The Music of Jōji Yuasa

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By

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Edited by Peter Burt

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Music uplifts me like the sea and races / me to my distant star,
Through veils of mist or through ethereal spaces / I sail on it afar.
—Charles Baudelaire

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my family, who have willingly accepted and accommodated my daily presence, and in particular to Martina, who is starting to develop a passion for all things musical!

The transcription of Japanese terms follows the Hepburn model except in a few instances involving names for which a different transliteration is in established use. Japanese names appear in the text following the western convention of name before surname. "Tokyo" and "Kyoto" are as pronounced, transcribed without long accents on the vowels except when quoted in a Japanese text. The transliteration "noh" (as opposed to "*nō*") is that commonly used in English texts.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

INTRODUCTION

Complexity occupies a pivotal role in contemporary speculation and it is just one of many notions that have migrated from science to the humanities. The personality, life and musical production of the composer Jōji Yuasa (1929-) demonstrates an interesting example of this complexity within a much larger, complex context, that of modern Japan with its contradictory and stratified history. An anthropological view maintains that every civilization, regardless of its degree of sophistication, shares a similar level of complexity. Nonetheless, Japan seems to represent a particularly intricate type of complexity. Ascent to cultural "parity" occured in Japan in the first half of the twentieth-century. The country was transformed in just a few decades from a society with a substantially feudal structure to one of the most advanced countries in the western developed world, and was for many years the only Asian country on a par with western technical and social knowledge. In investigating the figure of Yuasa, who has spent his entire creative life fusing the new and unknown from the West with the old and known from Japan, one cannot help but bear in mind this background layer of complexity.

Yuasa certainly comes from a general, if somewhat difference-blind, cultural community of contemporary music[1] and yet he is perfectly defined by both of the expressions "Japanese composer" and "global intellectual". In neither case does this alter the internationally recognized value of his works. I do however maintain, from a strict Confucian standpoint, that this "rectifying of the names" is not without its influence. On the one hand, to define Yuasa as a Japanese composer represents a certain tautology, while on the other, the second description acknowledges the fact that a human being develops into a person, existing only within, and as a result of, a cultural context.[2] A composer – according to Murray Schafer's epochal definition – is formed above all within his/her soundscape.[3] Nonetheless, many of Yuasa's creative impulses and quite a few of his technical procedures, together with some important friendships from the international contemporary music world – Morton Feldman, Iannis Xenakis – place him and his work within a type of fringe global community, in keeping with his complex "multiple identity" as defined by Amartya Sen. Sen's idea might be summarized as follows: rather than comparing cultures of a national orientation, today it seems reasonable to think in terms of cultural

communities that share parts of a whole complex, a structure which constitutes the cultural formation of a person.[4]

Nevertheless, it is because of this very reasoning that it is worth questioning Yuasa's intellectual landscape and the "Japanese essence" found within his work. Certainly, it is this "essence" which emerges more and more clearly in the course of his musical output, taking as its basis his original intellectual and creative experience and, through analysis, arriving at the unravelling of the final "spiral", of a process that is of profound interest to our times. This means defining cultural identities that have a particular relationship of identification and interiorization with cultural *otherness*. This ever-present category of otherness continues to occupy an important position in the negotiation of identity and personality, and even more so for an artist active at the global level. Continuous throughout Yuasa's output is the perception of *otherness* within western musical thought that serves to underscore his creative intentions.[5] Similar things have, of course, occurred with other Asian composers, notably the great Isang Yun (1917-1995).

Yuasa's development is profoundly original, in great part because he was largely self-taught. With a lucid intellect and an uncommon generosity of thought, Yuasa traces his own creative process as developing hand in hand with his radical thoughts on the existing relationships between cultures – not only within a musical context, but even more specifically, in the relationship with western culture. The word "radical" here refers to Yuasa's depth of intellectual effort. This is also apparent in his musical language, as I seek to demonstrate in this book. Radical and, as already stated, profoundly humanist,[6] Yuasa's expressive project remains "the communication of substance",[7] with all the associated intrinsic difficulties that are particularly evident in Yuasa's later works, such as the symphonic pieces of the late nineties. Radical too, however, is the marriage of western avant-garde procedures (the most intricate aspects of which are dealt with in this text) with an aesthetics not so closely linked with Japanese musical material as with the Japanese Zen thought process. In the shape of a continual interior dialogue, drawing on personalities who are among the most important in the history of human thought, there flows in Yuasa a range of disparate discourses which include those of Jean-Paul Sartre and Daisetzu T. Suzuki, Matsuo Bashō and William Faulkner, Henry Miller and Motokiyo Zeami. Other stimuli drawn from a mass of up-to-date literature in both the sciences and the humanities have accompanied the composer in his life devoted to aesthetic research within the field of music.

The self-consciousness of Yuasa's creative development can be perfectly described by four fundamental "pointers" in the finalization of the poetics that Yuasa himself taught to his composition students:

I. Become familiar with non-musical matter, that is, aesthetics and contemporary art, literature, philosophy, natural sciences, linguistics and the anthropological sciences.
II. Listen to all sound "happenings" and become a real expert of sound.
III. Although accepting the importance of instinct, maintain a scientific coolness regarding the choice of instruments, compositional methods, the sound phenomenon per se, and its perception.
IV. Be aware of what has been happening in the art world in the last fifty years, as well as where developments have occurred, in order to fully appreciate and understand, and to not uselessly repeat that which has already been done.[8]

I have attempted to follow these guidelines in the investigation and exposition of the complex phenomenon which is Yuasa's work. Even if there is not a precise correlation with chapters, my work will develop along the following lines:

I. To explore the most important non-musical forms of inspiration for Yuasa, looking therefore at his interests in aesthetic, literary, philosophical, scientific and anthropological fields. This comprises the fundamental themes of origin, meaning of language, etc.
II. To investigate Yuasa's composition from the starting point of his poetics of "sound", whether this sound be instrumental or vocal, acoustic or electronic, traditional or avant-garde, Japanese or otherwise.
III. Bearing in mind the degree of inscrutability connected with any creative act, to analyze Yuasa's scores and, in doing so, to understand compositional methods and the overall sound result. In the process, the presupposed speculative aims of the composer will be discussed; which in turn involves a different type of perspective, whether this be an unknown idea of Zen time, or chance, or something else altogether.
IV. To place Yuasa's works at the centre of the most original of creative movements in the contemporary music world, a place in which for Yuasa, "beyond labels, in the same idea of creativity, there has to be an avant-garde component".[9]

This book is divided into eight chapters, each dealing with the intellectual formation of the most important elements of Yuasa's work, which naturally appear in the titles Yuasa adopts for his compositions. Specific themes treated include "time", "project" (in the Sartrean sense of the word), "the cosmos", "genesis", and some aesthetic ideas associated with Sartre, Bashō, Suzuki, Zeami, etc. An examination of Yuasa's essays, a fundamental part of his output, demonstrates his affinity with a 20th century tendency to be both musician and theorist of one's own aesthetic and stylistic choices where contemporary developments are concerned. What remains central to Yuasa's aesthetic, as he himself has on more than one occasion affirmed, is the idea that "sound must be listened to as sound in itself, leaving behind our normal conceptual representation of sound. It is nonsense to attempt to logically understand music and art in general. Even traditional arts are not a historical development of technique but instead, a development *of communication*."[10] The italics are mine because it is through a precise consideration of the communicative content that the techniques of his musical language can be explored. The portrait is illustrated by and completed with analysis of Yuasa's works. Biographical information is given where it is relevant and helpful to the theme being discussed.

The problems that I have faced regarding analysis are linked to the complexity of the works themselves and to their placement at an appropriate creative juncture between what is considered analytically relevant in western or Japanese thinking about music – or perhaps I should say creative "caesura", in keeping with the composer's preference for certain imagery.[11] I have often found myself having to re-evaluate my own point of view, important in any analysis, by definition, will ultimately require a judgment. I have analyzed Yuasa's works considering material strategic variables[12] – sound layers, note groupings or pitch configurations, timbric layers, rhythmic figures and cells –, linguistic elements treated with a variety of techniques such as dodecaphony, topology, noh and others, all of which acquire a parametric meaning upon which is conferred physiognomy.[13] From this, I investigated the resultant organization, paying close attention to the expressive ends, poised between intention and result, to the structural implications in terms of time/duration, and to the articulation of form, always remaining aware of the fact that no analysis, no matter how thorough, can ultimately offer a complete explanation of the value and beauty of a musical work. Nevertheless, the analysis found in this book might offer a model of a successful, creative organizational thinking which is all the more fascinating precisely because it eludes any exhaustive explanation.

The music of Yuasa is recognized as having attained standards as high as any international musical production over the last fifty years. Less persuasive and captivating, and perhaps less facile than other Japanese composers of international renown like Tōru Takemitsu, Yuasa's music has nonetheless been a model for many young composers, both from Japan and further afield, thanks to the long period that Yuasa spent teaching composition at the University of California San Diego (1981-1994). I hope that my work serves to illuminate certain aspects of his work which are intricately linked to deep, native roots, and which tend for this reason to be more opaque for western and other non-Japanese ears. I am naturally conscious of the fact that a project ambitious enough to confront the entire output of a great composer could not be undertaken without some slips and errors. I have not addressed the issue of western music in Japan, something I have done in previous writings, and of which, in any case, a conspicuous and mature body of literature exists.[14] I have taken into consideration only that part of the output of Yuasa which is demonstrably "classical", only referring briefly to his output within the important field of *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music), rather as Peter Burt did in his book on Takemitsu.[15] Yuasa, in any case, is very clear about the different stances required by the two creative procedures "easy" and "cultured". Functional music, arising from restrictions which confine composers artistically, represent compositional exercises of considerable value for Yuasa.

I am profoundly grateful to Yuasa who has shared his wonderful humanity, intelligence and patience in our numerous interviews and meetings. I feel honoured and proud that the passion I have cultivated for his works and the esteem that I have always had for the maestro, which according to a profoundly Japanese principle seems to have united a creative path with interior growth, has now developed into a deep friendship.

Notes

[1] The label "contemporary music" conventionally refers to the production of western-trained, living composers of cultivated aesthetics. Its vagueness and covert ethnocentrism in the context of the multifaceted and diversified contemporary music scene is manifest and suspicious, although it may be convenient (bearing in mind its limits) for defining precisely the production of western-trained living composers of cultivated aesthetics. See Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, also Everett and Lau 2004.
[2] Gertz 1973.
[3] Murray Schafer 1977. For a critical examination of Murray Schafer"s book see Serra 2000.
[4] Sen 1997.
[5] This other-ness does not seem to take into account the work of Uno Everett and her interesting proposal for a "taxonomy of 'cross-over' compositions", in which one of Yuasa's pieces is placed alongside pieces by Kaija Saariaho or Stockhausen in the *transference* category, thereby "evok[ing] Asian sensibilities without explicit musical borrowing". Everett and Lau 2004 16-17.
[6] This is the central assumption of Yasuo Kōno, editor of Kōno 2004. See also a reference by the composer Matsudaira Yoriaki in the same work, Kōno 2004, 149.
[7] Yuasa 1993, 187.
[8] Yuasa 1999, 7.
[9] Ibid., 4.
[10] Yuasa 1978, 88-120.
[11] See Chapt. 3, § 3.3 Webern, Time and Space (*ma*).
[12] Molino 1975.
[13] Ibid.; see also Everett and Lau 2004, 11-12.
[14] Galliano 2002, Wade 2004, Herd 1987.
[15] Most Japanese composers produce music at different artistic levels, composing in equal measure "easy" music and that which is artistically and culturally weighted. The same phenomenon can also be seen in the music of contemporary Chinese composers, one example being the symphonic works of Tan Dun as opposed to his film soundtracks. See Utz 2002, 382 ff.

CHAPTER ONE

DÉBUT

Jōji Yuasa was born on August 12, 1929 in Koriyama, in the prefecture of Fukushima (central-north Japan). He was the second-born son of a renowned and well-off family that, for seven generations, had produced doctors, Yuasa's elder brother included. The family had moved from the Yamaguchi prefecture to Koriyama when Yuasa's grandfather established himself as chief physician at the hospital there. The landscape of Yuasa's childhood, in particular the plain of Asakaheiya – an area historically rich in terms of culture and tradition – certainly influenced his later notions of space and aesthetics, as the following quotation illustrates:

> I had to cross the plain to reach my high school,[1] both when there were flurries of snow accompanied by winds from Mount Bandai, and also when the weather was good and you could see the mountain far away in the distance. In the summer, there was swimming in Lake Inawashiro, which is very different from Lake Towada, surrounded by thick vegetation. Inawashiro, by comparison, is a much more open lake with mountains reflected in it. It gives a strong sensation of vastness, an openness that seems to reach the cosmos itself. This scenery has remained locked within me, and is a fundamental part of me.[2]

The Yuasa family environment was creative and culturally rich. They embraced modern ways of life and the new culture that had already been current in Japan for about half a century.[3] Yuasa's father, Daitarō, who had spent four years in Germany (Freiburg 1924-28), gave Yuasa an early introduction to both Japanese and western aesthetics. His father edited a poetry magazine dedicated to *haiku* and was an active painter, using oil paints as well as more traditional Japanese techniques. He also played the mandolin, the violin, and the shakuhachi, and was a lover of both classical music and opera. In addition to all this, he was the author of numerous libretti and performed in the noh theatre. From his travels, Yuasa's father brought back sketches of operatic scenes (*Rigoletto*, *Faust*, Wagnerian masterpieces from La Scala) as well as many records. This obviously

created an extremely favourable musical environment for the young Jōji, who never actually received any formal musical education with the exception of learning a few simple pieces from his mother, who had studied organ. The young Jōji took advantage of his father's varied record collection, a fact that later revealed itself through his profound, subconscious knowledge of symphonic, chamber and operatic works. Composers both "great" and "small" contributed to his vast musical knowledge, one that was a "natural background" for him.[4] Yuasa adored his father and was to hold him in high esteem throughout his life.[5]

Fundamental to understanding Yuasa's musical development is the fact that he did not initially experience any conflict between the two musical conceptions of western and Japanese music, having practiced both from infancy. According to his mother, one of Yuasa's favourite games as a very small child was to spend hours at the organ, discovering and playing the tonic/dominant/sub-dominant relationships of melodies he had learned, even during the cold winter months.[6] Yuasa's fundamental understanding of tonal harmony later benefited him in his role as first trumpet player of his school brass band, where he repeated the same melody under which the sonorous harmonies of other trumpets and trombones resounded.[7] In contrast, throughout his grade school years, Yuasa was a student of the Hōshō school of noh theatre, which he attended with his father. Here, he studied *utai* song until his second year at middle school. This influence of a *geinō* art form (traditional performing art for entertainment) imbued with literary and Buddhist culture was of paramount importance for the development of his artistic personality.[8]

Yuasa's first experiences in studying composition began in his final years at high school and continued when he transferred to Tokyo to pursue a medical degree at the prestigious Keiō University in 1949. Despite his rather average piano skills, Yuasa played scores of Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg and Sibelius, all of which served as future compositional models. Bach provided the rudiments of counterpoint and Bartók established a connection with him. Listening to records he bought from, and ordered through, a contemporary Ginza music shop, Yuasa however, found himself increasingly drawn to a more modern repertoire, including works such as *Salome* by Florence Schmidt, or the *Fontane di Roma* by Respighi. He was also attracted to Debussy, Poulenc, to the Russian Five, and eventually to Prokofiev as well.

All the while, he was highly attuned to the current music scene in Tokyo; he was very attentive to developments in Japanese contemporary music, particularly from the likes of Fumio Hayasaka and Yoritsune Matsudaira, who were the last remaining icons of the important pre-war

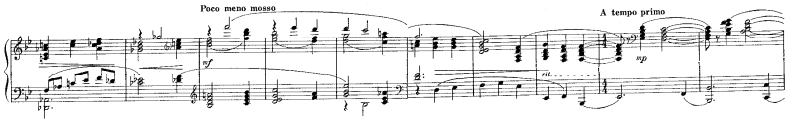
generation of composers. At this time, Yuasa decided to keep composition strictly as a life-long hobby, and in the only year in which he studied harmony regularly with Nakada Kazutsugu, Rimsky-Korsakov's manual served as his guide.[9] Despite this decision, he was already writing atonal works and was influenced by such pieces as works of Bartók' *Bagatelles* op. 6 (1908) and Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* op. 22 (1915-17). Other seemingly contradictory forces were at work as well in the shape of Bernstein and Copland. Copland's music, indeed, has often been linked to the wide-open spaces and vast horizons of western America, an "openness" which was likewise close to Yuasa's heart.

While Yuasa was preparing for entrance into medical school, the University of Fine Arts and Music in Tokyo started a musicology course and Yuasa was tempted to apply, preferring this to compositional studies. The largely academic base on which the course in composition was founded had proved distasteful to him, and he initially decided to work outside professional circles. It was not long before this decision was reversed. His first pieces for public performance consisted of incidental music for a student theatre group from the University of Waseda. Entitled *The Game of Love and Death* and *Akai Jinbaori* [The Little Red Jacket], based respectively on texts by Romain Rolland and by Junji Kinoshita, these pieces were written for a dozen musicians who played under the actual stage.[10]

§ 1.1 First Works

Yuasa's first work, *Two Pastorals* (1952) for piano, mixes all of these early influences with just a hint of "Frenchness." In the introduction to *Two Pastorals* one finds instructions for the correct understanding of Yuasa's aesthetic intent, namely, "to express strong sentiment which is at the heart of nature," and, "to express ... empathetic sentiment between human beings and nature."[11] The theme of empathy with nature is expressed by writing which inclines toward the use of the whole-tone scale over a substantially tonal, though non-functional, base. One can see, for example, a freshness in the succession of chords in the Poco Meno Mosso (Ex 1.1), and indeed, this first work expresses the intellectual tension of the young composer regarding his own representation of the relationship between human existence and nature.

The young Yuasa combined (probably unconsciously) *differing* constitutive essences of symbolic representations of Nature found in Chinese and Greek thought, in which Japanese and the western cultural constructions respectively take root.[12]



Ex. 1.1 *Two Pastorals*, Poco Meno Mosso - © Zen-On 1981

A type of short-circuit seemed to be emerging between the two intellectual constructions. The Japanese, from Kūkai onwards, were mostly interested in the world of nature-in-itself, counterweight to the human world where actions were often made for "irrational" reasons.[13] Indeed, it is nature, with its sublime aspect of spontaneity and freedom-in-itself (literally signified by the characters *shi-zen*, "nature") that should be considered a model and place of safety. From its affirmation during the Kamakura period (1192-1233), specifically Japanese Buddhism speculated that every element, every place of nature be considered an original possessor of the Buddha nature insofar as it originated from a Buddhist absolute, the *dharmakaya* (body of *dharma*). An important part of the debate, and a permanently present theme of noh, was the proposition *mokuseki busshō*, the nature of the Buddha of plants and rocks.[14] Many noh dramas present people and stories organized around *mokuseki busshō* concepts and their adherence to the principles of *shizen*. Yuasa's reflections regarding his search for a particular natural quality of random becoming, or regarding John Cage's techniques for aleatoric writing,[15] confirm that his vision of "nature" corresponds to that already mentioned.

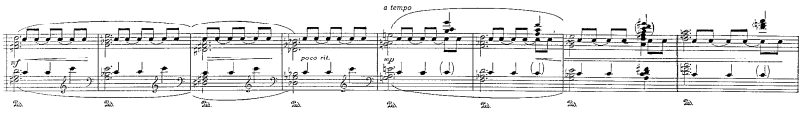
Yuasa's father, after hearing the first radio performance of *Two Pastorals* and reading Fumio Hayasaka's review which spoke of "honesty", wrote to his son saying,

> I would have said "purity"... Hearing the *Pastorals*, I couldn't help but remember the picture of Millet's *Twilight*, and you had mentioned to me in your letter "the sentiment of prayer and the joy of living."[16]

Following Yuasa's *Two Pastorals* and some incidental music came his *Three scores set* (1953) and *Serenade: chant pour "Do"* (1954), again for piano, both of which he originally omitted from his acknowledged opus.

Chant pour "Do" constitutes in itself an interesting experiment as it operates by reducing the material to a minimum in terms of pitch. Terry Riley's *In C*, by comparison, which experimented with a different creative path, but which similarly propounded a radical simplification and naturalness, shocked the world of contemporary music in 1964. *Chant pour "Do"* explores a new organizational hypothesis based on the placing

of a sound, in this case, C. A phrase classically constructed in 8 measures is reiterated and progressively made more complicated by introducing new elements, as seen in the fifth statement of the phrase with the insertion of a chord *a tempo*, using isochronic rhythm and distributed alternately between the two hands (Ex. 1.2). The dynamic indications help to delineate the phrasing, and even here the chord successions are with a loose functional sense, except for the somewhat ironic final perfect cadence. The symmetry of phrasing maintains this attempt at musical organization on an archaic level of minimal conception of sound reiteration in layers of time.

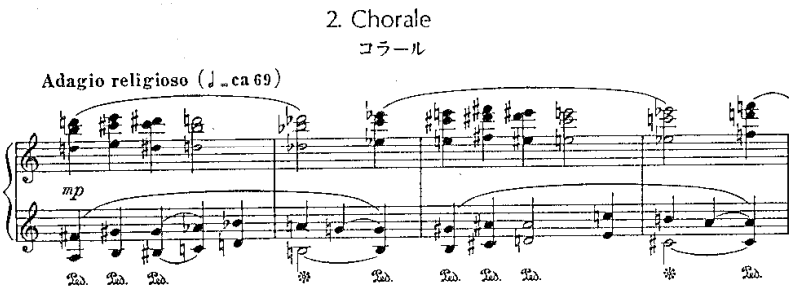


Ex. 1.2 *Chant pour "Do"*, V repetition of the 8 measure model - © Zen-On 1981

Yuasa's previous work, his *Three score-set* for piano (1953), demonstrates a growing interest for a more abstract organizational aspect, the use of enharmonic symmetries – his first approach to the use of chromatic material and atonality. The three pieces (Prelude, Chorale, Finale) result from Yuasa's examination of Bach's, Bartók's and Messiaen's styles respectively in the early years of the 50s. The pieces also reveal elements such as the realization of a palindromic retrograde canon *à la* Bach, Andante nobilmente, from measure 21 (A tempo). Moreover, the asymmetry of the fugue, the plan and purely asymmetrical distribution of time of the Meno Mosso constitute an original Yuasa "fingerprint" as shown in the constant accompaniment of the sixth "void" in the Adagio Religioso (Ex.1.3). Instructions in the score itself state that "it expresses the spirit of the person who, wanting to or not, must live in the present".

§ 1.2 Intellectual Consciousness and Jikken Kōbō

When Yuasa decided that composing could become a serious pursuit, removed from the realm of mere personal pleasure, the dichotomy between western and traditional Japanese musical traditions ceased to be an unconscious one. As composition work became increasingly important in his life, it started to dawn on Yuasa that he was moving in



Ex. 1.3 *Three Score-set*, Chorale - © Zen-On 1981

two distinct musical circles:

> From my earliest years, I experienced both Japanese and western traditions. When I first started composing, these two features cohabited in relative innocence. It wasn't, however, until I started composing seriously that these two parallel "pulls" within me started to seem strange in themselves – an extremely painful sensation to which my thoughts continually returned.[17]

In a recent interview, Yuasa stressed that,

> From the beginning, it seemed remarkable that inside of me there existed a Japanese musical world together with an international musical world, both in turn shared externally with a new musical generation of which I was a part. It was odd that they were separated, and from that initial sensation of twofold existence came the thought that I should conscientiously confront this issue. My personal background and conscience, together with my ideology, tended towards tradition, but my personal identity was constructed on the basis of my interests.[18]

Regarding the duality of his conception of "music" Yuasa would nonetheless maintain an open, somewhat contradictory approach, situated between his research into a "global method which transcends the differences between western and oriental cultural environments"[19] and an intimate necessity to reiterate an individual style set against that of western culture: "In the second half of the twentieth century, European rationalism clearly collided with different limits … turning its gaze toward oriental irrationalism."[20] Yuasa goes on to say that

> One cannot comprehend the world on the basis of a simplistic model such as that of the opposing stances of "western" and "oriental." One must

> simply arrive at a place in which things in themselves are perceived and no more.[21]

At the beginning of the 1950s, Yuasa began to undertake a process of clarification and elaboration that addressed his suffering, slightly schizophrenic conscience and his internal musical dichotomy. To cite a recent stance – which, in a certain sense, was a provisional conclusion of the compositional process generally – Yuasa predicted the total relativization of the idea of music:

> "What is music?" is a question that I have now been asking for twenty years. I don't think that I will ever find an answer, even after a lifetime of research…. fire and water remain the same but the significance of the word "music" continually changes and I am conscious of contributing to this flux.[22]

Likewise, the process of formulating the idea of "being a composer" and the conscious engagement with the problems of comparison corresponded to the intellectual experiences of the Jikken Kōbō (experimental workshop) group.[23] In 1949 Yuasa met the poet Kuniharu Akiyama (1929-1996), a multifaceted and talented intellectual who was later to become a music critic. This meeting took place at a modern music appreciation club at Keiō University. The two of them, together with Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996), whom they met and with whom they celebrated in 1950 following the performance of *Lento in Due Movimenti*,[24] worked together to create Jikken Kōbō, an avant-garde group comprised of many musicians and artists whose artistic projects would be defined today as "multimedia". Sound was manipulated, various genres were mixed, the possibilities of *musique concrète* explored and installations utilizing space assembled.[25] This was a project that allowed them to re-evaluate the conditions, the "process", and the results of the creative path in the extraordinarily painful but also fertile transition from the ruins of post-war Japan. As Yuasa himself recounts,

> At the time of Jikken Kōbō, all values had been destroyed and nobody trusted the adult world. Okamoto Tarō speaks of *hunger*, hunger in the sense of the ambition to create, and that was our own sentiment.[26]

Yuasa was still a student, but after the first year he abandoned his medical studies. By then he had been in Tokyo for three years, two having served as academic preparation. His father, when Yuasa consulted him about the possibility of becoming a composer, supported him with great

enthusiasm. Yuasa thus found himself involved fulltime in Jikken Kōbō working among more established artists, even if the musicians were more or less of his generation – Takemitsu (1930-1996), Ken'ijiro Satō (1927-), Hiroyoshi Suzuki (1939-2006) (whose younger sister he would marry in 1958), the already mentioned Akiyama and Kazuo Fukushima (1930 -).[27] Among the group's mentors was the acclaimed artist Tetsurō Komai (1920-1976), [28] the surrealist poet Shūzo Takiguchi (1903-1979) – of particular influence for Takemitsu[29] – and the composer Fumio Hayasaka, who has been widely recognized as Takemitsu's mentor. The group's intent was not to align itself with traditional Japanese music – which was neither recognized nor accepted, owing to the obsession that the label "Japanese" had throughout their childhood years[30] – but rather to mediate Japanese sensibility with the tantalizing, unknown material of western contemporary music in order to achieve an original compositional expression which corresponded, in turn, to personal expressive desires.

The group was constructed around loose friendships, yet there was a strong sense of membership. Takiguchi's influence encouraged these young artists to read Paul Éluard, André Breton and Louis Aragon, and there were communal catchwords such as "Discover a new world", "Explore new media", and "Oppose all prejudice". Naturally enough, European and Japanese academic music were also rejected. This group was as distant from the experimentalism of a neo-dada movement (of great interest to the visual artists Gutai) as it was from a cynical approach of liquidating the past ("It is never necessary to kill Beethoven").[31] Rather, these young artists were hungry for acquaintances, contacts and knowledge. They read avidly and also attended concerts and meetings held at the cultural centre of the American occupation forces, with its library and modestly equipped sound recording archive. Akiyama was particularly active in unearthing the latest developments, such as the emergence of John Cage, with his adhesion to Zen Buddhism and thorough knowledge of the poetry of Bashō. [32] They were aware of the major American composers of the time, such as Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, and Roger Sessions. As a backdrop to this cultural panorama, they continued to study the scores of twentieth century composers, including Schoenberg and Messiaen. Additionally, they held heated discussions on the various aspects of musical identity. The years between 1953-54, during which the group worked most collectively, involved a great deal of study of dodecaphony with the aid of Ernst Krenek's text and the works of Schoenberg and Webern.[33]

§ 1.3 (Im)possibile Convergences I: Zen and Sartre in the Search for Subjectivity

When the young Yuasa began to compose, he found he needed to mediate his general musical sensibility – profoundly shaped by the experience of noh and in general by his being Japanese -- with his many international musical interests. Behind this problem, however, lay another on a much grander and historically deeper scale, namely the relationship between the art object and its creator, a relationship dramatically different in traditional Japanese art than in that of the West.

The experience of noh, over and above its special treatment of space and sound, which Yuasa dealt with consistently throughout his artistic life, profoundly affected Yuasa's understanding of subjectivity and artistic output. Leaving aside the debate on the relationship between noh and Buddhism, as well as the question as to whether such Buddhism was more Zen or more Tendai,[34] the subject which expresses itself in noh is, in the words of Yuasa,

> something separate from the heart of a person, even if it is without doubt linked to a human drama. For example, someone dies and this is a human drama between children and parents, as in *Sumidagawa,* but where is the drama set and in what dimension? That is the point…. Unlike *kabuki* in which the drama happens in real life, in noh, there is a temporal, cosmic ambience from another world, and in my own practice of noh as a child, I perceived a profound sense of affinity, of congeniality…It is a problem of subjectivity.[35]

The problem regarding Japanese subjectivity, both before and after the Meiji Restoration, has been endlessly debated. Recent work by Sadami Suzuki demonstrates an interesting point of view on the matter.[36] At the outset of the 19th century, with the first opening of international links, a movement was formed within Japan that proposed to reformulate the history of Japanese culture in romantic terms. Based on the legacy of Baigan Ishida's (1685-1744), who advocated social equality and liberty, the movement grew along lines whereby the artist, rather than articulating any form of subjective expression in the European sense, was expected to express *shinseimei*, a word difficult to translate and written with the characters for "truth", "life" and "destiny". *Shinseimei* is an expression of the profound current of life connected to an Absolute, particularly in relation to the participating being of the artist within a community.[37] Also attached to this term is a strong component of mysticism and spontaneity, which in relation to contemporary thought of the time Suzuki calls *life-*

centrism. This was an idea expounded by the philosopher Kitarō Nishida and profoundly rooted in a new speculation about, and conception of, Zen Buddhism, elaborated on in his widely diffused book *Zen no kenkyū* (A Study on Good, 1911).[38] Nishida's philosophy was dutifully delivered to Japan's youth during the war and was of particular interest to the intellectual élite at the University of Tokyo (at that time Teikoku Daigaku, the Imperial University). Yuasa, however, was slightly too young at the time and was more influenced by the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose ideas were first propagated in Japanese magazines in 1949/1950.[39]

In the first, fruitful years of the 1950s, Yuasa read Sartre like many restless youths of that era. He particularly embraced Sartre's vision of existentialism[40] and, as has already been emphasized by both composer and commentators alike, it is through Sartre that Yuasa formulated his own notion of "project", the intentionality of an action that is not subject to any reason other than its own, and that is not anything other than choice. As a consequence of adhering to this Sartrean idea, weighted with universal value, Yuasa began to elaborate a broader ontological content of composition, synthesizing European musical thought dating back to Herder[41] with his own compositional sensibilities. Yuasa understood Being not as Sartre conceived it, but rather as similar to the concept found within Asian culture, that of

> the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, which states that the ultimate truth is found precisely in the absolute emptiness (*kū*) of Tendai Buddhism, or in the Non-being (*mu*) of Zen, each of which completely denies the substantiality of all existence.[42]

This belief has continued to inform aesthetic, literary, poetic and artistic matters even up until recent times, in the form of the hybrid thought of the Kyoto school.[43] The radicalism of classical Japanese aesthetic concepts of refined charm (*yūgen*) and mysterious profundity (*yūhen*) in poetry and the arts, based on (and, according to a few thinkers, corresponding to) *kū* or *mu*, eventually dissolved into the pragmatism of new-Confucianism which has dominated Japan since the 19th century. It did not, however, change the most profound episteme of intellectual discourse, interiorized by those who understood and participated in the world of noh theatre like the young Yuasa. He, in any case, was an intellectual and musician-artist fully conscious of living in the second half of the twentieth-century. Yuasa's sensibility, already informed by the concept of Non-being as ultimate truth, also took into account ideas involving the individual, the human species, the cosmos, and the *mundane* existence of man's interest. This vision, in which humans are not