital Music in Asia, in Hall 6 at Geidai, moderated, when necessary, by Yoshihiro KANNO from Japan. At once, confusion was clear: The opening work was not what was printed in the programme and indeed The Announcer's Announcement for tape by LEUNG Kei Cheuk aka 'Gaybird' from Hong Kong was never properly introduced, its three movements, perhaps mocking as much as reveling in concert clichés, were interspersed nonchalantly through the evening. Maybe this structure was the intent of the composer. The first proper piece, point for koto and synthesiser by the Japanese Yuria TOBE, made curious use of analogue technology, though to no great effect: Neither koto nor synthesiser seemed at ease in this equation. Another Japanese piece followed, Wavelet for computer and film by Naotoshi OSAKA, in which the sounds transformed from watery in their origins to ethereal, the film undergoing a change much less subtle in its trajectory. Glassback by the New Zealander Jason LONG changed the atmosphere completely, its five minutes derived from the sounds of a squash game. The work built to a furious pitch before receding to a subdued close. The next work was in a state of Flux... for sho and live electronics by Miyuki ITO from Japan, whose title inadequately describes the music, which is more or less static. The sound of the sho is automatically endearing, but the processing added nil to the experience. A brief intermission was a welcomed respite. Next was In the great green room... for tape by Seong-Joon MOON from South Korea, in which the evergreen tale for children Goodnight Moon is subjected to accelerations that mask the bedtime story beyond all recognition. Its effect gradually became more heightened, perhaps a metaphor for increasing distance from childhood naïveté. Shiyo for biwa and tape by Rui OGAWA from Japan placed a traditional instrument inconveniently alongside taped sounds of various sources, including voices, masking its potential. The Australian composer Brigid BURKE was reminded of the fickle nature of technology, when her piece Island City for clarinet, tape and film malfunctioned. She kept her poise and, after some adjustments, began anew. The more relevant portion of the experience was the images, extracted from coastal Australia as well as coastal Japan, often small and in boxes, and more in black-and-white than colour; the music ultimately left no impression. The evening ended with the invigorating Metascape II – The Inner Voice of Chinese-Opera Cymbals by the Taiwanese composer TSENG Yu-Chung, the most compelling work of the evening, one in which the simple sound of cymbals is rendered in a dazzling, and surprisingly musical, array of permutations.

3 October 2010

Another busy day was in order. I was too late to attend the koto workshop offered by the distinguished Masateru ANDO, but I was later fortunate to see, and hear, some of the shakuhachi workshop given by Christopher 'Yohmei' BLASDEL, an American long resident in Japan. I quickly learned how difficult this instrument is, when Isao

MATSUSHITA insisted on having a PVC model of the instrument given to me. I could not coax a single sound out of it, despite repeated tries and advice from BLASDEL! The wise MATSUSHITA opted out of trying.

In-between the workshops was a performance of the gigaku piece Sanzo-hoshi, whose story my Chinese colleagues knew already, telling of seventh-century journeys to India and the return to China with Sanskrit texts. How a Westerner could engage directly with the performance is a mystery to me, but the lack of engagement was never on my mind, so spellbound was I by the austerity, the discipline and the immediacy of the spectacle. I was surprised to see movement on stage, having expected stasis. From a musical point of view, the change of ensemble concomitant with the change of scenery nicely offset different passages of the story, unfolding in less than 50 minutes, yet seeming much shorter. I regretted not being able to understand the extended, prefatory remarks by the chief abbot of Yakushiji Temple, Hoin YAMADA, which were delivered in Japanese.

After such a rewarding experience, the afternoon concert of short works for piano at Bunkyo Civic Hall was somewhat trivial. No work particularly stood out from the crowd, the lot being accessible, playful and only rarely serious, as befits the theme, To the Children in the World. Much more exciting than hearing the pieces, mostly charming and short, was seeing so many young students, some apparently as young as 6 or 7, enjoying their turns on the piano bench. Seeing many composers play through their own works with enjoyment was also memorable. The list of composers was extensive: Yumi TOHIRA (Japan), Eunhye KIM (South Korea), Ross James CAREY (New Zealand–Australia), Moritoshi HAMANAKA (Japan), Livia LIN (Hong Kong), JeDon OH (South Korea), Shuhei TAMURA (Japan), Osamu KATSUKI (Japan), Kayoko MAEDA (Japan), and Megumi KANAMARU (Japan) formed the first half. The second half encompassed Deborah ROTHSTEIN SCHRAMM (Israel), HO Chee Kong (Singapore), Yumiko KOWATA (Japan), Max STERN (Israel), Naoto OMASA (Japan), Yuri POVOLOTSKY (Ukraine–Israel), Yumiko NISHIDA (Japan), Shigeo SUZUKI (Japan), Kenji WATANABE (Japan), and Yong Nan PARK (South Korea).

The concert Conductors Are Composers finished a long day and indeed a long weekend. I missed the opening piece, Yong for orchestra by Fung LAM (Hong Kong–UK). The composer had shown me its score earlier in the day and it is clearly a concert-opener, filled with the usual, gestural expectations. I arrived in time to hear Yukyu no mai (Eternal Dance) for orchestra by Shigueyuki IMAI (Japan), a seven-minute exploration of rhythmic patterns, first mostly allotted to percussion and later more to strings. The next work proved to be the most thoughtful of the evening, Es klingt noch..., a symphonic scene for orchestra by Seunglim KIM (South Korea). The work began with three strokes of a bell, the third stroke leading into icy strings, making me unsure which direction it would take and, indeed, a sense of aimlessness pervaded for a spell, represented by frequent pauses in the score. After these hesitations, the work became increasingly directional and the orchestration became more lucid; a moment of soli for the cello section, for instance, was organic and the emotional core of the nine-minute piece. The opening material for bell returned near the end, now louder and more menacing, before the work faded away. Could music of a more different nature have followed than excerpts from the scores for the two films Red Cliff for orchestra, capable if not revelatory, with the usual moves from the Korngold playbook? The composer-conductor, Taro IWASHIRO (Japan), also served as the amiable emcee; I felt most fortunate to have Daisuke INOUE, a local jazz

pianist and businessman, as my companion, as he translated many of the witticisms uttered by IWASHIRO throughout the evening. Intermission ensued, the second half promising three works with concertante natures. First to appear was TSAI Ling-Huei (Taiwan), leading her Concerto for Southern Drums. In fact, one drummer also used bells and rattles. I could understand the need for restraint, but having the drummers mostly rub their instruments very quietly for the bulk of the piece seemed a wasted opportunity. That the music never had any propulsion and stayed squarely in lifeless terrain, whether for the soli or the orchestra, only increased the alienation. The next work was another disappointment, The Music Is but Momentary (Consolation)... for gu zheng and orchestra by Richard TSANG (Hong Kong). From its opening, which was stolid both in terms of musical development and tempo, to a climax ten minutes in, headed by the cliché of a loud tam-tam stroke, to the concluding moments for soloist alone, the music never captivated. Kumo (Spider) for sho, noka and orchestra by Yoshihiro KANNO (Japan) is cast in three movements and leaned more toward extroversion than introversion, unexpected in view of the delicate, solo instruments involved. The best, most flamboyant music was reserved for the orchestra and the integration of the two soloists was far from seamless; at least a forced juxtaposition was not the primary goal. Only during the second part has a tranquil mood prevailed. The work ended very suddenly, but satisfactorily. Seeing traditional garb on the two soloists made the experience even more enticing.

4 October 2010

The concert of the evening was entitled Asian Tunes and occurred in the Sakura Hall of Hokutopia. Two types of repertory were on display, which could loosely be grouped into traditional and contemporary, the former sung by the N F Ladies' Singers and Tokyo Trouvère, each a choir of women only, and the latter sung by Vox humana, a mixed choir. The combined choirs opened with five works for female voices and piano: Agnus Dei by Heejung AHN (South Korea), Umi no hate by Sawako TAMARU (Japan), eight pieces from Ryojin Hisho by Kikuko MASSUMOTO (Japan), A Lullaby for Altan Tsetseg by Akiko KAMI (Japan), and two excerpts from Aki no hitomi by Takashi MATSUOKA (Japan). The simple, almost disarming setting by AHN was the strongest music, the other examples being immediate yet not memorable. Vox humana then had a short set of four pieces. A change of programme put Birth and Death, Five Songs for Thich Nhat Hanh by HOH Chung Shih (Singapore) next. How disappointing to hear only one song, so moving was this excerpt! Twelve singers moved around the stage in near-darkness, syllables serving as a cantus firmus upon which the composer heaped a plethora of hisses. The choir was halved for Ben-Zoma Omer by Shmuel MALKIN (Israel), containing four languages, of which the section in German was the most emphatic. The Peony Pavilion for eight mixed voices by Christopher Ming-kin HUNG (Hong Kong) followed, its eight minutes a parade of modern techniques never amounting to a whole. To close was the prayer namoamidambuthu for twelve mixed voices by Mankai UCHIDA (Japan), which almost overwhelmed with its insistent vehemence, but which left an indelible mark on the ears and mind afterward. When, near the end, the singers went without conductor, the precision of their rapid chanting was especially noteworthy. At this point, intermission was needed! The second half began with another set that was in a light mood, again with the combined choirs of women. A Turtle from Two Allegories for female chorus by Satoru NAKANISHI (Japan) and Eternal Hiroshima for female chorus and piano by Mikio ITO (Japan) opened the second half; that the former was often more contemplative and the latter often more direct, even playful, was a rôle reversal. What the Sirens Sang for female chorus and piano by Stuart

GREENBAUM (Australia) innocuously followed, then Hydrangea Village and Requiem, each for soprano, female chorus and piano and each by Asei KOBAYASHI (Japan), which were even lighter and more inconsequential, seeming more like show tunes than choral items. Vox humana soon returned for another set, now of five pieces. Tangi for six mixed voices by Carol SHORTIS (New Zealand) featured the gimmick of singers moving from the audience to the stage, yet the music itself was strong enough not to need this needless distraction. The work is cast as an arch framed by male overtone-singing. The choir grew to eight mixed voices for Lu Chai by Austin Ho Kwen YIP (Hong Kong), a work of much promise, yet much of it unfulfilled. Moments of repose alternated, sometimes brusquely, with music of a dramatic, albeit effect-laden, character. ...About Gong, Ai, Na... for four female voices by WONG Chee-Wei (Malaysia) was disappointingly simple, based on a folksong, but without enough decoration to transcend the genre. Next was Sen no Show from Panta-rhei II by Junnosuke YAMAMOTO (Japan), in which the choir was divided into a female quartet, stage left, and a male quintet, stage right. Perhaps to accompany the arrangement, the music was vociferous and contemplative to varying degrees, the latter mood prevailing in the end. A long night ended with Tsang Tse for twelve mixed voices by CHAO Ching-Wen (Taiwan), a mind-numbing work that seemed much longer than its nine minutes. The vocal clicking involved could have been deployed to much richer results had the music been more variegated.

5 October 2010

Japanese Instruments and String Quartet was the title of the chamber-music concert held in the oldest music building in all of Japan, the Sogakudo of the Former Tokyo Music School. Forest Symbolised for string quartet by Ryuichi KOBAYASHI (Japan) impressed with its predominantly grim mood, giving way to moments of rarefied beauty and austerity in equal measure. Vocalising early in the piece was a false step, but was soon forgotten. A recurring, tapping sound was described as an "inverse pizzicato" in my notes. Next was Nocturnum for cello by Ken-ichiro ITO (Japan) suffered from a tendency to meander and to leave promising material, such as rhythmic patterns, undeveloped. The lasting impression was of an episodic piece, its bold gestures separated by tenuti, pizzicati or col legni. Six Scenes from Basho for shakuhachi and string quartet by Stephen YIP (Hong Kong–USA) became increasingly poignant, then ended, leaving me to wonder why its first half could not have been as potent. The dialogue between soloist and quartet was always understated, even hesitant, as though neither one wished to invade the realm of the other. After intermission was Kurita for two koto by Noriko NAKAMURA (Japan), quite arresting during its ten minutes and showing a delicacy not anticipated, even from such instruments. Much more boisterous, at times, was Phlegon for violin by Masao ENDO (Japan), a work that seemed "off", but pleasantly so, due to its just intonation. My notes referred to Phlegon as having "some parts flamboyant, some parts quiet, some parts flamboyantly quiet". Doming LAM (Hong Kong) was represented by his String Quartet No. 2, a tone poem in five sections, played attacca. The one-time radical has cooled considerably, this work being unapologetic in its joviality and simplicity, at the expense of profundity.

6 October 2010

The title of the final concert was that of the festival as a whole, Japanese Sounds and Spirits, held at the Main Hall of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space. A classic of the koto repertory began the night, Midare by seventeenth-century composer Kengyo

YATSUHASHI (Japan), a work without fixed metre and with superb fluctuations of tempo, rendered by massed koto. In *Gentleness and Suddenness* by Bruce CROSSMAN (Australia) hewed closer to the former, titular sentiment, firmly pensive and breathy. *Mimesis* for fourteen koto by Joshua Kam-biu CHAN (Hong Kong) was a feast as much visual as aural, its motifs clearly flung from one side of the stage to the other and from one group of koto to another. Intermission ensued, then *Ryukyu Islands Folksong Suite* for ten shakuhachi and twenty-seven koto by Yutaka MAKINO (Japan), a charming rendering of what the composer claimed to be the three foremost folksongs of the isles. *Akishinodera* by Hiroyuki NAKADA (Japan) was presented in an arrangement for uta, shakuhachi, koto, and string quartet by Isao MATSUSHITA (Japan). The music was often threadbare, ritual in nature, and fell into manifest subsections, often heralded by intermezzi for string quartet alone. *Hi-ten-yu*, a concerto for wadaiko and Japanese orchestra by Isao MATSUSHITA (Japan) marked the end of the festival. The work, heard in sundry versions during the past two decades, here found a sympathetic accompaniment, in which only timpani, vibraphone and a pair of contrabasses betrayed the lingering influence of the Western orchestra. Anchoring the work are two enormous cadenzas for wadaiko, leading to a finale of shattering proportions. Not content to close the final page of the festival yet, the performers returned, offering a repeat of the second cadenza, performed, as a cadenza should be, differently than it had been only minutes before.

Conclusion

Festivals are always daunting, with so many events crammed into such a compressed span of time. The Asian Music Festival 2010 in Tokyo gave invaluable insight into the state of composition in various Asian countries and territories, as well as lending opportunities to hear works that may never be heard otherwise. Able volunteers staffed each event and the "festival experience" from my viewpoint as a visitor was entirely positive. I wish only to have had more time to discuss music with the assembled composers and musicians, who were more often than not preoccupied with performing or rehearsing. Such will be the fate of any festival, I suppose.