

# THE JAPAN FOUNDATION NEWSLETTER

VOL. XXVIII/NO. 1

AUGUST 2000



## On Other Pages

<b>Cultural Highlights</b>	
From the Japanese Press (January 1–May 31, 2000)	8
<b>Research Reports</b>	
Depiction of the Family in Contemporary Japanese Cinema	9
Masao Maruyama	12
Reclaiming Cultural Identity, Rejecting Deviance, and “Doing Homelessness” in Ueno Park	15
<b>Book Reviews</b>	18
<b>Foundation Activities</b>	
Exhibition of Children’s Picture Book Illustrations from Korea	20

The Japan Foundation Newsletter is distributed free of charge to individuals and organizations interested in Japanese Studies and international cultural exchange. Requests for subscriptions or for copies of articles that have appeared in the Newsletter should be addressed to:

The Editor  
The Japan Foundation Newsletter  
Media Department  
The Japan Foundation  
ARK Mori Bldg. 20F  
1-12-32 Akasaka, Minato-ku  
Tokyo 107-6021, Japan  
Tel: +81 (03) 5562-3532  
Fax: +81 (03) 5562-3501  
E-mail: [jfnl@jpf.go.jp](mailto:jfnl@jpf.go.jp)  
URL: <http://www.jpf.go.jp/>

If you are already a subscriber, we would appreciate being informed of any change in your address.

©2000 The Japan Foundation  
Reproduction of Newsletter articles in whole or in part is prohibited without permission of the author. After permission has been received, articles may be reproduced providing the credit line reads, “reprinted from *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, Vol. xx, No. xx,” and the Japan Foundation is notified. Printed in Japan. ISSN 0385-2318

Design by Becky Davis, EDS Inc., Editorial & Design Services, Tokyo

 国際交流基金

The Japan  
Foundation

## Sound Japan

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel

Several people sit in a simple tatami-matted room, enjoying the deliberate movements of the tea ceremony. All is silent except for the susurrant rattle of the teapot’s iron lid as steam rushes out. This murmur is punctuated by the soft whisks of the bamboo stirring brush.

A *shishiodoshi* bamboo ladle, set along the stream in a traditional Japanese garden, slowly fills with water. As critical mass is achieved, the liquid is dropped. The base of the ladle hits a stone on the rebound, sending a report throughout the garden.

In another part of the garden, a *suikinkutsu* jar, partially filled with water, is buried just below ground level. As water slowly drops into the jar from above, sonorous plops escape into the garden, audible only to those who wait, patiently, near the jar’s opening.

Cicada hum in unison from the luxuriant growth of summer. Later, as evening cools to night, the shrill sounds of their *bigurashi* cousins reverberate back and forth, as they call to each other; the same phrases repeated at different pitches and rhythms.

Sounds of a shakuhachi flute drift over the grounds of a quiet temple. The soulful tones lead directly to the heart, as if they were meant for none but oneself. Farther away, in the center of the city, the strains of shamisen lute music can be heard as a delicate punctuation to the traffic noises.

These descriptions of Japan’s soundscape are still not uncommon, although in the cacophony and din of the modern nation one must make an effort to search out such fleeting but richly satisfying sounds. This article will attempt to describe what sound has meant in an artistic and religious context in Japan and briefly outline the idea of “timbre aesthetics” in *hōgaku* (traditional Japanese music) and its relationship to cultural perceptions of sound. I will also describe how awareness of timbre (the tonal overstructure of sound that gives each instrument its characteristic sound) plays a vital role in traditional Japanese music and how modern Japanese composers approach timbre in their compositions. Lastly, the contradictions of the traditional receptivity to sound contrasted with the stressful sound pollution of modern Japanese society will be discussed.

**Ear Cleaning** Before discussing sound we need to talk about one of the most basic of all senses, that of listening. It is both easier and more difficult than most imagine. Above all, careful and sensitive listening is indispensable for the under-

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel, a twenty-eight-year resident of Japan, is a shakuhachi performer, researcher, and essayist. His recent discography includes *Zen Reveries*, for shakuhachi and synthesizer (Moonbridge, 1996), and *Heart of Bamboo* (Copper Canyon Press, 1999), a CD collaboration with the American poet Sam Hamill. His English-language publications include *The Shakuhachi: A Manual for Learning* (Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo Sha, 1988). His Japanese-language book (describing his experiences studying shakuhachi in Japan, the state of *hōgaku* in Japanese education, and his travels performing shakuhachi around the world) *Shakuhachi Odessei [Shakuhachi Odyssey]* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2000) was awarded the prestigious Rennyō Prize for nonfiction. He teaches, records, and performs shakuhachi and works as advisor to the arts program at the International House of Japan, in Tokyo. His Web site is at <<http://www2.gol.com/users/yohmei/>>.

standing of a culture and its music, and listening must be an active, as opposed to a passive, effort.

We describe our quotidian experiences with visual metaphors and relegate most sensory perception to that realm. Without considering the preponderance of the visual, we use such expressions as “What did you see?” “Take a look,” “Go sightseeing.” Rarely do we ask, “What did you hear?” and never do we say, “Take a listen” or “Go ‘soundhearing.’” Innate understanding of a situation is expressed with the succinct “I see.” Why is it we do not hear here?

Yet it is the auditory sense that gives us our true bearings in the world. Since sound waves actually penetrate our body and are processed by organs deep within the recesses of the ear, listening, like breathing, provides us with a sense of depth and connectivity with the outside world.

Our ears are never turned off. They reach out into the surroundings, like diligent detectives, picking up every rustle and whisper. Unlike our eyes, our ears cannot be closed, and therefore the brain creates a myriad of filtering mechanisms to keep out extraneous and/or unwanted sounds. Such filters are necessary in a world filled with unpleasant or meaningless noise, but when the filters are habitually left on, they create significant obstacles to sensitive hearing.

What is needed is to learn how to control the filters, clean out the ears, and reevaluate the sounds we chose to heed. Such “ear cleaning,” a kind of sensitivity training for the ear, was made popular by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer (b. 1933) in a course he designed for his students at Simon Fraser University in the late 1960s. In his pamphlet *Ear Cleaning*, he describes the process: “I felt my primary task in this course was to open ears. I have tried always to induce students to notice sounds they have never really listened to before, listen like mad to the sounds of their own environment and the sounds they inject into their environment.”<sup>1</sup>

Everyone—student, scholar, casual tourist to Japan, and, most important, the Japanese themselves—would do well to take a hint from this idea and pay more attention to sounds, especially if they are interested in enjoying and understanding Japanese music. To quote Schafer again, “Ears perform delicate operations, and therefore ear cleanliness is an important prerequisite for all music listening and music playing.”<sup>2</sup>

**A Cultural Sensitivity Toward Sound** “The Japanese are a people who have been endowed with a keen receptivity towards timbre from ages past,” writes composer Tōru Takemitsu (1930–96).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the earliest chronicles of Japan, the *Nihongi* (720), describes the creation of the land through the imagery of sound—a drum beat. “The noise like that of drums was the sound made by the

gods in constructing this island.”<sup>4</sup>

Where, exactly, does this cultural sensitivity toward timbre arise?

My feeling is that there is a basic and profound connection between sound and the spiritual/religious process of enlightenment, especially in the context of Zen Buddhism. Sound (including everything from song and musical tones to mundane animal cries and accidental sounds of nature) becomes a vehicle for elevating the mind onto higher levels. Like the sirens’ songs, a carefully placed sound has the effect of disorienting the mind, cracking open the door and allowing the soul to slip through into a new space. This can be frightening to someone who is not prepared, but to a person who has disciplined his or her mind through rigorous training and practice, it is a revelation.

Before turning to religious or musical examples to understand the importance of sound in the spiritual awakening, let’s take a look at some literary examples, many of which show a deep sensitivity and innate understanding of the relationship of sound and the listener. Perhaps the most well known is the famous haiku<sup>5</sup> of the frog by the celebrated poet Bashō (1644–94):

At the ancient pond  
a frog plunges into  
the sound of water

The setting is prosaic, but the result is an overwhelming of the senses with pure sound. As Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870–1966) explains it, “This sound coming out of the old pond was heard by Bashō as filling the entire universe.”<sup>6</sup> The sound crescendos to fill the world, subject/object dichotomy ceases, and a state of absolute annihilation of the senses occurs. The frog, the pond, and Bashō all cease to exist in the sound of water, yet still they are. All becomes just “the sound,” which is recreated for us in the haiku.

Other examples of Bashō’s haiku that ring in our ears include:

A cuckoo cries,  
and through a thicket of bamboo  
the late moon shines

Awakened at midnight  
by the sound of the water jar  
cracking from the ice

And my favorite:



Christopher Yohmei Blasdel.

Lonely silence,  
a single cicada's cry  
sinking into stone

The painter and poet Buson (1716–83) also was fond of using sound in writing. His sounds tend toward the dramatic; they jump out and hit the reader like the *keisaku* stick used on Zen meditating novices to keep them awake:

A lightning flash—  
the sound of water drops  
falling through the bamboo

The late evening crow  
of deep autumn longing  
suddenly cries out

The *thwack* of an ax  
in the heart of a thicket—  
and a woodpecker's *tat-tats!*

The poetry and stories left by Buddhist monks also contain a wealth of sound. The Zen priests' experience of *kenshō*, or sudden awareness of the true nature of things, was often instigated by some kind of sound. Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of the Sōtō Zen sect, was said to have attained enlightenment upon hearing the cry of a nightingale and the sound of bamboo splitting. Sounds, both musical and nonmusical, were also vital to the experiences of the famous Zen priest Ikkyū (1394–1481).

Throughout Ikkyū's *Kyōunshū* [The Crazy Cloud Anthology], a collection of Chinese-style poetry, there are many references to both music and sound as vehicles for enlightenment. Most revealing is his account of his own moment of *kenshō*, occasioned by the cry of a crow that Ikkyū heard while meditating on a small boat on Lake Biwa.

Now, as ten years ago,  
A mind attached to arrogance and anger  
But at the laugh of the crow  
As adept from the dust arises  
And an illumined face sings  
In the morning sun.<sup>7</sup>

In the Surangama Sutra, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (known in Japan as Kannon; this Japanese rendering of the original Sanskrit means “seeing/hearing”) gives a lengthy discourse on entry into the supersensible realm, or *samadhi*, through the organ of hearing. The trick for such self-cultivation is to realize the duality of nature and by doing so attain a transcendent state that embraces the opposites. Not an easy task, to be sure, but Kannon says that proper hearing is the most suitable for this exercise.

Through concentration on an external sound, a distinction is created between the listener and the source of the sound. Further meditation on the sound, however, leads into a realm where there is no distinction between

the listener and the listened, between the action and the deed, between life and death. This, stresses Kannon, is the true way to control the mind and look into the essence of nature. It is rather like listening to a frog plunge into the sound of water.

Mantra Yoga—the intoning of certain holy syllables, usually consisting of the name of the historical Buddha—was extensively used as a means for attaining enlightenment. Such “sound yoga” is a mainstay of Buddhism. It is much easier to recite a mantra than it is to concentrate on breathing or to visualize various mandala, because anyone, regardless of learning, can recite prayers or intone mantras. It is no wonder many popular present-day Buddhist sects emphasize chanting as a means to salvation.

### Attaining Enlightenment Through One Tone

The shakuhachi, of all Japan's musical instruments (besides the voice itself), has the longest connection with spiritual seeking.<sup>8</sup> A popular epithet among shakuhachi players, *Ichin jōbutsu* (“attaining enlightenment through a single tone”), suggests the depth that can be attained through simply playing and concentrating on the single tone.

The idea of tone as spiritual salvation is central to the theme of the *Kyotaku Denki Kokuji Kai*, a shakuhachi-related document published in Edo (present-day Tokyo) at the end of the eighteenth century. This document outlines the putative origins of the Fuke shakuhachi sect, which flourished during the Edo period (1603–1868).

The document begins with the story of an actual Zen monk, Fuke, who lived in China in the seventh century. The eccentric Fuke walked about, ringing his bell and speaking such bewildering sentences as “If attacked from the light, I will strike back in light, if attacked from the dark, I will strike back in the dark, if attacked from all four quarters, I will strike back as the whirlwind. If attacked from emptiness, I will lash out like a flail.”

The purpose of Fuke's cryptic words, along with the sound of the bell, is much like the present-day koan used in Zen meditation, in which a series of sounds and nonlogical ideas act to jog the quotidian consciousness enough to let the reality of another, more spiritual dimension enter.

The document continues with the story of the novice monk Chōhaku, who tried to persuade master Fuke to teach him the secrets of bell ringing. Fuke refused, so Chōhaku fashioned a flute and named it *Kyotaku* (literally, “that which is not a bell”). His idea was to imitate the bell's ringing with the flute. Various shakuhachi pieces extant today with the name “*Kyorei*” or “*Reibo*” suggest the shakuhachi's imitation of Fuke's bell.

The *Kyotaku Denki* also describes the origin of the wandering monks called *komusō*. The *komusō* were a common feature of the Edo-period landscape. Wearing deep



A group of modern-day komusō at the World Shakuhachi Festival 1998, in Boulder, Colorado.



A sankyoku-style shakuhachi ensemble. From left to right: Mariko Yamamoto on koto, Satomi Fukami on shamisen, Christopher Yohmei Blasdel on shakuhachi.

basket-shaped hats, these monks walked the countryside, visited various Fuke temples, and played shakuhachi. Their aim was spiritual enlightenment through sound, a practice they called *suizen*, “blowing Zen” (as opposed to *zazen*, “sitting Zen”). They enjoyed considerable protection by and support from the government and, in a time when internal travel in Japan was stringently controlled, they were allowed to move around freely. *Komusō* were also highly visible in the literature, theater, and woodblock prints of the time; in the Kabuki play *Suke-roku*, the eponymous protagonist is a shakuhachi-wielding *komusō* dandy.

Although the historical references in the *Kyotaku Denki* were specious and the *komusō* had grown quite decadent by the Edo period’s end, their original motives were pure. They used the shakuhachi as a discipline for enlightenment and blew their flutes with the realization that just one tone has the power to bring about buddhahood.

**Aesthetics of H gaku** Much Japanese music, especially of the Edo period, was not overtly religious; nonetheless, it was influenced by Buddhism and the awareness of sound as a holistic experience.

Japanese musical tastes and aesthetics vary, of course, according to historical period, but love of timbre seems to transcend all the ages, continuing into the present. A highly evolved awareness and use of timbre is, therefore, a definitive aspect of traditional Japanese music. Both the music and the instruments are structured in a way that requires the performer to consciously manipulate tone color in order to bring about the full effect of the music, and appreciation of the various timbres is a key to understanding the music. It is also a key to appreciating much Japanese contemporary music.

Again, literature provides us with an example of ancient Japanese sensibilities toward sound. An important subtheme in the *Genji Monogatari* [Tale of Genji], the novel describing Japanese court life of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, is the feelings and sentiments provoked by the timbres of various *hōgaku* instruments, such as the *biwa* lute, shakuhachi vertical bamboo flute, *fue*

transverse bamboo flute, koto thirteen-stringed zither, *shō* bamboo mouth organ, and *bichiriki* double-reed vertical flute. Many of the characters in *Genji* played these instruments, which were used in the *gagaku* classical court orchestra of the times.

The individual timbres of the above-mentioned instruments all differ according to the unique sonic properties of their construction and playing techniques, but a few common aesthetic points are evident. One of these is the idea of the perishing tone. Rather than the beginning, or incipit tone, the tone that remains and lingers into fade-out is more important; and many techniques, like *biki-iro*, *oshide*, *ato-oshi*, *tsuki-iro*, and *yuri-iro*, executed on the perishing tones of the koto are employed to alter and ornament the perishing tones.

Another salient aesthetic point, common to all instruments, is the use of “nonmusical” sounds. In nineteenth-century Western orchestral music we are much accustomed to hearing pure sounds, with no scratching of the strings or breath in the wind instruments. Indeed, such extraneous noise suggests musical incompetence. Not so in traditional Japanese music. Scraping the strings of the koto, breathy sounds on the shakuhachi, and the unique pitches from the *kotsuzumi* hand-held drum are highly appreciated as the pinnacle of the art. Especially intriguing is the *sawari* twang of the shamisen, a three-stringed plucked lute that came into Japan via China and Okinawa in the sixteenth century and quickly became the most widely used instrument in Japan. Somewhat reminiscent of the twang of the Indian sitar, *sawari* is created by allowing the shamisen string to come into slight contact with the hard wood of the instrument’s neck. The result is a slightly impure ringing of sound that remains and builds in intensity after the string is plucked.

Japanese instrumental timbres are greatly influenced by and imitative of natural sounds; wind in the pines, insect cries, waves, etc. In fact, many Japanese-music scholars have suggested that the premodern Japanese didn’t make strict distinctions between the sounds of nature and the sounds of art music.

A third aesthetic point—closely related to the others

—is the fact that traditional Japanese music is extremely economical and uses very limited materials to create the maximum effect, something often pointed out in the lectures and writings of the noted Japanese-music scholar Dr. William Malm.

Simplicity can be observed, foremost, in the construction of the instruments themselves. For example, the shakuhachi is basically a piece of hollowed bamboo, fifty-four centimeters in length, with five finger holes and a simple mouth-piece insert, yet there are endless possibilities for producing a variety of timbres. Likewise, the three strings of the shamisen are able to handle extremely complicated melodic lines that often undergo rapid modulations.

It is because of these structural and sonic limitations inherent in the instruments and music that the individual tone and its timbre take on such importance. The single tone and its timbric richness create a microcosm of total aesthetic expression, much as the sparse lines of a haiku poem suggest images that reach far beyond the actual words.

Any serious discussion of traditional Japanese music and aesthetics should include the rich vocal tradition—from the *shōmyō* Buddhist chanting to the dramatic recitative and song of the *gidayū* in the Bunraku puppet theater. Song comprises more than eighty percent of all Japanese music, and timbre in voice is just as important as it is in instrumental music.

Space constraints prevent a further and detailed analysis of these aesthetic points, but I believe that any listener with a sensitive ear can hear and respond to them. Awareness of this aesthetic makes a heretofore formidable and distant tradition accessible and understandable; it is also the key to understanding the process by which many successful contemporary Japanese composers approach their work.

**Timbre in Contemporary Compositions** In discussing contemporary Japanese composers, it is helpful to realize that until relatively recently there has been a distinction between composers who were trained in Western compositional techniques, with influences primarily from German, French, and more recently, American composers, and those composers whose musical influences stemmed from their association and immersion in traditional Japanese



A shakuhachi.

music. The Western-trained composers worked to assimilate mostly European-style orchestration and musical sensibilities, while the *hōgaku* composers, who were for the most part performers themselves, worked upon expanding the limits of their tradition. It is only recently that the Western-trained composers have begun to cross over and experiment with Japanese instruments in their compositions, perhaps the most famous and earliest example being Tōru Takemitsu's 1964 composition *November Steps*, which successfully combined the shakuhachi and *biwa* with a Western orchestra.

In their own thinking, most Japanese maintain a conscious division between *hōgaku* and Western music, due to a very Western-oriented music-education system and a feudalistic structure pervading the *hōgaku* world. Takemitsu was no exception. It was at the suggestion of John Cage that he began using the shakuhachi for his composition.

Because of the very nature of *hōgaku* instruments, however, it is easy to ensure traditional aesthetics in contemporary compositions that use these instruments—indeed, that is the reason many composers write for them in the first place. What I want to point out here is how *hōgaku* techniques and subtleties are translocated to Western instruments to obtain a similar effect.

In this, Takemitsu was a master. His style, characterized by long, deftly articulated phrases that move through time, seems to pay a kind of homage to the traditional aesthetics of timbre. “The sensing of timbre is none other than the perception of the succession of movement within sound.”<sup>9</sup> Timbre in *hōgaku* also plays a very important spatial role. Whereas in Western classical music the highly developed harmonic system confers a sense of spatial expansion and structure, the individual tone color and its minute variations do the same for traditional Japanese music. Takemitsu unites the spatial and temporal aspects as he creates fascinating timbres that metamorphose through time. For him, this shifting of sound “is symbolized by the word *sawari* (which also has the meaning of touching something lightly), something of a dynamic state.”<sup>10</sup>

Takemitsu also allows for various “nonmusical” sounds in structuring his work; an appreciation of natural sounds reminiscent of *hōgaku*. This use of cacophony in well-tempered music can be heard in his *musique concrète* compositions, such as *Ki* (Tree, for temple bells, prepared piano, and wooden instruments) and *Yuki* (Snow, for shakuhachi and stone instruments). This latter piece, helped by the consummate ability of the shakuhachi to alter tonal colors, celebrates timbre through both time and space.

Ryōhei Hirose (b. 1930) is contemporary with Takemitsu and was also trained in Western compositional techniques. Although the majority of Hirose's works are for Western orchestral instruments, he writes much

more extensively for Japanese musical instruments than did Takemitsu. Nonetheless, Hirose's pieces for Western instruments demonstrate a similar approach to the importance of timbre in providing temporal and spatial depth.

Especially important for Hirose's development of timbre aesthetics is the shakuhachi. "For better or worse, the tone of shakuhachi is the soul of the Japanese."<sup>11</sup> The absolute control of the breath, the wide range of musical dynamics, and the subtle possibilities of variation in rhythm and melisma (the elongation of sung vowel sounds) were aspects of this instrument that Hirose could incorporate into his music. The list of compositions Hirose wrote for the solo or duo shakuhachi from the early 1970s through the 1980s is quite impressive,<sup>12</sup> but equally interesting are the works for solo or small-ensemble Western wind instruments that are clearly influenced by shakuhachi techniques. Perhaps the best examples are the series of compositions he wrote after several trips to India in the 1970s.

*Kalavinka* (1973), for recorder, oboe, strings, and percussion, has for its theme the mythical bird of the same name, which lives in the Western Paradise of the buddha Amida (Amitabha or Amitayus). The oboe sings back and forth (reminiscent of bird calls) with the recorder in a call and response technique, *kakeai*, that is found throughout Edo-period shamisen and koto music. *Pippala* (1973) features a bassoon playing delicate portamentos, microtones, and nonmusical sounds (overblowing and double tones) in very meditative, long phrases (the name of the title signifies the bodhi tree under which the historical Buddha attained enlightenment). The bassoon strongly suggests a shakuhachi timbre, and the harp punctuates these tones with short arpeggiated chords, sounds very much like koto techniques that alter the perishing tones.

Of this series, however, perhaps the most significant composition is *Paramita* (1973), for solo alto flute. The playing techniques of the flute are very closely patterned after the shakuhachi. These techniques include a dynamic overblowing of the sound, which produces an explosive rush of air (*muraiki* on the shakuhachi), delicate portamento and pitch bending (*nayashi*), finger trills (*korokoro*), and the long, meditative tones that are the shakuhachi's hallmark.

Lastly, let us take a look at the work of a postwar-generation Japanese composer. Somei Satoh, born in 1947, combines in his music a high degree of sensitivity to traditional timbre with the powerful expressionism of nineteenth-century Romanticism and the cleverness of electronics. His sonorities of sound and the sensation of pulse in his music—almost like the vibrations of the vocal *kobushi* melisma found throughout all Japanese vocal music—create, as in Takemitsu's work, a sensation of the tone that exists only for the sake of itself, and in which time seems to be caught in a rhythmic "limbo." In Satoh's

own words, "My music is limited to certain elements of sound and there are many calm repetitions. There is also much prolongation of a single sound. I think silence and the prolongation of sound [are] the same thing in terms of space."<sup>13</sup>

The title piece of Satoh's CD *Litania* is for two pianos with a digital delay. The piece uses the reverberative aspects of the piano (aided by the electronic delay), with which a basic tremolo is repeated, ever undulating in intensity and volume. "This creates a sonic interference resulting in an extremely rich harmonic texture, which is further intensified by the overlaying of second or third piano."<sup>14</sup> In addition to the intense concentration of the tonal sonorities, we have in this composition another aspect that is common to *bōgaku*, that of creating the maximum effect with the minimum amount of material. Although compared with traditional Japanese instruments, there is nothing minimal about a piano, Satoh is able to create on it the effect of great economy, and among the rich tapestry of quick tremolos and massive pianic reverberations, one begins to hear drones that suggest the lucid intensity of the single tone.

**Modern Insensitivity to Sound?** Now that we've seen how awareness of the beauty of timbre and the single tone informs and enriches Japanese religion, poetry, and music, let's go back to the elegiac soundscapes evoked at the opening of this essay. They make Japan sound like the most sonically pleasing place on earth; a nation of silence punctuated only by most delicate and sublime sounds.

Actually, the opposite is closer to the truth. Like all urban spaces, Japanese cities are filled with noxious noise from trains, cars, and planes that bombard the ears from all directions. The interiors of buildings, walkways, and shopping streets that might escape the noises of the city are filled instead with announcements and incessant background music.

Ride any escalator in Japan and you are reminded, by hidden loud speakers, to keep a firm grip on the handrail and on your children and remain standing in the center. Bus rides are punctuated with shrill voices announcing the bus stop in between commercial advertisements and warnings that the brakes might be applied suddenly so you should hold on tightly. While queuing for a museum show, young men with intimidating loudspeakers order you to stay in line and get your tickets ready. In between the loud bells and inane little melodies announcing the train doors' closing, the station attendants on the platform yell at the passengers through loudspeakers, ordering them to stop running for trains.

Perhaps it would be better in the countryside, one might think, but it is actually worse there. A townwide speaker system informs the residents, minute by minute, of every meeting and town activity. Escaping to moun-

tains or beach offers no relief either. The sounds of wind through the pines and the swish-swish of skis plying fresh snow on the ski slopes are now replaced with loudspeakers blaring heavy-beat popular music throughout the mountains. On the beaches, loudspeakers periodically exhort the beachgoers to swim within the buoys, exercise before entering the water, not drink too much liquor, and be careful of the tides, hot sands, pickpockets, and food poisoning. Whence the healing sounds of the waves and water?

Some of the modern-day cacophony, especially the ubiquitous use of loudspeakers, can be explained in terms of power. Simply put, the bigger sound system you have, the more power of control you exert over the listeners. Volume reigns supreme. That is one reason for the ubiquitous loudspeakers mounted on the trucks of politicians and right-wing groups in Japan, blaring rhetoric in megadecibels. Content of message is secondary; what is important is the overpowering violence of the sound itself.

Even well-intentioned announcements in public places can be obnoxious; for example, periodic train announcements telling the passengers not to use cellular phones. Such announcements tend to cause more bother than the cell phones themselves. My favorite example of irritating “helpful” announcements is the endless tape at the famous rock garden of the temple Ryōan-ji in Kyoto “explaining” to the visitors how to enjoy the peace and stillness of the environs.

The majority of these announcements are completely useless, except, perhaps, as examples of how the Japanese people tend to be prodded and controlled in public places. What is most troubling about their presence, however, is that they indicate a severe lack of awareness by the Japanese of their soundscape. Very few Japanese realize how ubiquitous sound pollution—and its concomitant stress—has become. Yoshimichi Nakajima, in his 1996 book *Urusai Nihon no Watashi* [Noisy Japan and Me], gives excellent examples—some of which I’ve used here—of the prevalence of noise in public places and how it generally passes unnoticed by the general population. These sounds manipulate, control, and ignore the rights of the silence-loving minority, all in the name of the “public good.”

Japanese society embraces many contradictions, and attitudes toward sound is one of them. On the one hand there is Bashō’s frog, and on the other is background music. It might be easy to conclude that the Japanese have lost their cultural sensitivity to sound, but that is not exactly correct. It is precisely because the Japanese were traditionally receptive to and tolerant of all kinds of sounds that present-day society is such a cacophonous helter-skelter. The filters need to be readjusted to allow a conscious and intelligent decision about which sounds to accept and which to reject. Along with modernization and its attendant problems, sounds have changed, and

now we have the ranting rightists or nanny-like admonitions in public places overpowering the insects cries, bamboo splitting, or plaintive plunks of the shamisen.

What is needed, more than ever, is awareness and selectivity, that people realize the problems of negative, destructive sounds in the environment and regain an appreciation of the subtle qualities of timbre that make the Japanese soundscape so spiritually rewarding. I have found training in *bōgaku*