

1. Could you give us a description of your music; including which influences are important to it and what do you try to avoid when you are composing?

My music is an aural representation of my thoughts, and ultimately, my innermost identity as a human being. It is true that because of its abstract nature, music as a sounding artifact can hardly be a concrete representation of anything; after all, its signifier is vague. What you may hear in my music, then, is your projection of whatever my music may signify. As a result, there could be as many interpretations while listening to my music as number of audience members. I particularly welcome the individual experience[s] of how my music is heard, interpreted, and internalized.

Nonetheless, in order for the multitude of interpretations to take place, it is paramount that, as the first audience of my music, I must be convinced of the musical coherence. For this reason, I try to avoid carelessly letting go of notes onto the manuscript paper.

As for influences, there are too many to mention, not only artists and their artworks, but also life events. Each influence, however small it may be, has affected me and shaped the way I now think. So it is futile, if not impossible, to attempt to pick any of them.

2. How do you think is the impact of “being Japanese” in your music?

In relation to my previous response, I'd like to point out that the culture of listening is connected to the consideration of extramusical materials; we all do this, consciously or subconsciously. For example, seeing the names of the composers and imagining their origins, or even reading the program notes of the pieces that we encounter on the internet impacts the way the listener experiences the work. In other words, there are many places for listeners to be biased. With that said, I have never really considered the impact of “being Japanese” in my music. I work with diverse kinds of sounds and, as utopian a thought as this might be, I try not to have such biases at the level of evaluating each sound with which I weave my music. It is impossible for any sound—particularly when viewed as physical vibrations—to be inherently Japanese, or any other adjectives I may choose to describe the sound.

When considering each sound further, it becomes necessary to qualify it somehow. Inevitably, the idea of “locus of sound” must be considered. However, I try not to privilege or hierarchize certain cultures from which these sounds may emanate.

I am a person who was born in Hokkaido, the Northern island of Japan, to my Japanese father and my Japanese-American mother. I was raised there for sixteen years, and then continued my education in the United States. I studied composition with many different teachers, all of whom brought their own, unique perspectives. My path, thus far, has taught me to see and consider things, not only in a location-specific sense, but also in a global context. I might appear Japanese; however, I don't consider “being Japanese” when I compose. Admittedly, this makes my compositional process more difficult, because I do not and cannot rely on Nationalistic musical tools. But the result

Yoshiaki Onishi, composer (yoshiakionishimusic@gmail.com)

Answers to the four questions by David Durán Arufe

February 6, 2016

is worth the effort. As a composer who writes in the classical tradition that originated in Europe, I have to grapple with sounds and musical notes that have such heavy historical and intertextual weights. And these are the problematics for all artists, not just those of a particular race.

If I must contextualize my music and its impact of “being Japanese”—an idea not connected to the act of composing—then I would have to question what “Japanese” is. Before Japan opened up to foreign countries some 150 years ago, answering this would have been easier because of the limited choices in answering that question. Feudalism brought a particular system that was long cultivated, and within it, a very rich culture flourished. But in this world and age, things are more complicated. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make any generalizations of people (nor was it a good thing to do in the first place). Would any person who was born in Japan be automatically entitled to have the right to claim that he/she is Japanese? What if that person were of a different race? Would others then even start to think of that person’s “Japanese-ness?” Or would they think that the person is somehow European, or coming from different “origins,” despite being born on the island of Japan? I believe a more productive thought process is to wonder what “Japanese” *could be*.

3. The role (and job) of the composer has always been subject to change. What would you say are the challenges/tasks for the composer today?

The fundamental role of the composer has not changed since the idea of “composers” dawned in the Medieval era of (European) classical music, that is, as a composer, one needs to engage in the act of putting notes together, and be very skilled at that process. What has changed overtime is the methodology for carrying out such a compositional act.

The situations surrounding all composers (that is, composers *at-large*) are never alike. The ways in which composers’ beings are legitimized today are so diverse. The challenge, then, is to find one’s own way amidst so many ways that others have taken. It is easy to follow someone else’s path just because the path is already there, and that is less work for the successors. It is equally easy to be discouraged by the attention some types of behavior receives; I observe that this trend has been made even more polarized due to the rise of Internet social media and the first generation of composers who do not remember a time before social media.

Many of my former colleagues are now receiving major commissions and living every day of their lives fulfilling those commissions. I am very happy for them, of course, but I reject the idea that the number of commissions received is the sole way by which a composer’s success is measured. Despite not having a list of deadlines lasting for the next fifteen years, I am extremely fortunate to have musicians and colleagues who would lend their ears to my works.

I believe ardently in music, and a certain type of music that I happen to write. I have long wondered how I could maintain such a strong passion in an overly competitive world. Fortunately, there are two things that help me in that regard. First, I am currently teaching full-time at a conservatory in Tokyo. I admit that it is a lot of work;

Yoshiaki Onishi, composer (yoshiakionishimusic@gmail.com)

Answers to the four questions by David Durán Arufe

February 6, 2016

however, not only am I learning a lot from the teaching experience, but my job allows me to pursue my creative projects further. Second, I recently became the artistic director of a new ensemble of contemporary music, Ensemble Exophonie Tokyo. I conduct the ensemble, and as a composer I interact with wonderful musicians who could provide me with their expert opinions on their instruments. Because the process of composing is intensely solitary, it is all the more important that I may not forget the tie between my music and the external world. Engaging in a community of music making keeps me fresh and balanced in perspectives, and that is important for me when it comes to the act of composing as a series of decision making process. But this is my own path, and it may not be the perfect solution.

4. What is the answer after asking yourself: why do I compose?

Composing is an action that I do best to reassert my own being. And through that action, I am able to scrutinize my own being.