

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CULTURE, TRADITION, AND ARTS OF JAPAN ON CONTEMPORARY MARIMBA LITERATURE BY THE JAPANESE COMPOSERS KEIKO ABE, MINORU MIKI, AND AKIRA MIYOSHI

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My main motivation for discussing the topic of the marimba is the rapid development of this instrument, its techniques, and literature worldwide. Increasing interest in this issue has been seen among students of conservatories, academies, and universities. Due to the fact that most material devoted to the marimba and its music has been written in English, I decided to present one in my mother tongue, Polish, and eventually translated some excerpts into English. The topic covered in my thesis *The Influence of the Culture, Tradition, and Arts of Japan on Contemporary Marimba Literature by the Japanese Composers Keiko Abe, Minoru Miki, and Akira Miyoshi* was a missing link of understanding for a branch of marimba music composed in Japan. Through my paper I wanted to cover this need to understand Japanese aesthetics and its roots. Moreover, it is very important to raise awareness for implementing the aesthetic ideas while performing. I focus on presenting Japanese cultural influences in the following chosen marimba compositions: “Voice of Matsuri Drums” by Keiko Abe, “Marimba Spiritual Part I” by Minoru Miki, and “Ripple” by Akira Miyoshi. I found these compositions most suitable for highlighting the differences between European and Japanese aesthetics, and in the marimba world they are highly recognizable.

Since Japanese aesthetics are so unique, I decided to translate their idioms into a European way of thinking. When it comes to making a clear statement on “what Japanese culture is like” we need to understand the mentality of the nation, which has been evolved over many centuries.

In my lecture I focused on presenting three very important composers who had an immense influence on Japanese marimba solo and chamber music: Keiko Abe, Minoru Miki, and Akira Miyoshi. Each of the composers represented different stylistics, and their music refers to different fields of interest. One common idea between the three is rooted in Japanese aesthetics. In this category, Japan has many terms referring to poetry, monochromatic pictures, and other branches of art. Everything was connected with beauty, which depending on the era, had various types: *miyabi* (elegance), *aware* (melancholy), *sabi* (imperfection), *wabi* (noble poverty), *yūgen* (mysterious depth), or *iki* (charm, chic). Apart from these

specified names, it is possible to say that Japanese aesthetics lack one definition, and if there is any, it refers just to one attribute.

In music, what I found very mind opening, there is the concept of *ma*. In Japanese, *ma* directly means *space around objects*, and in music, *space around sounds*. It constitutes fullness from which sound is born and dies back, like the waves in the ocean.

Ma describes neither time nor space, but tensions that are being built around objects or sounds.

In European culture, this concept could be translated into the meaning of silence in music, such as a rest, pause, or fermata. Each of these symbols gives us a certain idea of its length, so silence is measurable.

All the phenomena mentioned above can be found both in traditional Japanese and contemporary music. Due to the very dynamic history and politics of Japan, music evolved into a unique art, and what we call now traditional Japanese music (court music) sounds exactly like it did about 300 years ago “thanks to” *sakoku*, the policy of closed borders.

Trends in contemporary Japanese marimba music compositions include:

Eastern Inspirations

- Atonality and using the full scale of the instrument,
- A unique approach to dissonance—a paranormal element—not from this world (*Nō* theater),
- Extreme dynamics,
- Creating and releasing tension,
- The *ma* concept,
- Polyphony and multi-layered structures.

Western Inspirations

- The Westernization of Japan after World War II,
- Influences of light music accompanying movie shots,
- Tonal music,
- Homophony deriving from piano music.

Japanese marimba composers of my choice

Keiko Abe (1937)

Abe's composing style derives from improvisation and her emotions. Thanks to her great experience as a performer, her improvisation comes naturally and is full of pure expression. Abe contemplates the sound and resonance of each marimba bar and can produce a whole spectrum of colors with the instrument. Abe consulted the works on Yamaha 6000, marimba which became her label instrument. Her compositions are unique in many aspects. She creates independent voicings above the bass chord sequences. She interweaves polyphonic structures and experiments with sound generating and sound generators—sometimes using very original objects (e.g. rattan shafts, slap mallets, carved sticks). She can create an unprecedented peaceful atmosphere of beauty and nature. In Abe's pieces, we can also find traditional Japanese elements, especially religious ones, present in *matsuri* (festivals). She is highly inspired by taiko drumming and the sounds of traditional Japanese drum ensembles.

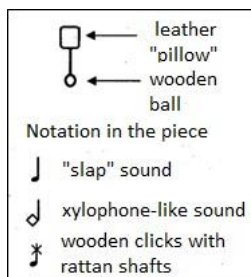
Minoru Miki (1930 – 2011) was an innovative composer connecting traditional instruments and contemporary music. In 1964 he established the Pro Musica Nipponia Ensemble and focused on composing his new music for this group. He also cooperated with Keiko Abe, composing new pieces for a marimba and percussion ensemble, which eventually became the most popular pieces in the marimba environment (“Time for Marimba,” “Marimba Spiritual”). He promoted traditional Japanese music worldwide and the *konketsu* idea. The term *konketsu* describes the cultural mixture present in Japanese arts. Its inventor was Minoru Miki. This idea is also very observable in the Japanese music presented in this lecture, but it is difficult to place it in one stylistic category. Apart from Eastern inspirations, the music is full of Western implications such as alternative instrumentation (in “*Marimba Spiritual*,” instead of the musician using the original taiko drums, the composer suggests tom-toms), very precise articulation, and descriptions for rests. Miki's music is full of contrasts and life, and it represents the spirituality of the nation: respect, contemplation, and joy.

Akira Miyoshi (1933 - 2013) also worked with Keiko Abe and composed pieces on her request, such as “Suite for Marimba: Conversation” (1962) and “Torse” III (1965). From as early as three years of age, Miyoshi, a child prodigy, played the piano. He continued his education in violin. In 1951 he was accepted to Toho University's French Literature Department and specialized in symbolism and existentialism. He simultaneously studied composition. In 1953 his “Sonata for clarinet, bassoon and piano” received first prize at the

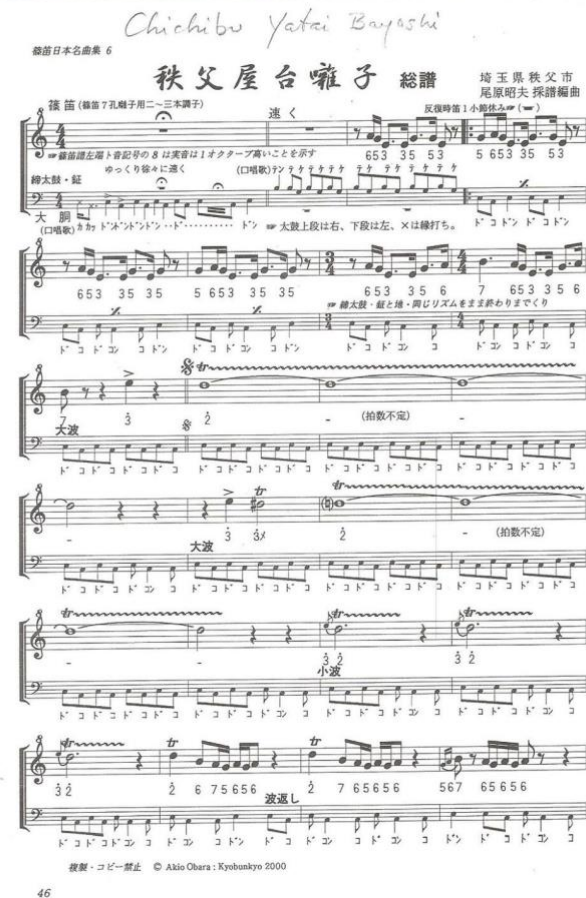
22nd Japanese Music Competition. In 1954 his “Symphonie Concertante for Piano and Orchestra” was awarded with a prize at Bunkacho Arts Festival. In 1955 Miyoshi went to France to study composition at the Paris Conservatoire Nationale Superieur de Musique in the class of Henri Challan and Raymond Gallois Montblanc. Miyoshi’s composition style, apart from its Japanese roots, was inspired by pieces by Henri Dutilleux. Between 1957 and 1960 Miyoshi focused on publishing his music, and from 1996 to 2004, he was the head of Tōhō Gakuen. In November 2001, Miyoshi was awarded the Cultural Merits Award.

“Voice of Matsuri Drums” (1992) Keiko Abe

Voice of Matsuri Drums uses special mallets to enable an integration of the traditional Japanese drumming style with the atmosphere of a Japanese festival (matsuri) into marimba music. The piece, composed in ternary form, develops as the pentatonic melodies are repeated on rhythmic patterns characteristic of traditional Japanese drums. In the middle section, the melodies float and submerge in a sea of arpeggios with *rubato*. The theme is then played again, this time augmented by special mallets against several rhythmic patterns, played with mallets with a hard rubber/wooden ball attached to the end of the stick. The balls strike the marimba bars repeatedly, without pause, increasing tension until the coda is finally reached.



Marimba Spiritual for marimba and percussion trio (1984) by Minoru Miki



This composition is dedicated to Keiko Abe. The title of the piece suggests its mystical and ceremonial character. It has an organic structure: the first part is a static *requiem*, and the second part represents impetuous *resurrection*.

Since in Japanese traditional music metal and wood in are the main materials used to make instruments – Miki introduces, apart from the marimba, *mokusho*, *atrigane* – *changiri*,

and different types of *taiko* drums deriving from Matsuri festivities.

In the first part, Miki refers to *shōmyō* Buddhist chants and introduces ritual temple instruments like the *kin* and *tempelblocks*.

The second part is based on a traditional

form

of *Chichibu yatai bayashi* (the picture to the left represents a traditional *yatai bayashi* form).

Characteristic ornaments played by marimba and sixteenth notes patterns are originally played by *fue* in *yatai bayashi*. Another original Japanese element present especially in drum solos are *kakegoe*—shouts and calls used in performances of traditional Japanese music, Kabuki theater, and in martial arts such as *kendo*.

“Ripple” (“Sazanami Hamon”) (1999) by Akira Miyoshi

This composition carries immense energy. Due to its multidimensional title there are many meanings we could find to create our own interpretation: a ripple could be splash, murmur of a brook, circles on water, electric pulsations, beats, or tremors from the Earth. These synonyms give a bigger picture about the inspirations of the piece. Miyoshi “painted” many scenes here and created many energetic culminations.

The composer states that the title “Sazanami Hamon” is the image of active magma under the Islands of Japan. The work’s dynamics illustrate the contrast between stillness and movement and express the rhythmic motion, which changes dramatically. This piece has both silence and loudness. Some parts are but whispers, but when the drama builds, it shows its full energy.

Emiko Uchiyama: “Emiko, Works for Marimba,”
review by Reina Naruta. 2009

From the formal point of view, *Ripple* is just a one-movement piece subdivided into four parts connected with each other *attaca*.