

Notation as Canon: Post-War Japanese Composers and Indeterminate Notation

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This study examines the multifaceted roles that indeterminate notations have played in processes by which a group of post-war Japanese composers have established their own creative identity. Part of the premise of my discussion is that musical notation--whether traditional or indeterminate--has long functioned as a tool that would define musical canons.

It goes without saying that most composers in classical music use five-staff notation. The same also applies to popular music composers, although, admittedly, they may not be as well-versed in that notation (yet there is no convenient alternative to it so far). Indeed, training in music institutions, such as conservatories, is, to a large extent, about how to become skilled in the notation. Given this, one may even say that the traditional notation is that which has largely determined the trajectory of musical thinking--i.e., the formation of musical canon.

Therefore, when the concept of indeterminacy drew upon indeterminate notation to “lay out” music intentionally vaguely, it shook not only the very premise of traditional notation--that is, to precisely indicate the composer’s thought--, but also the foundation upon which the musical canon was long built. The renewed approach to notation, derived from Oriental thought, has, needless to say, made us aware of the importance of direct communications between the performer and the composer. The fact that many European composers have depended on the new notation when introducing non-Western musical elements in their compositions may therefore be interpreted as the emergence of a new musical canon.

Japanese composers long worked on how to “unite” their own musical tradition and that of Western music. Many of these attempts, however, had ended in notational deadlock. It is with the notation introduced by the Cage school in the 1960s, that Japanese composers have finally succeeded in the musical fusion they had long searched for. For example, such indispensable musical concepts as uncountable metricity, pitches outside of the system of equal temperament, and ensemble performance that unfolds with the performers’ own discretion, could now be expressed through indeterminate notation. Equally important, the new indeterminate notation has enabled post-serial European avant-garde to formulate new sound-worlds.

It may then be argued that notation has become something beyond a mere “means,” something that could set up new musical thinking. That is to say, if composers are to search for new music and to formulate a new canon, that effort should also go hand in hand with the pursuit of a new type of notation.