

THE CONCEPT OF *MA* AND THE
MUSIC OF TAKEMITSU

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INTRODUCTION

The initial problem confronting any investigation of the music of another culture is to understand the aesthetic attitudes which prevail in that culture. In the case of Japan, this task is made easier by the availability for study of a large body of Japanese music in Western styles. By looking at the characteristic ways a Japanese composer handles the familiar materials of Western music, the musician in the West can begin to understand the aesthetic attitudes that underlie Japanese music as a whole.

Toru Takemitsu, one of Japan's leading composers in the Western style, writes music which is structured in cycles on a large and small scale and in which silences and the spatial arrangement of the instruments are often critically important. These attributes reflect the Japanese aesthetic concept of *ma*.

The present study will begin with a discussion of the concept of *ma* and will then look at three ways in which *ma* can be manifested in music, calling on examples from the music of Takemitsu. In the end, the discussion of *ma* will serve as a background for an analysis of Takemitsu's piano piece, For Away (1973).

I. THE CONCEPT OF *MA*

Ma is an everyday word from the Japanese language meaning both space and time as well as a number of different shadings of space and time including the space of rooms to live in and the time of time to spare. *Ma*, as an aesthetic concept, is a way of conceiving of space and time that has roots deep in the Japanese past and continues to be reflected in the basic concepts underlying Japanese art today. *Ma*, in this aesthetic sense, is fundamentally different from the usual Western conception of serially ordered space and time. For the Japanese of the past, space and time were conceived of in the same way. Both could be roughly defined as “an interval of motion.” The time between the setting and rising of the sun, for instance, would be thought of as the interval of waiting for the sun. The road connecting Kyoto and Edo (the old name for Tokyo) known as the Tokaido, with its fifty-three stations or resting places, would be thought of as the interval of walking organized by the stops for rest.

Ma in its aesthetic sense, then, refers to intervals of space and time that become meaningful only when filled with motion. The origins of that become meaningful only when filled with motion. The origins of this concept in ancient Japanese religious practices have been traced by Arata Isozaki and are set forth in his texts for the exhibit on the concept of *ma* entitled *Ma: Japanese Time-Space*.¹ At the heart of the concept of *ma*,

¹ This exhibit originated at the Musee des Beaux Arts in Paris and appeared later at museums in New York and Chicago where I saw it at the Museum of Contemporary Art in the spring of 1980. An excellent summary of the exhibit can be found in the article “*Ma: Japanese Time-Space*,” *The Japan Architect* 54, no. 2 (February, 1979): 69-81.

Isozaki writes, is the importance attached by the ancient Japanese to perceiving the instant at which their *kami*, or divinities, descended to earth:

Sanctified places were sometimes delineated by the setting up of four posts, one in each of the corners of the area. . . . *Kami* were thought to descend into such enclosed spaces, which were usually totally vacant. The very acts of preparing such a space and waiting for *kami* to descend into it had immense influence on later modes of space-time cognition.

Space was thought of as void—like the vacant holy zone—and even concrete objects were thought to be void within. *Kami* were believed to descend to fill these voids with spiritual force (*chi*). Perceiving the instant at which this occurred became decisively important for all artistic endeavor. *Space was perceived as identical with events or phenomena occurring in it*; that is, space was perceived only in relation to time flow.² (Italics mine.)

For the ancient Japanese, there were two important parts to the religious experience described in this quote. First was the preparation of an interval of space to be occupied by the *kami*. Second was the setting aside of an interval of time to be spent waiting for the *kami* to descend. Both the spatial and the temporal interval were thought to invoke the motions that filled them with meaning (the descent of the *kami* or the waiting for their descent). As a result, empty intervals of space and time in general came to be perceived as invitations to some sort of action, and all such intervals came to be called *ma*. In the products of Japanese art, *ma* became a means for inviting the action of the audience as participants in the artwork.

As an example of the concept of *ma* expressed in classic Japanese design, consider the five hundred year old Zen Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto. This rock garden consists of fifteen large stones set out in five small groups in a sea of gray gravel. The stones are placed so that the view from any point on the bare deck facing the garden is unique and never takes in all fifteen stones at once. Apart from this, there is no

² Arata Isozaki, quoted in “*Ma: Japanese Time-Space*,” p. 71 of the summary mentioned in the previous footnote.

discernible pattern in the placement of the stones, and yet, their arrangement is quite intentional. The stones are the markers of a space devoid of meaning, like the vacant space of the ancient Japanese religious rituals. This space remains meaningless until some motion occurs within it to give it significance. In the case of the garden, the meaning will come not from the descent of *kami* to fill the void, but from the mental activity of some visitor to the garden. The following description, from an article on the garden by Eliot Deutsch, captures perfectly the *ma*-like emptiness of the Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji which invites the visitor to fill it with meaning:

[The garden] tells us that we will find neither an abyss from which we must flee, nor a radiant splendor that will enrapture us: beyond that it tells us no more. It is an invitation to contemplation.³

Ma, therefore, refers to empty intervals of space or time that invite some sort of action to fill them with meaning. The pervasiveness of this concept in Japanese culture is attested to by the examples of *ma* that abound in so many areas of Japanese art and daily life. The traditional *sumie* painter, for instance, paints only part of the canvas, leaving empty space to be filled with meaning by the viewer. The percussionist in the *nō* drama is a master at the dramatic use of silence to involve the audience in a performance. An analogous technique is seen in the poetic form of *haiku*, which is thought to communicate more through what it leaves out than through what it explicitly states. Even the Japanese home usually has a touch of *ma* in the small, bare alcove called a *tokonoma* which is

³ Eliot Deutsch, "An Invitation to Contemplation: The Rock Garden of Ryoanji and the Concept of Yugen," in Studies in Comparative Aesthetics, Monograph no. 2 of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 26-27.

thought to draw the family together much like the hearth of an American home.⁴ It is no wonder, in light of all this, that *ma* is reflected in Japanese music as well. In the music of Takemitsu, it is a fundamental part of the musical structure.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these and other examples of *ma*, see the article “Ma’: Space Full of Meaning in Japanese Culture,” The East 17, no. 7/8 (August, 1981): 53-57.

II. MA AND THE MUSIC OF TAKEMITSU

Toru Takemitsu was born in 1930 and raised in Tokyo in a musical culture which had been strongly influenced by Western ideas and styles of composition since the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ Yet his aesthetic approach to space and time in his music often results in arrangements of sounds that have more in common with the intentionally non-expressive rocks of Ryoan-ji than with the purposeful arrangements of most Western music. For Takemitsu, sounds take on meaning only through the action of the listener, not through the composer or the performer. The composer and performer are left with the task of allowing sounds to reach the listener in as pure (i.e., uninterrupted) a form as possible. This view comes out clearly in Takemitsu's statements about his aims as a composer:

What I want to do is not to put sounds in motion towards a goal by controlling them. Rather, I would prefer to let them free, if possible, without controlling them. For me, it would be enough to gather the sounds around me and then gently put them in motion. To move the sounds around the way you drive a car is the worst thing you can do with them.⁶

And again:

⁵ Western music was reintroduced to Japan during the reign of Emperor Meiji (1868-1912), after a hiatus of more than two centuries. It quickly became the predominant style for Japanese educational and public use. In Takemitsu's lifetime, however, the special identity of traditional music has been more and more recognized and its development encouraged through government support and experiments aimed at synthesizing Western and Japanese styles. For a survey of post-Meiji music in Japan, see The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980, s.v. "Japan," section VII by Masakata Kanazawa and Eishi Kikkawa.

⁶ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to the record "Toru Takemitsu: Miniatur II," Japense Deutsche Grammophon, MG 2411.

My musical form is the direct and natural result which sounds themselves impose, and nothing can decide beforehand the point of departure. I do not in any way try to express myself through these sounds, but, by reacting with them, the work springs forth itself.⁷

An equal devotion to producing free, unfettered sounds is required of the performer. This is one reason why Takemitsu is interested in writing music for traditional Japanese instruments. After his first experience with writing for the biwa, for instance, Takemitsu was struck by the quality of sound that could be produced:

Now I became aware of how much in incessant training in Japanese traditional music meant. Strictly abiding only by the manner transmitted according to tradition, the player only twangs on the sound handed down by word of mouth. This can be thought of as a very narrow and destitute world, but all the more because of that, the freedom of the resulting sound is great and strong.⁸

The constraints imposed by a centuries old tradition allow the biwa to produce a sound that is free from all limitations of a particular player's personality or playing techniques. Takemitsu demands a similar discipline from players on Western instruments; for instance, when he refers to performing as "transcending the body" to allow music to emerge.⁹ Thus, for Takemitsu, both composers and performers are expected to allow sounds to be themselves, to develop naturally, unencumbered by any personal expressive aims. With their expressive trappings stripped away, musical sounds become like the rocks of a Japanese rock garden, telling the listener nothing, but inviting, through the empty spaces they define, actions from the listener that fill them with meaning. The listener must become involved in discovering what sounds themselves can reveal, or the *ma*—the empty space among the sounds—will remain meaningless voids.

⁷ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to the record "Piano Music of Takemitsu," Decca Head 4.

⁸ Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to "Toru Takemitsu: Miniatur II."

⁹ Ibid.

Ma makes it possible for a composer to notate sounds on paper without defining their meaning. In this sense, *ma* can be seen as an alternative to the chance procedures some composers employ “to remove themselves from the activities of the sounds they make.”¹⁰ Using *ma*, the composer is able to distribute sounds in time and space so that they are surrounded by an emptiness that *invites* rather than *conveys* interpretations of their meaning. Sounds come to be heard in their full potential as sounds rather than as vehicles for human expression.

The search for specific examples of *ma* in Takemitsu’s music must begin with a better understanding of how *ma* is expressed in Japanese culture in general. For the Japanese, all of the following would serve equally well as definitions of *ma*: empty intervals marked out by objects in space (e.g., the empty intervals marked out by the rocks at Ryoan-ji); edges where two different worlds meet (e.g., the edge separating the vacant holy zone of the *kami* from the outside world); pauses between successive events (e.g., the rest stops on the walk from Kyoto to Edo). . . . The list could go on and on, but these three definitions are especially interesting because they each have clear counterparts in Takemitsu’s music. In the following pages, these definitions of *ma* will be explored further with reference to specific pieces by Takemitsu, and the understanding obtained of *ma* will then be applied to an analysis of Takemitsu’s piano piece For Away. The structure of For Away will be found to depend, at every level, on intervals of *ma*.

The first definition of *ma* to be considered is *ma* as an empty interval in space between two or more things that invites motion, contemplation, or some other form of human activity to give it meaning. This definition of *ma* has some claims to being the

¹⁰ John Cage, “Experimental Music,” lecture published in Cage’s book Silence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1961), p. 10.

most basic of the three since it bears closer resemblance to the origins of the word in the ancient Japanese religious rituals. Recall how the ancient Japanese marked out an empty space which was thought to invite the descent of their *kami*. In the same way, Takemitsu uses unusual spatial arrangements in his music to invite the listener to enter into the empty spaces between the sounds. These spatial arrangements can be accurately described in terms of *ma*, as Takemitsu himself has confirmed.

An example of this first meaning of *ma* can be found in Takemitsu's piece Distance (1972), written for the oboist Heinz Holliger¹¹ and scored for oboe and sho, a traditional Japanese instrument of the Gagaku orchestra.¹² In his instructions to the performers, Takemitsu asks the oboist to stand close to the audience with the sho player behind the oboe and as far to the back of the stage as possible. The aim of this arrangement can best be understood by contrasting it with a more typical way in which Western composers have used space. Whereas a composer might commonly position instruments in various areas of a stage or concert hall to allow the sound to converge on the listener from different angles, Takemitsu has confirmed that his aim in Distance was to involve the listener in the music in a different way, by setting up a spatial arrangement which, in one critic's words,

¹¹ Holliger's recording of this piece is available on the CD "Takemitsu Garden Rain," Deutsche Grammophon, 477 5382.

¹² The sho is a type of mouth organ consisting of seventeen bamboo pipes rising from a bowl-shaped mouthpiece section. Sound is produced on the instrument both while exhaling and while inhaling, enabling the performer to play extremely long, sustained notes and chords. Otherwise, the tone quality is rather like that of the oboe. A detailed account of the instrument is given in Masataro Togi's book Gagaku: Court Music and Dance, trans. Don Kenny (New York and Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1971), p. 21 and p. 69. A shorter description is given in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980, s.v. "sho" and "Japan," section III, 1(iii) by Robert Garfias.

forces [the listener] to create an active space (the ma of Japanese aesthetics) between the two instruments. The listener is thus put in a position where he must participate actively to create this virtual “space” where the sound events that relate the two instruments happen.¹³

Takemitsu’s conception of the empty space in Distance is similar to the conception of space found in the Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji. Like the rocks at Ryoan-ji, the sound sources in Distance merely mark out an empty space which, in itself, tells the listener nothing. It is only the listener’s willingness to become a participant in the music, through contemplation, that fills the space with meaning.

Takemitsu’s use of a Western and a Japanese instrument in Distance points to a second way in which *ma* can be realized through musical materials. The juxtaposition of the Western oboe and Japanese sho might at first seem paradoxical, in light of Takemitsu’s strong feelings about the differences that separate the sound worlds of Japan and the West:

Japanese instruments, for example the biwa [zither] and the shakuhachi [end-blown bamboo flute] produce sounds that are very vivid and near to man. The moment I hear one of these sounds I see a whole world before me: this is music for me. When I hold such an instrument in my hands and play it, I am nearer to the essence of music than when I compose something new for this instrument. On the other hand, the sound of European instruments is already very abstract (removed from nature). The two categories of sound belong to different worlds.¹⁴

¹³ Joaquim M. Benitez, liner notes to the record “Toru Takemitsu: Miniatur II,” Japanese Deutsche Grammophon, MG 2411. Takemitsu’s agreement with this interpretation of Distance was expressed in a brief note to this author received in August of 1982. Takemitsu wrote, in part, “Yes. I think Benitez is right. I agreed [with] his idea that [this] was my aim.”

¹⁴ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in Siegfried Borris, “The Discovery of the Japanese Musical Tradition by Artists and its Influence on Musical Creation in Japan and in the West,” International Round Table on the Relations Between Japanese and Western Arts, conference held September, 1968 (Tokyo and Kyoto: Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 1969) p. 285.

By combing these two worlds in the same composition, however, Takemitsu asks the listener to become involved in his music in a new way, as the medium in which two otherwise disconnected worlds come together. The listener becomes a kind of bridge, linking separate worlds of sound.

The second definition of *ma* we will consider, then, is *ma* as an interval or edge between separate worlds waiting to be bridged. The interval in Distance separating the sound worlds of Japan and the West, waiting to be bridged by the listener, is one example; but so is the interval between the worlds of nature and of man. The original meaning of the Japanese word for bridge, *hashi*, was not so much a bridge in the physical sense, as a bridging of the *ma* between two worlds. Here is how Arata Isozaki explains the relationship between the words *hashi* and *ma*:

An edge was conceived of as the edge of one world, implying the existence of another world beyond it. Anything that crossed, filled, connected or projected into the interim *ma* between two edges was called a *hashi*.¹⁵

Isozaki expands further on the Japanese concept of edges embodied in the word *ma*:

Originally, *ma* meant the distance between two points. Later it came to indicate a space surrounded by walls on four sides—that is, a room. As this development of the meaning of the word *ma* suggests, living spaces may originally have been wallless, empty zones with a post in each of the four corners.¹⁶

This concept of rooms without walls, or rather, rooms in which the walls are openings into other worlds, is echoed in the following statement by Takemitsu:

Nature must be part of music as it is part of a Japanese house. In the West you build houses with walls to separate you from nature. You cut windows in rooms and see nature like paintings in a frame. That is wrong.¹⁷

¹⁵ Isozaki, quoted in “*Ma*: Japanese Time-Space,” p. 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in “Takemitsu Talks: An Interview with the Composer,” High Fidelity/Musical America 18 (September, 1968): MA 12.

By incorporating different types of sounds in his music, among them the sounds of nature, Takemitsu invites the listener to overcome the walls that are often erected between different worlds of sound.

The next musical example, Stanza II (1971) for harp and tape, creates an environment where the sounds of nature meet with three other distinct types of sound: sounds of the harp, electronic sounds, and sounds of human activity.¹⁸ The piece opens with the harp music unfolding above electronic sounds that develop into a slowly wavering drone. Later, the sounds of nature (birdsong) and a roomful of human activity are added in an arrangement of sound types which might at first seem to make no more sense than the arrangement of stones in the Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji. Yet, as at Ryoan-ji, it is this very arrangement that invites the listener to enter into the *ma* between the different sounds. There are no impassable walls between these sounds—only edges, waiting to be crossed by the *hashi* in the minds of listeners. Takemitsu avoids giving greater definition to this arrangement of sound types, preferring instead to leave it to listeners to find their own meaning in the *ma* or edges where the four different sound worlds—harp, electronics, nature, and man—meet.

In this example, *ma* has been seen to arise from the edges between contrasting sound worlds. A similar conception of *ma* was seen in the combination of Japanese and Western instruments in Distance, but Distance also showed how *ma* can arise from a spatial separation between sound sources. In both of these pieces, the use of *ma* provides the listener with an invitation to become actively involved in the sound world of the

¹⁸ A recording of Ursula Holliger playing this piece is available on the CD “Takemitsu Garden Rain,” Deutsche Grammophon, 477 5382. The score is published by Editions Salabert, Paris.

music. The third meaning of the word *ma* reminds us that the “silence world” of a piece of music demands the listener’s active contemplation as well.

Ma can be a void moment of waiting between two events, or (quoting from the Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms), “the natural pause or interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously.”¹⁹ This manifestation of *ma* originated, once again, in the ancient Japanese ritual of inviting the *kami* to descend to earth. Recall how Isozaki describes this ritual: the interval between the marking off of the holy space and the descent of the *kami* to fill that space was one of intense and quiet waiting. Recurrences of these intervals of waiting organized the pace of life in much the same way as the placement of stepping stones leading to a Japanese teahouse organizes the breathing rhythm of the one who traverses them. Cyclic phenomena—footsteps over stones, the tolling of a temple bell, the recurring descents of the *kami*—are all series of events connected by periods of quiet and intense waiting.

Sound, too, is part of a cycle that includes periods of intense waiting: periods of silence. In the cycles of Takemitsu’s music, silence is just as important an element as sound:

Every living thing has its sound and cycle. . . . Music, too, is a permanent oscillation, developing with silent intervals of irregular duration between the sounds, like the language of dolphins.²⁰

To make the void of silence live is to make live the infinity of sounds. Sounds and silence are equal. . . . I would like to achieve a sound as intense as silence.²¹

¹⁹ Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms, quoted in “*Ma*: Japanese Time-Space,” p. 70.

²⁰ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to the record “Piano Music of Takemitsu,” Decca Head 4.

²¹ Toru Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to the record “Toru Takemitsu: Miniatur II,” Japanese Deutsche Grammophon, MG 2411.

Silence in music organizes the breathing rhythms of performers in obvious ways. In the next musical example, Takemitsu's Garden Rain (1974) for ten brass instruments, the breathing rhythms of the performers are exactly attuned to the breathing rhythms of the music because tempos are to be chosen on the basis of how long the opening progressions of two or a few chords can be sustained in a single breath (figure 1).²² Silences occur between the adjacent progressions, providing intervals during which the players can breathe as well as intervals of *ma* to be bridged by the listener. The lengths of the silences are adjusted to be roughly in proportion to the lengths of the phrases that follow (phrases of 12, 14, 13, 18½, and 24 time units are preceded by silences of 1½, 2, 2, 3, and 4 units, respectively).

In the way that they draw the listener into the cycles of sound, the silences in Garden Rain become moments of the most intense communication. Takemitsu even tries to include the silence that precedes the start of the music and follows its end as part of the cycle of the piece by instructing that the first sound is to enter *pppp* and without any accent and the last is to die away for $4 + \infty$ time units!

²² Toru Takemitsu, Garden Rain (Paris: Editions Salabert, 1974), pp. 1-4. A recording of this piece, played by the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, is available on the CD "Takemitsu Garden Rain," Deutsche Grammophon, 477 5382.

Figure 1: Opening of Garden Rain, for 10 brass instruments
Nearly stationary (J. Cage)

* 6 10 1.5 4 8

Trumpets
 ** (pppp) Bouché dying away (d.a.) open Bouché d.a.

Horn (Sounding pitch)
 open d.a.

Trombones
 with mute (Tbn.)

Tuba

* Numbers indicate time (tempo) and each number is played relatively.
 This piece is desirable [sic.] to play as slow as possible.

** Dynamics are generally very soft . . . and entry . . . without accent.

2 5 3 6 2 5 8

Note o = movement ad libitum in the indicated time according to the order proportionally notated in the score. d.a.

3 4 2.5 4 8

4 4 5 6 7

Bouché d.a.

(short sound with little accent)

The *ma* or silent intervals of waiting between the phrases in this example, require the listener to make connections and become part of the cycles of the music. Cycles are manifested in Garden Rain in a number of other ways as well. The overall form of the

piece could be described in letters as *a b c b c a*. Figure 2²³ shows the ending of the piece, specifically the second *c* section and the return to the sustained chords of the *a* section. Notice how the beginning phrase played by the muted first trumpet is echoed four times at successively closer intervals in the other instruments. This is followed by two brief statements of the chord progressions from the beginning, which bring the piece to a close.

Figure 2 points out the cycles in Takemitsu's music on a number of different levels: each statement of the muted trumpet melody completes a cycle that was initiated with the preceding statement; the return of the cycles of sustained chords connected by silence is itself the end of a larger cycle covering the piece as a whole; and the return of silence (or rather, the ambient sound of the room) at the end of the piece completes a cycle encompassing higher level events that occurred before the piece began and after it ended. The perception of a cycle in this latter sense is reinforced by the instructions for entering and dying away at the beginning and end of the piece. I would like to suggest that each of these cycles consists of pairs of events connected by periods of quiet (not necessarily silent) waiting which depend for their meaning on the bridges built in the mind of the listener. In this way, they all reflect the aesthetic quality of *ma*, the quality of intervals inviting human involvement.

²³ Ibid., pp. 21-23.

Figure 2: Conclusion of Garden Rain

1/p 60-72 dynamics and phrasing sim.

Trumpets
(muted)

Horn (sounding pitch)
(muted)

Trombones
Tuba
(tbn.)
ppp = pp

3 5 2 2 1/p (48-52) 4 + α *

open

a little

Harmon pull stem

Harmon pull stem

open

open

open

echo long

D# only

(tuba muted) (pppp)

d.a.

soft as possible

dying away---

* Should be played as long and soft as possible

III. *MA* IN THE PIANO PIECE FOR AWAY

We have traced the concept of *ma* through three different manifestations in Takemitsu's music: *ma* achieved through spatial separation of instruments in a special way (the front/back separation of Distance), *ma* achieved through juxtapositions of different sound worlds (the Japanese and Western sound worlds of Distance or the electronic, natural, human, and harpistic sound worlds of Stanza II), and *ma* achieved through intervals of silence between sounds (the silences of Garden Rain). Just a moment ago, I suggested that this last meaning of the word *ma* can include intervals of contrast between recurrences of similar sound events. I would like to show how construing *ma* in this way helps to make sense of the structure of Takemitsu's music, even when spatial separations, timbral differences, or silences do not seem to be operating in any obvious way.

For Away (1973) for piano,²⁴ has only one eighth note of silence in its entire length, and, because it is a solo piece, cannot make use of the kinds of spatial and timbral separations found in Distance and Stanza II. Yet, in expanding the third meaning of *ma* to include intervals of contrast as well as intervals of silence between recurring events, we can find examples of *ma* operating on every level of For Away. Of course, in this sense, any piece of music which makes use of repetitions of events separated by intervals of contrasting events (any sonata form movement by Mozart or Haydn, for example) can be

²⁴ Roger Woodward's recording of this piece is available on the CD "Takemitsu: Corona; For Away; Piano Distance; Undisturbed Rest," Explore Records 0016.

said to have the aesthetic quality of *ma*. In For Away, though, these repetitions of events connected in the minds of the listeners are the principal means used to tie together the music on both a small and large scale. For purposes of this study, these kinds of repetitions will be referred to as “cycles” or “oscillations.”

Let us begin on a very small scale. In figure 3, which is the opening of For Away,²⁵ the music I have enclosed in the first box consists of a cycle descending from and returning to B^b. The repetition of the B^b is an event easily connected in the listener’s mind through the brief collection of intervening notes. However, this cycle also contains the germ of a second cycle which extends to the end of the first line, the repetitions of E’s and B^b’s that slowly die away. This entire first line constitutes what I will call a “group,” that is, simply, the music occurring between any two solid bar lines. Still a third, and larger, cycle can be seen to be initiated in the box in this first group. The C, which in the available recordings of this piece never seem to endure as long as the score indicates, is repeated as the first note of the second group, again inviting listeners to build in their minds the mental bridge that ties the groups together. All such repetitions of notes in the same register, other than the constantly recurring E’s and B^b’s, have been marked on the figure with dotted arrows. Think of these arrows as *hashi* or bridges, if you like, which you build in your mind as you listen to the piece. Note that Takemitsu draws his own dotted line connecting the two C’s in the first and second lines.

²⁵ Toru Takemitsu, For Away (Paris: Editions Salabert, 1973), pp. 1-2.

defined by repetitions of elements between these first two groups. The box in the second group encloses a motive analogous to the one in the first: that is, an oscillation initiating a motion that dies away in the rest of the group. The E/B^b repetitions of the first group reappear as part of this dying away. Notice how the peculiar dynamic of the second D^b in this line, *mp* in a context of gradually dying away *p*'s, makes sense when the note is seen as connected to the louder D^b earlier in the group rather than the notes that immediately surround it. The one problematic element in this second group is the high A introduced along with the second D^b. However, as the arrow shows, this initiates a cycle that connects the second group to the third.

The third group is in many ways the least typical of the five that I see as making up the first half of the opening section of For Away.²⁶ Its tempo is different; although it contains a motive roughly similar to the boxed motives in the earlier groups, the motive is located in the middle of the group rather than at the beginning; and the oscillating repetitions of the E's and B^b's have disappeared. Its overall shape could indeed be characterized as a cycle away from and back to the high C[#] and A, but the very fact of this group's being atypical helps to give shape to the first five groups as a whole, because the elements that disappear in group 3 reappear in groups 4 and 5.

By now, it is probably becoming apparent to you how this process works. Every pair of groups is bridged together by the cyclic repetition of at least one prominent

²⁶ According to my interpretation, the opening selection of For Away consists of eight groups divided into sub-sections of five and three groups respectively. The first sub-section ends in the middle of page 2 (bottom line of figure 3) and the second carries to the middle line of page 3.

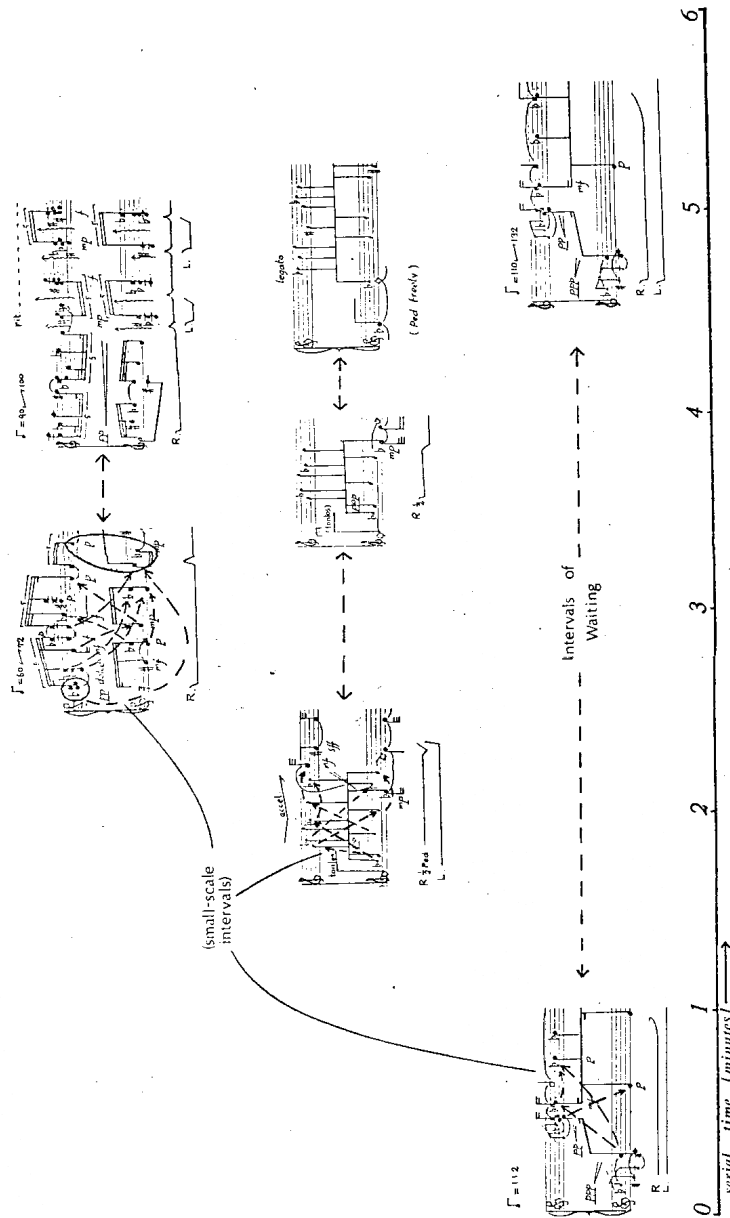
feature. In addition, every note, save one, in the first five groups is involved in some kind of cycle of repetitions which must be bridged in the mind of the listener. Either the note is part of one of the boxed motives, or it is repeated at some small or large interval in the same register. The one exception to this rule, the high F in the fourth line, could conceivably be a copyist's error (should it be an A and therefore be tied to the earlier A in the same register?), or, less likely, it may be related to some F's and B^b's that occur together later in the second half of this section (not in the same register, however).

Before leaving this first section of For Away to look at the overall structure of the piece, I would like to point out another thing that invites the listener to tie together the music of these opening groups: one of the most prominent audible features of the first five groups is the tritone oscillation that results from the frequent repetition of the notes E and B^b. In the fourth group a new tritone appears, consisting of the notes F[#] and C. These notes, along with E^b, will become the most prominent recurring notes in the three groups that make up the last half of the opening section of For Away (groups 6 through 8, not shown on figure 3). The shift from an E/B^b oscillation to oscillations involving F[#], B^b, and C is one of the most obvious things marking the division of the opening of For Away into two large halves.

This example from the opening of For Away has shown how the concept of *ma* can be expanded to help explain the way Takemitsu's music is tied together on a small scale. Figure 4 summarizes larger-scale patterns of repetition in For Away that call on the listener to make connections as well. Sections of similar music are placed, in the figure, on the same horizontal level. Only the beginnings of sections are shown, to give an idea

of the motivic, rhythmic, and harmonic character of each type of section. The order of events in the piece is shown in the figure as progressing from left to right according to the time scale at the bottom of the page. The first section of the piece is the last to recur, requiring the longest *hashi* or mental bridge. The other sections recur at successively shorter intervals.

Figure 4: Large-scale repetitions creating ma In For Away



From the figure, it is clear that the overall shape of For Away is itself a cycle or arch, requiring at least three different levels of connection in the listener’s mind. So that we don’t forget the many small levels of bridges in the piece, the first examples of each

type of section are marked to show these as well. You can see in this figure the extremes in the range of cycles of repetition that involve the listener in making connections on every level of the music, from connections between two closely recurring notes to connections involving sections repeating at wide intervals. In being the *hashi* that makes these connections, the listener becomes an essential part of the sound cycles that make up Takemitsu's music.

IV. *MA*, TAKEMITSU'S MUSIC, AND THE MUSIC OF JAPAN AND THE WEST

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CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how the concept of *ma*—empty intervals inviting human involvement—is reflected in Takemitsu's music through empty spaces inviting contemplation, edges between worlds requiring a connecting bridge or *hashi*, and pauses or “void moments” between events calling for concentrated waiting. Further, we have seen how *ma* can help to make sense of the structure of Takemitsu's music on many different levels. *Ma* imparts a special quality to Takemitsu's music which distinguishes it from most Western music. There is a sense that the music progresses not so much through the playing out of large-scale directed motions in measured time as through the succession of irregular spacings between recurring sound events. The music sounds timeless, non-developmental, arrhythmic, full of space. . . . All of these traits serve as reminders that Takemitsu's music, in spite of its many points of contact with the West, retains a sense of motion which is firmly rooted in Japanese ways of conceiving of space and time.

Descriptions of Japanese traditional music are full of attempts to depict in words the sense of motion in Japanese music. William Malm's description of Gagaku (literally “elegant music”—the music of the Imperial court) as moving “from pillar to pillar of

instrumental time-marking sound”²⁷ could be extended to cover Japanese music as a whole. Every sound or combination of sounds stands on its own like a pillar, and there is little more than empty space linking one pillar to the next. Yet, to the Japanese the empty space is just as important as the pillars of sound. Hisao Kwanze, one of Japan’s foremost singers and actors of the *nō* drama, used to stress to his students the creative function of this empty space in *nō* music: “In the music as well as in acting the pause is never a lessening of intensity, but on the contrary the projection of highest intensity into the empty space of the pause.”²⁸ These words echo what was stated by Zeami, the master of *nō*, over five centuries earlier:

‘Where there is no action’ is the interval between two performances. To make the interval interesting, it is necessary to maintain the spirit that connects the two performances without relaxing the tension. To that end, one must pay attention to all the spells between breaths of an *utai* [*nō* song] and between words and actions without relieving the tension. . . . One must unite the space between two performances by the spirit, in a state of perfect selflessness, a state in which there is no concern for oneself.²⁹

This concern with “where there is no action”—*ma*—is one of the fundamental traits distinguishing Japanese music, or indeed any Japanese art, from the music and art of the West.

Although theories of Western music have traditionally emphasized the idea of “music as directed motion,”³⁰ Western composers have increasingly come to share the

²⁷ William P. Malm, from his introduction to Masataro Togi’s book Gagaku: Court Music and Dance, trans. Don Kenny (New York and Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1971), p. 24.

²⁸ Hisao Kwanze, quoted in Eta Harich-Schneider, A History of Japanese Music (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 435.

²⁹ Zeami, Kakyō, quoted in “‘Ma’: Space Full of Meaning in Japanese Culture,” p. 55.

³⁰ See the second chapter of Felix Salzer’s Structural Hearing for a detailed elaboration of this theme (New York: Dover Publications, Incorporated, 1962), pp. 10-31.

Japanese interest in “where there is no action.” This attitude is reflected most obviously in the increased importance of silence in contemporary music, but it is seen as well in an urge towards self-effacement which leads many composers to adopt techniques of chance or of mathematical precision in order to solve the dilemma of how to notate sounds on paper without determining their meaning. This urge towards self-effacement has audible results. Highly organized music like Boulez’s Structures or Messiaen’s Mode de Valeurs et d’Intensites has much the same static, spacious effect as Japanese music. Like Takemitsu’s For Away, these pieces can be enjoyed by listeners who find, in the almost chance recurrence of isolated notes or sound events, ample opportunity to become involved in the music. Music written using random processes has a similar effect; it asks listeners to become involved in finding their own meaning among or between sounds, where none has been supplied by the composer. John Cage, as one of the foremost practitioners of this type of music, has spoken forcefully of the need to allow listeners the freedom to find their own meaning in sound. This aim can be accomplished, according to Cage, in a world where space is left around each person and around each sound. Cage finds a vision of such a world in the ideas of Buckminster Fuller:

[Fuller] describes the world to us as an ensemble of spheres between where there is a void, a necessary space. We have a tendency to forget that space. We leap across it to establish our relationships and connections. We believe we can slip as in a continuity from one sound to the next, from one thought to the next. In reality, we fall down and we don’t even realize it! We live, but living means crossing through the world of *relationships* or representations. Yet, we never see ourselves in the act of crossing that world!³¹

³¹ John Cage, in conversation with Daniel Charles, For the Birds (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 93.

Cage urges us to accept Fuller's world, where the space between different spheres is acknowledged and recognized as important. It is a world where meaning is left open, to be determined as each individual sees fit.

There is a fundamental difference between the empty spaces which Cage urges upon us and the Japanese concept of *ma*. This difference is reflected in the contrast between Cage's music and the music of Takemitsu. "Letting sounds be themselves, for Cage, consists largely of employing random processes to remove his will from sounds that are written down. For Takemitsu, on the other hand, it is still possible to write a fully notated music devoid of chance elements by simply paying strict heed to the natural tendencies of the sounds themselves. In other words, Cage's *negation* of the will is replaced, for Takemitsu, by the possibility of *transcending* the will through discipline. If the will of the composer can subject itself to the natures of the sounds themselves as the determinants of the compositional process, then the music that results will become "the direct and natural result which sounds themselves impose."³² The empty spaces left between the sounds will be felt as compelling, as invitations to the active involvement of the listener, as *ma*.

Takemitsu's music, then, provides us with a lens through which to view Japanese music as a whole. In this music we find the ideals of involvement of the listener, proximity to nature, and acceptance of sound and silence in all their forms expressed through the *ma* that is left between sounds. This *ma* is not a passive empty space, like the empty spaces resulting from the negation of will in chance or totally controlled music;

³² Takemitsu, quoted in the liner notes to "Piano Music of Takemitsu."

rather, the *ma* of Japanese music is felt as compelling and necessary. It is an “invitation to contemplation.”³³

³³ Deutsch, p. 27.

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