

One History, Two Canons? Japanese Contemporary Music and American Avant-garde Aesthetics

Fuyuko Fukunaka (Keio University)

Recent years have witnessed publications in English that shed new light on the use of “Eastern” elements in 20th-Century Western art music (Locke 1993; Bellman 1998; Corbett 2000). These studies convincingly expose various implications of the issues of motivation, appropriation, and mystification to be found in this “tradition,” let alone the questionable nature of the East-West dichotomy. At the same time, one vital yet fleeting question remains unanswered: in what way has the Western construct of “East” impacted the canonization of “Western” art music composed by non-Western composers? Moreover, the role played by the Western imagery of “East” in the (re-)configuration of the creative thoughts of those non-Western composers seems to warrant closer investigation.

In this study, I would like to examine how the history of post-war Japanese music has been greatly shaped by the creative responses of Japanese figures to the increasingly visible fascination with the Eastern philosophies, particularly of Japan and China, among American composers and other artistic figures. Pioneered by Cowell and later led by Cage, several leading American experimentalists sought aesthetics alternative to European avant-garde in the “Eastern” as they understood and defined in their own way. It partly resulted, in the US, in the canonization of certain types of music composed by Japanese figures that would match and, moreover, conveniently reinforce the Americans’ Eastern imagery. What is more, the resulting cultural politics, I argue, has more or less created one dominant canonizing trend of Japanese composers’ works back in their home country.

This paper examines the social and cultural aesthetics of such US avant-garde figures as Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Cage, who played a significant role in formulating the reception patterns of the works of post-war Japanese composers, such as Toru Takemitsu, Toshiro Mayuzumi, and Somei Satoh, in large US cities, e.g. New York and LA. The paper then explores how these patterns impacted--sometimes overtly re-shaped--, these composers’ creative languages. Through my discussion, I would in particular like to stress that the trajectory of post-war Japanese music has in part been the product of internalizations, among Japanese figures, of purely Western motivations.