

Of Sound and Fury

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By Adaam James Levin – Aredy

I close my eyes and listen. Something's buzzing nearby. It's as though all the air in the room is being sucked up in a whirlwind of noise. Then... silence? No, something's still out there – a sound crawling, undulating anxiously. Then, an outburst of shrieks and whirrs and angular noises – the metallic bend of a saw, the scream of fingernails clawing down a blackboard – and a deep, low shudder underneath it all, it wants to come out but instead it cackles, water simmering on a low fire. I open my eyes and see the bows are laid down and the string quartet taking a bow.

What was that?

Short answer, that was *Culs-de-Sac*, a 13-minute-long piece of contemporary classical music composed by Yoshiaki (Yoshi) Onishi. When the piece was first performed in 2009, Onishi was still a first year doctoral student of music in Columbia University. Five years later, burnishing the final draft of his dissertation, 33-year-old Onishi already trails behind him a string of awards, including the coveted 2011 Gaudeamus Prize for young composers, and prestigious, international performances. He's a bona fide star.

Yet Onishi's music is not the kind you'd hum to yourself on the way from his concert. It's more likely to make you bridle for hearing it called music in the first place. Here, you won't find the ear-sweetening immediacy of popular songs, jazz-club jams, or even most traditional classical music.

Critic Anthony Tomasi of *The New York Times* described *Culs-de-sac* as "scraping, fluttering, trilling, quietly grating sounds" and meant that as praise. Fellow musicians would unflinchingly use the word "noise" to laud the piece. Prof. George Lewis, an esteemed experimental composer himself, called Onishi's music "audacious, both brash and introspective." Confident of Onishi's future among the music world's first rankers, Prof. Lewis took him under his wing as doctoral advisor at Columbia. "He will go on receiving more and more commissions and winning more and more awards as he takes his place at the top tier," he said. A rising star indeed, but in a world which, to many like me (a prisoner of indie-rock's diatonic tyranny), might seem not only foreign, but discomposing.

Short and firm-bodied, bespectacled and cleanly shaven, with neatly cut black hair and a hesitant, measured gait, Onishi is discipline in a coat of shyness. His head lowered, his thoughts adrift, he quietly wades around Columbia's Upper West Side campus, from teaching Music-101 to undergrads at Hamilton Hall, to the Doge gym for a daily afternoon workout, and then up to his makeshift garret – a little office on the roof of Butler Library – where he lucubrates nightly over music sheets and critical-philosophy books. Adorno, Barthes, Ueda, Lavy. Always in their original languages.

"What drives me is the sound itself, and what the sound wants to do," he said. Yoshi's voice is softened with traces of Japanese. He speaks slowly, carefully considering his words, enjoying word-culling too much to rush it. Pinching his lower lip into one of his tooth-hinting smiles, hiding a private joke, he added: "I don't want to impose myself on the sound. I want to stay behind the curtain."



Yoshiaki Onishi at Columbia University, New York, 2014.

So where do I start with Yoshiaki Onishi?

Maybe I should reel back. Early 20th-century "modern music" was a push back against Western tradition in general and the maudlin accent of Romanticism in particular. With new technologies and

ideologies popping up everywhere, forward-looking was the vogue and nostalgia palled. It was high time to imagine a new language for music to sever it from crowd-pleasing euphony. Keeping up with progress meant rethinking music completely, rendering it more cerebral and demanding; it meant avoiding predictable scales and the comfort of tonality; it meant accepting, even embracing, alienation.

By the time Yoshi Onishi was born, in 1981, modern music itself came to be considered a little hidebound. The modern traditions were sundered by competing ideas on what music should really offer – and to whom. Once perhaps a single language, classical Western music has now branched out into countless idiolects.

Where does Onishi fit into this? Apparently, his contemporaries have as hard a time figuring this out as I do. When the New Japan Philharmonic finished its performance of one of Onishi's pieces, *Tramespace*, in Tokyo last year, several sullen spectators stormed Twitter to jeer at his “un-Japanese” style. At Yale, he was often dismissed for straying too far from the “American tradition,” while at Columbia he was extolled for “transcending” (to quote prof. Lewis) any particular school or culture. “Yoshi’s music shows that there are no more schools, only individuals,” said Turkish contemporary composer Mahir Cetiz. “I would call him the multicultural composer.”

In some ways, Onishi’s work seems close to spectral music, a French technique from late 1970’s that involved experimenting with the subtle qualities and potentialities of sound. Inspired by Fabian Lavy, one of the forefathers of spectralism, Onishi mastered the art of drawing unthinkable sounds out of familiar instruments. He does so either by inventing new ways to play the instrument (“extended playing techniques”) or by finely whetting the edges of existing techniques. In accordance with spectral tradition, Onishi would occasionally use computer analysis in order to determine the audible extremities of certain instruments, or the acoustic capacity of certain materials – but never as an instrument. The result of those sounds mixed together is called “sound mass” or “tone shower” or “audible cloud.” And yeah, let me tell you, the world of *Culs-de-sac* isn’t quite like anything you’ve heard before, certainly not coming from a string quartet.

Is that it, though? Crafting new sounds? Is that what it’s all about?

Onishi grew up in Hokkaido, Japan’s northernmost island, in a little town called Nanae. Furling up a bit, as he does whenever he laughs, Onishi shook his head conclusively, saying, “the fish are great and the sushi tastes really nice, but that’s about the only good thing about Hokkaido.” Blushing, he admitted he doesn’t know how his parents met. “Whenever I’d ask, they would just laugh.”

His mother, Japanese-American, encouraged her family to speak English, but Yoshi fiercely resisted. “Deep down I felt compelled not to speak English. I felt embarrassed. You know the saying ‘the squeaking wheel gets oiled’? Well, we have a similar saying that means the opposite: ‘The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.’”

“My time in Japan was a conflict. I was bullied a lot,” he told me matter of factly. “I had a disproportionately big head, and I was not athletic – back when athletics was important, before Playstation came into play. My Japanese was also different, too proper, too polite. I wondered what it’s like to be a nail who’s the same as the others.”

Alone in his room, he’d spend hours reading volumes of children encyclopedias as if they were novels. When his parents got him a dingy little tape player, he began devotedly listening to classical music on Sunday morning radio. He also took up the clarinet in his school orchestra. Unlike anything else, music offered him a modicum of comfort, dignity and poise. So he secretly came up with a plan.

“I was feeling dormant in Japan,” he said, as though apologizing.

His father was skeptical about the move, even without knowing anything about the inchoate musical ambition that propelled it. Still, after exhaustive rounds of bargaining, he was swayed to let Yoshi go and stay with his mother’s family in California in order to study English – a valuable tool for a prospective engineer, after all.

Years of resisting his mother’s English made the change a shock. Unable to carry a conversation beyond cordial introductions and weather commentary, Yoshi grew acquainted with a whole new brand of loneliness.

“I had nearly no positive experiences in elementary school in Japan,” said Yoshi. “Yet in a way, my time in the U.S. was harder. Still. The moment I landed I didn’t want to speak Japanese anymore. I didn’t understand Japanese people who only hung around Japanese friends. The point is to learn English, not to console yourself in your own language.”

In “Sheltered English” class (which since got politically corrected to ESL) Yoshi met Mrs. Burnett. The first time Yoshi had one of his assignments graded by Jane Burnett, he was horrorstruck by the sight of burning, red ink consuming the entire paper. A careful look, though, revealed the attention, sensitivity, and respect that went into each correction. More importantly, this was the first time Yoshi felt moved by language, marveling at how the mind bends in order to grasp different schemes of grammar, and how different languages can paint different worlds. “It was all like a puzzle to me,” he said.

Mrs. Burnett spotted that immediately. “I noticed how excited and amused he was to discover words like ‘vituperative’ and ‘cacophonous.’ It was as if he’d been looking for these words and found them like buried treasure.”

Around that time, Yoshi also discovered composing. He spent hours in music classes, critically pouring over classical scores, and then hours more writing his own. Mrs. Burnett looked the other way whenever she spied him “composing surreptitiously” during her class. One time she asked her students to make a multimedia presentation. “I expected mostly visual illustrations, of course, so I was flabbergasted to get a kind of opera from Yoshi, written down in musical notation.” When later she showed it to another English teacher, a pianist himself, he summarized it simply: “He’s a one-in-a-million-student.” Mrs. Burnett still calls him that behind his back.

Before graduating, Onishi found himself increasingly attracted to contemporary classical music. Among his musician friends, listening to experimental pieces was considered a bit angsty. For Yoshi, it was just pleasure. “I felt physically blown away. I didn’t know you could do that in music.”

He went to Pacific College and then to Yale for grad school. Even today, when you mention Yale to him, he will either snicker sarcastically or fume with carefully preserved bitterness. Of all his struggles to fit in, this one was by far the most painful. He found that, all of a sudden, everyone around him was an accomplished composer, usually boasting more experience and “a lot more accolades and honors than me.” The harsher sting, though, was that everyone also knew something he was utterly ignorant of: how to play the game. As Onishi recalls, Yale career advisors and guest lecturers would persistently hammer home that success demands more than churning out innovative scores. He came away with the message that what success wants is a sleek, marketable composer, who can fulsomely wear just enough charm to palliate peers, blandish teachers and coax commissions.

Crestfallen, he approached one of his professors and confided in him that politics and schmoozing make him anxious, that he was afraid he won’t know how to sell his music, and that he was fearful his music wouldn’t get as many published reviews as career advisors expected. As Yoshi uncomfortably recalls, his professor broke out in laughter. “Well, you better get those reviews,” he said.

“He couldn’t find himself in that very social and competitive environment of Yale. He was very sad,” said one of the few long-term friends he made at Yale, Ayano Kataoka, a Japanese marimba player currently teaching at the University of Massachusetts. I met her at the Lincoln Center, where she’s a resident percussionist for the Chamber Music Society. “I don’t want to say traditional,” she chuckled, grinning fondly, “but Yoshi has this very Japanese-man spirit. You know, he’s very modest and...” she paused to consider, “yeah, a bit shy. But inside very strong.”

When I asked Yoshi about this “Japanese-man spirit” of his, he said in one of his gentle apologies, “It’s a way for me to show respect to others, and it’s the only way I know.”

“Yoshi and I felt the same way, I think,” said Kataoka. “Seeking to be appreciated, lost between different cultural institutions, and wanting to protest against all that.”

Frequent backhanded remarks from professors and classmates about his work didn’t help. “It felt as though cutting people down – with comments that had nothing to do with the music – was the fashionable thing to do.” It was that his music wasn’t “American enough,” or that the title of a piece was “too French,” or that his music wasn’t “music enough.” Nor did he ever receive any of the small awards the music school grants every semester to composition students, as symbolic tokens of validation. “That added kerosene to that already burning bridge,” he said.

In 2008 he started his Ph.D at Columbia. He locked away his past, looking for a fresh start. He even decided to get another Masters degree, as if to jettison any remnant of Yale. Three years later, Onishi’s roommate, also a composer, was selected to receive one of the eight sizable scholarships awarded annually by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Onishi, who himself never received an Academy grant, joined him for the ceremony in upper Manhattan. There, Onishi immediately recognized several of his old Yale professors, all prominent members of the Academy.

“I saw these people,” Onishi took a deep, jittering breath, “professors from Yale, and some younger people – teachers’ pets. And all of a sudden, all these memories came back to me. I felt that until these people are gone – for another thirty, or forty years – I will not be paid any attention.” Yoshi slowed down a bit, taking off his glasses to brush his fingers over his eyes. “It’s not even about attention, it’s this feeling of rejection. I remember I got a quick bite at Subway, on my way back. And,” he waited again, “arriving at the apartment with the sandwich I cried, thinking, God, I have no future here.”

Later that same year, Onishi was chosen as a finalist for the Gaudeamus prize. “I cried then, too. I guess I’m a cry baby.”

Onishi is currently working on a commission from Ensemble Intercontemporain. It’s a sequel to his 18-minute piece *Tramespace*. Unlike *Culs-de-sac*, *Tramespace* is full of silence. The tacit tension is disrupted sporadically by sudden squeaking and brushing and tapping and thrumming (a spider tangled in its own web) that gather momentum (you can almost hear the pattern!) and ebb. Then a squeal stretches tortuously and the room is suffused with ghastly overtones wrenching at your gut, the ghosts of a sound you’re not sure was really there in the first place.

Cetiz, whom Onishi replaced as assistant conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra, described this music as “looking into a kaleidoscope.” As Certiz said, “it’s Zen-like. It invites you to listen more actively.” While Onishi’s soundscape is indeed so ethereal and elusive that it almost goads the audience to pay closer attention, it’s hardly as tranquil as these similes suggest. His music is a world of fury – stirring, hypnotic and, in its unique way, fiercely emotional.

Yoshiaki Onishi. Photo by: David Adamczyk

Onishi creates this illusory mayhem with calculated precision. Nothing is arbitrary. Like a disjointed thought seeming to pop randomly in our mind, each note is in fact the result of a dense algorithmic process. Sitting at his office on top of Butler Library, Onishi designs time and space, and how these should vibrate into sound. Maybe he will start with an idea about a certain rhythm and an incipient pitch. Slowly, methodically he will examine what that pitch can do next, given the time, given the space. Gradually, those tiny notes, with their unique timbre, will aggregate into a complex of inconceivable textures. It could take months to plan and more to write. “Shubert wrote Erlkonig in one sitting; he just flushed his mental toilet and all the notes came as is. I realize I’m not that kind of guy. I’m the guy who constantly doubts.” More often than not, he will have had to make up original signs and notations to adequately instruct players how to eke those foreign noises out of their instruments.

“It starts by establishing sound behavior,” Cetiz took me through a typical Onishi craft, “then his music goes through subtle changes, as original themes persist, and then big contrasts.”

“But why even bother to have craft?” Onishi challenged me, and himself. “There’s a real desire to say something and that endowment is the driving engine in doing art. But something happens between inspiration and that final thing, the final product.”

Wait a minute. “Didn’t you say you only want to follow the sound? Stay behind the curtain?”

Again with the smile; again the private joke. “Glenn Gould had recorded two versions of Bach’s Goldberg Variations,” Onishi replied. “It was very rare for him to record the same piece twice, especially one this long. He had discovered, years after his first recording, things in the piece he didn’t hear the first time. What this means to me is that any experience is not understood completely, it’s only revealed in a certain chronological way. We then start to process what happened in our brain, when we start to understand the language. But there are things we will never ever know.”

Confused, I had to close my eyes and think for a minute. It reminded me of something. Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, in his 1915 essay “Revelation and Concealment in Language,” referred to the empty, inscrutable depths of our mentality as “personal chaos.” We want to believe that through words we might successfully convey a bit of our own chaos to others. Yet in truth, the words that make conversation or prose only bury our chaos deeper. Language exists in our minds as a web of personal memories, symbols and associations; words carry colors, fragrances and feelings that fill them with meanings unique to each of us. Whatever it is I’m really trying to say is first concealed by what the word means to me, then by what it means to my listener. The purpose of poetry, suggested Bialik, is to find new ways to hack at the hoary and set words free, the better to reveal the chaos.

Is this what Yoshi does in his music?

“I might go into child psychology a little bit,” Onishi started after pondering this. “Babies cry because they need some kind of attention. After a while, that crying no longer works, so they find phonemes to express what they want, which then turns into words, and sentences. Despite all that, there are moments, or feelings, that escape the words. Knowing four languages only highlights my incapacity to express certain things in a pristine way. When I think about it, that’s the kind of moment I need music to express. It’s at the same time an intellectual and a bodily need. It might have something to do with my childhood. Upbringing wise. When you’re repressed, you yearn to be free.”

Yoshi Onishi is a scientist – and a prisoner – of language, probing for a way to break out. He piled on words from four different languages, hoping it would afford him a more surgical voice to talk with, but knowing full well it also traps him in the process. So his music does away with grammar and words. Instead of telling a tale about Yoshi – whether of culture or loneliness, or of “vituperation and cacophony” – it recreates his entire world with new rules, not just of language but of physics too. On their own accord, his particles of sound will grate and screech and whirl for you, with all the chaos that could get anyone who dares put it to words hammered down. All you need to do is listen.

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