

## The Shakuhachi as a Deconstructive Epistemology: Toward an Ecological Vision of Music Education

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*Of what a pine tree is, learn from the pine*

*Of what bamboo is, learn from bamboo*

The above poem, composed by Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), may appear to be a riddle in the eyes of many people residing in contemporary society. A pine tree does not speak by itself, nor does a piece of bamboo seem to hear utterances of human beings. This poem, however, suggests a phenomenological approach to nature—so common to all human beings long ago—by which people tune into the mode of nature and experience it as it is. Such an embodiment of nature is not achieved by scientific reasoning or deductive thinking, nor is it approached through referring to a transcendental God or understanding subject matters of the arts. Bashō seems to suggest that the embodiment of nature is gained by experiencing the relational positioning of human lives and the ontological indifference of all beings.

This ecological view is once again finding its place within contemporary societies: An increasing concern about environmental disruption and sustainability has directed our attention toward native traditions and spiritual ecology.<sup>1</sup> The result is ongoing discussions in many fields including, but not limited to, environmental philosophy (Bowers, 1995; Bruun & Kalland, 1995; Callicott & Ames, 1989), anthropology (Ellen & Fukui, 1996; Posey, 1999), social science (Catton & Dunlap, 1980), environmental studies (Ellen, Parkers, & Bicker, 2000), indigenous aesthetics (Leuthold, 1998), ecofeminism (Gradle, 2007; Kronlid, 2003; Riley-Taylor, 2002), ethnomusicology (Feld, 1982, 1996, 2001; Yamada, 1997, 2000), and education (Cajete, 1994; Miller, 1996; Nakagawa, 2000). The emerging ecological worldview posits that human activities, not excluding music making, are part of the processes of nature. For example, Bateson (1972) and Capra (1996, 2005) reveal that human mind activities are connective to the ecological patterns of a large system and thus situated in, interrelated to, and dependent on the environment.<sup>2</sup> This acknowledgement, in turn, calls for an alternative pedagogical approach that promotes relational knowing rather than isolated, objective analyses of the world (Bowers, 1995; Riley-Taylor, 2002). Such a relational understanding of human nature questions anthropocentric approaches to knowledge production in many areas, including music education.<sup>3</sup>

Framed within the ecological paradigm, I attempt in this essay to highlight a nature-situated orientation to music making through the case of Japanese music that emphasizes practitioners' interactions with nature. My thesis is that such practice, typically found in native traditions of music (e.g., Feld, 1982, 1996, 2001; Levin & Edgerton, 1999), underpins the view that music is a process of human beings' attentive encounters with, negotiations with, and immersions in nature; music is inspired by, modeled after, and performed in nature.<sup>4</sup> As such, nature is experienced through the very practice and making of music.

An example of such practice is realized through the *shakuhachi*, a type of end-blown bamboo flute. Although *shakuhachi* practice is typically understood to be a form of Zen meditation (Gutzwiller, 1984), I suggest that it can also be understood as a representation of vernacular ecology—a point often overlooked in the intellectual realm and thus a focus of my project. The idea of ecology relates to the very origin of each individual *shakuhachi* qua instrument: Because each instrument is made from natural elements, each product has its own unique musical qualities that depend on the nature of the individual bamboo segment. Each *shakuhachi* is thus an embodiment of nature; and *shakuhachi* music is a form of Japanese music that is performed and appreciated in line with, not opposed to or separated from, the experience of nature (Kikkawa, 1984). Spirituality and ecology are two key aspects that are crucial to understanding such musical

traditions in Japan (Matsunobu, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

My attempt in what follows is an exploration of a linkage among spirituality, ecology, and aesthetics in music practice. It involves unraveling the epistemology of the shakuhachi practice by drawing on the aesthetic continuity between music and nature. A close investigation of the shakuhachi practice through an indigenous knowledge framework reveals the ecological dimension of music making.<sup>5</sup> I extend my discussion further to reflect on the anthropocentric view of music making as the underpinning of today's music education.

### PRESERVED NATURALNESS

In the practice of the shakuhachi, elements of nature can be integrated on each level of instrument making, performing, and listening to music.

The instrument is traditionally made out of a single piece of bamboo with minimal artificial modification in order to maximize the character that the individual bamboo segment naturally bears. Unlike modern shakuhachi instruments that come apart into two pieces, the traditional ones are one-piece flutes. Whereas the modern type of the shakuhachi is made with a filling material, called *ji*, put inside the bamboo segment in order to control the diameter of the inner bore of the bamboo and thus to produce tuned pitches, such a process is not identified with the traditional shakuhachi.<sup>6</sup> With the latter, the original shape, length, and thickness of the bamboo segment are intentionally preserved so that each product bears inherent musical qualities in terms of timbre, pitch, playability. These qualities are enriched further by individual makers who have different tastes regarding the thickness of the walls and the hardness of the bamboo (Tukitani, Seyama, Simura, & Lee, 1994). The result is an instrument that is much less processed and resembles closely to its natural state. It is precisely this characteristic of the traditional shakuhachi that roots each product in a particular location and time and that individualizes it to each maker and player.

The preserved naturalness is experienced at the very essence of music by traditional shakuhachi practitioners. Such an experience is portrayed by Loori (2004) upon listening to the legendary shakuhachi master Wadazumi Dōso (1911-1992). Loori writes:

Dōso didn't use the highly polished lacquered and well-tuned flutes... His flute was much less processed and far closer to its natural state. The inside of the section he used still revealed the bamboo guts. Most people, even experienced masters, considered that kind of instrument unplayable. Dōso's music proved that wrong. His playing always touched the very core of one's being. Sometimes the sound had a tremendous strength, like the driving force of a cascading waterfall. Sometimes it roared like thunder. At other times it was gentle and sweet like birdsong at sunrise. It always seemed to reach me, but not through my ears: It entered my body through the base of my spine, moved upward, and spread through my being. (pp. 171-173)

The idea of preserving naturalness in the process of instrument making is also found in the making of the *nōkan* and the *biwa*, two other traditional Japanese instruments. These instruments are intentionally "retrograded" (Imada, 2003) so that they sound in a way close to nature. They are inevitably harder to play in comparison to modern instruments that are made in the way to maximize the instruments' functionality. However, the sounds produced from these instruments are described as strong, ambiguous, complex, profound, and deeply resonant (Matsunobu, 2007).

According to Takemitsu (1995), this reduction in functional playability is potentially "creative" in the sense that "it is an intentional inconvenience that creates a part of the expressiveness of the sound" (p. 65). The idea of leaving inherent naturalness within the instruments eventually brings forth potential for musician to be more creative.

Dewey (1934/1980) reasons that artists enjoy working on inconvenience and tension brought by natural objects. He observes,

Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their

potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total. (p. 15)

Bare, natural materials (in his example, clay) do not easily allow human beings to do what they would like these materials to do. But when the resistance is overcome, an experience follows. Dewey observes that this is how artists create new forms of meanings around works of art. Such artists include Wadazumi, whose musical inspiration is gained through first-hand interactions between the self and the world for the unity of experience. Rather than searching for functionality, they accept the inconvenience of the instruments in favor of the experience of music and nature. Indeed, these musicians unreservedly yield to the distinctive characteristic of each bamboo piece as is, assimilating *themselves* to it, instead of altering it in favor of functionality.<sup>7</sup> They get used to each bamboo segment in time while developing a sense of attachment and ownership. With such sensitivity, they enjoy its inherently varied musical qualities and resulting individualized music making.

### EXPERIENCING NATURE THROUGH MUSIC

One can feel at one with nature while listening to the shakuhachi. Japanese composer Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996) reports his “tuning-into-nature” experience through Wadazumi’s shakuhachi performance. Takemitsu was in a small room at a Japanese restaurant listening to Wadazumi’s rare live performance over dinner. Wadazumi used a bare bamboo flute that was as long as his height and made into the shakuhachi by children. In about twenty minutes after Wadazumi started performing, he requested Takemitsu to open the windows, despite the noises coming from the outside, as he felt that the room was too small and lacking *ki* (*qi* or *ch’i* in Chinese) energy. Shortly into Wadazumi’s performance, Takemitsu was once again mesmerized by Wadazumi’s serene music so much so that he felt as if the sounds of the shakuhachi, the boiling water in a hot pan, and the traffic passing by, all became one in harmony; yet his sensitized perception captured each sound resonating even more clearly and vibrantly. Wadazumi stated after the performance: “You must have been listening to the sound of boiling water.” Takemitsu abashedly told Wadazumi that he, indeed, had been listening to the sound of boiling water. Wadazumi answered assuredly and unhesitatingly, “That water sound you listened to is my music.” Takemitsu (1995) explains that, because of the nature-like sound of the shakuhachi, it became merged into the cosmos: The sound of the shakuhachi disappeared between the phrases, followed by serene silence (called, *ma*), in which nature participated and started vibrating musically.

It should be noted that the idea of nature for these artists does not have to be “beautiful nature” or “wild nature” but needs to consist of an integrative context.<sup>8</sup> Wadazumi’s embracive attitude toward surrounding sounds explains his naturalistic approach to music making:

Soon after the performance started, an LAPD helicopter flew into the area and hovered overhead. TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! Dōso’s flute immediately picked up the rhythm and developed a counterpoint. An infant cried. Dōso’s flute responded. A car drove by at high speed. The flute whizzed with it. Dōso’s concert included the totality of all the sounds that were happening around us. He blended, merged, answered everything he heard, incorporating it into his experience and expression, rather than being distracted by it. (Loori, 2004, pp. 171-173)

Nature-inspired artists such as Wadazumi try to be part of and in tune with nature while embracing all sounds in the environment. Rather than excluding or dominating nature, they stay with nature, making it as part of their creative expressions and musical experiences.

### TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE OF MUSIC EDUCATION

The shakuhachi is appreciated, practiced, and passed down in a variety of ways in contemporary societies. My intention of describing and emphasizing traditional aspects of the shakuhachi practice is not to limit its potential but to

allow new approaches and musical hybrids to be born out of the tradition.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to underscore a host of characteristics central to the practice of the shakuhachi and its ecological aspects. To summarize, (a) with the shakuhachi, nature is experienced in the processes of music and instrument making; (b) music making is less an act of expressing or objectifying the self than that of embodying or becoming oneness with nature; (c) music making through the shakuhachi thus involves the cultivation of an ecological self; (d) the inconvenience of expression may not be eliminated as it allows for an investigation of both the “world of sounds” and “sounds of the world” (Feld, 2000); (e) the art of impression is appreciated as much as the art of expression through music (Matsunobu, 2013c); (f) the shakuhachi bears inherently varied musical qualities and allows for individualized music making; and (g) its learning thus needs to be individualized to each learner.

The last point cannot be emphasized enough: Because the experience of the shakuhachi varies depending on the environment surrounding the practitioner, the shakuhachi calls for a localized approach. It cannot be standardized and taught through the use of universal curricula or methods as the shakuhachi operates to enlighten, liberate, and individualize the practitioner. This is a significant implication for music education because many of us tend to emphasize the universal aspects of music that transcend here-and-now propositions, such as musical concepts, techniques, creativity, problem-solving, and beauty, and try to teach music based on curriculum standards.<sup>10</sup> The pedagogy of the shakuhachi suggests a slow food approach to music making and learning. The opposite is a fast food approach in which we standardize students’ individual experiences.

Perhaps, the poem at the beginning of this essay now makes more sense to the reader: The bamboo is nature itself, and its sound is a reflection of the world. To London (2003), “Nature speaks. The pivotal act of drawing closer to Nature is to learn how to listen” (p. 86). This idea applies to music making. If we fail to listen, nature becomes silent. Musicians such as Tōru Takemitsu, Wadazumi Dōso, Zhao Wen,<sup>11</sup> Johannes Brahms, and others who sought after sources of their musical inspiration in the cosmos have had a kind of eco-spiritual moment while strolling through the woods, admiring a constellation of stars, or listening to the silence of night. Such experiences for firsthand conversation between the self and the world—necessary to gain “authentic sources of aesthetic experience” (London, 2003, p. 76)—are somehow missing in our attempts and efforts of teaching music today.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In formulating an ecological worldview, many scholars have looked to religions, traditions, and old values of native societies—prior to the impact of Western modernization—and their ecological ways of life (e.g. Kinsley, 1995). The underlying assumptions about native cultures are that native cultures (a) have significant knowledge about the ecology of the ecosystems in their homelands; (b) practice an economy which uses their land and resources sustainably; (c) promote the conservation of their natural environments; and (d) are effectively guided in these and other matters by a profound spirituality in which the environment is respected and treated as sacred (Sponsel, 2001). It is also assumed that native traditions inherit ecological practices of music making. Bowers (1995) observes that creative expression in traditional cultures has been “a means of renewing the spiritual ecology which, in turn, serves as the basis of a cultural group’s sense of moral order that defines the human’s responsibility to plants, animals, and other sources of life” (Bowers, 1995, p. 71).

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Capra (2005) suggests that the basic principles of teaching and learning need to be congruent with the characteristics of ecosystems: interdependence, sustainability, ecological cycles, energy flows, partnerships, flexibility, diversity, and co-evolution.

<sup>3</sup> In the field of art education, issues of ecology and spirituality are becoming a significant part of professional concerns and educators’ practices. For instance, the 2007 special issue of *Studies in Art Education* calls for submission on “eco-responsibility and art education.” Similarly, ecological/spiritual concerns in arts education are identified in the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*. I believe that the ecological framework of inquiry will highlight significant roles of music education toward eco-sensitive practices.

<sup>4</sup> An example of such traditions is the culture of Bosavi in Papua New Guinea in which the arts serve as a way of communication with nature. Steven Feld (1982) reports that the Kaluli people in his study perceived and experienced birds not only as living creatures in place, time, season, and weather but also as the spiritual reflections of deceased people. Birds thus became active participants in the construction of aesthetic, personal, and social experiences: Song was inspired by thinking about birds; it was sung in a bird voice; and dance was patterned as bird movement. As Feld (1996) aptly puts it, for the Kaluli, “the music of nature is heard as the nature of music” (p. 62). Similar principle of music making is identified in Tuvan throat singing in which music duplicates natural sounds

- such as gurgling water and swishing winds (Levin & Edgerton, 1999). According to Tuvan animism, the spirituality of nature is manifested through the sounds it produces and experienced through synchronization by human agency.
- <sup>5</sup> Indigenous knowledge framework celebrates differences—beyond the level of differences in form and style of music—and promotes the coexistence of diverse modes of engaging in music. Investigating musical experiences through an indigenous knowledge framework is to engage in the process of decolonizing and deconstructing the dominant ideology of the musical canon by investigating ontological and epistemological assumptions of music that are incompatible with European ones. The European value system enjoys its supremacy over indigenous, local cosmologies, not only in the West but also in non-Western countries such as Japan.
- <sup>6</sup> The modern type of shakuhachi is most commonly used today for both spiritual and entertainment purposes. However, the popularity of the traditional type of the shakuhachi is increasing in the West, due to its reference to a more authentic form of shakuhachi practice as well as a more individualized form of Zen practice appropriated by Westerners who are isolated from its cultural source in Japan (Keister, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Shimura (2002) argues that when using the traditional type of the shakuhachi, the instrument determines what pieces the player can perform, not the other way around.
- <sup>8</sup> Nature is perceived in quality as well as in quantity. A Japanese poet, for example, “needs a small garden or a bonsai pot, not a national park, in order to observe seasonal changes” (Kalland, 2000, p. 323).
- <sup>9</sup> For further discussion, please refer to Matsunobu (2007, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) as well as Keister (2004, 2005).
- <sup>10</sup> Anthony Palmer (1994) observes that this kind of practice is a reflection of the formalist view of aesthetics wherein the sole value of an object (e.g., music) is believed to be intrinsic to the features of that object. The result of this view is an unbalanced inclination toward teaching “about” music and teaching something “cognitive and abstract” in music classrooms (p. 43).
- <sup>11</sup> Zhao Wen is portrayed by Tsai Chih Chung in his comic book, *Zhuanzi Speaks: The Music of Nature*, as a musician who embodies the spirit of Zhuan-zi’s (Chuang Tzu) teaching of Taoist philosophy and music. Realizing that only when he was not playing music he could hear everything in complete harmony, he stopped playing the zither.

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