

Roche Commissions

Breath crystals – encomium to Toshio Hosokawa on 30 August 2008, Buonas

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(The spoken version is definitive.)

Toshio, ladies and gentlemen:

At times of economic globalisation and the increased mobility of people and goods, artistic productivity – in literature, fine arts, cinema or music – seems more and more to emerge between cultures. Where different languages, traditions and creeds meet, energy is obviously released – in the course of translation and blending, but also by the enforced reflection on our origins and what makes us what we are.

The old musicological concepts of a national musical culture no longer seem appropriate. These days it is becoming more and more impossible to see composers as belonging to a single culture, a single nation; rather they live in the interstices between them, addressing listeners beyond their own original borders, living as Frenchmen in Berlin, as Israelis in Harvard or as Japanese in Tokyo, Mainz and Berlin (to mention but a few of Toshio Hosokawa's postal addresses). We now have music of no fixed abode. This changes the artistic landscape in which composers and interpreters work.

In this community of crossborder-commuting artists, Toshio Hosokawa has acquired a highly distinctive position by building bridges between the Western avant-garde and Japanese tradition. While continually employing Western composition techniques, he at the same time reverts to Japanese and Asiatic musical traditions. He had his forerunners and role models in composers such as his teacher Isang Yun and Toru Takemitsu. But like Goethe's "world-child in the middle", he is favoured by the historical moment. Western avant-garde composers no longer merely watch with benign paternalism as their Japanese colleagues transmute their achievements into their own idiom. Instead they are pricking up their ears in response to the new sounds and the altered concepts of form and time that are coming out of the East. Hosokawa's compositions have now become milestones in contemporary music in the West as well. If we think of the use of the *shō* and other Asian musical

instruments in the works of Helmut Lachenmann or Hans Zender, we can see that Hosokawa has had a productive reception since the mid-1990s.

The list of his works has now reached a considerable length: he must now be on his opus 70 or thereabouts. His *œuvre* includes two operas, an oratorio, choruses, songs, major orchestral works, concertos, music for various chamber ensembles, pieces for solo instruments, music for traditional Japanese instruments, and film music. It is unique not only in terms of its size, but also in the range of compositional topics that it employs. Hosokawa developed his own idiom, with its typical direct appeal, sensuality of tone and air of contemplation, in works for chamber ensembles. It was not long before he tried to transpose these experiences to a large orchestra. The delicacy of his treatment of tone, his attention to detail and his awareness of form are equally in evidence in both registers. An authority on musical instruments, Hosokawa has not only learned to play Japanese instruments such as the *shō*, *koto* and *shakuhachi*, he has also found ways to get previously unknown tone colours out of European instruments like the flute, the accordion and the guitar. He is also endlessly fascinated by the human voice.

To see Hosokawa merely as a Japanese composer – often the case in today's world, where media-friendly, immediately recognisable images are the order of the day – would be to belittle the stature of his music. It *is* very Japanese, but at the same time it achieves the same level of quality as the best Western avant-garde music. It appeals equally to the Japanese and the European ear. Significantly, it was Hosokawa's immersion in the musical thinking of his Western colleagues that stimulated his rediscovery of Japanese traditions. There is ample biographical evidence for this.

Born in Hiroshima in 1955, Hosokawa grew up with Western music as a natural element of his environment. He started piano lessons at the age of four, entered the Tokyo School of Music at sixteen, and at twenty went to Germany to study composition. To him, music meant classical European music, and Germany was the place to study contemporary music – under Isang Yun in Berlin, for example, Klaus Huber in Freiburg and Helmut Lachenmann, who became his mentor and friend after they met at the Darmstadt Holiday Course for New Music. It was in Berlin that Hosokawa first became consciously acquainted with traditional Japanese music. As a child he must have listened to his mother singing Japanese songs – accompanying herself on the *koto*, a zither with a domed sound board – but it was not until now that

he discovered the extraordinary freshness of the koto-uta, the solo voice with koto accompaniment, gagaku, orchestral music performed at the imperial court, and shōmyō, the ritual Buddhist chant. He had learned from Yun, Huber and Lachenmann how contemporary European music was extending its expressive capabilities by new sounds, stereophonic effects, clusters and microintervals. Now, however, he had to come to terms with the fact that Japanese court music had done something very similar a thousand years earlier, if in circumstances that were rather different in spiritual and religious terms. In a process that is typical of this sort of artistic reversion, Hosokawa had to discover the Japanese musical tradition by way of the Western avant-garde. He did not, of course, simply stitch that tradition onto modern composition techniques as some sort of spiritual or religious add-on. Rather he continued to develop it so that the prospects of a new concept of tone and a non-teleological approach to time – as seen in Europe and America with Cage and Stockhausen since the late 1950s – were extended into the Japanese tradition, where they encountered remarkable resonances. In a nutshell: he may have composed in the Japanese idiom, but he retained his consciousness as a Western avant-garde artist.

Hosokawa himself coined the expression “sound calligraphy”, which brilliantly describes his musical aesthetic while at the same time highlighting links with the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Like Lachenmann in his *musique concrète instrumentale*, Hosokawa aims to make the individual sound audible as a trace of a motoric expenditure of bodily energy, a physical gesture that grates against the resistance of the material. A brush-stroke, not just a line drawn with a pen. But his calligraphic gestures constantly point the way back to the disembodied and the invisible. The listener must also hear the unheard and the unsaid. You cannot understand these sounds unless you hear the silence that underlies them. “My music is calligraphy, painted on the open border of time and space”, he writes (*Silent Flowers* for string quartet (1998)). “Each individual note has a form, like a line or a point applied with a brush. These lines are painted on a canvas of silence. Its border, part of the silence, is just as important as what is audible.”

Hosokawa transplants this principle of calligraphy to vocal and instrumental music. “In Eastern thought”, he continues, “the voice (the sound, that is) is born when the spirit manifests itself in the breath. How to express this dynamic process, which gives expression to the sound of the spirit in breath and voice, is my major challenge as a

composer.” (Sen I for solo flute) A calligraphic gesture with the hand executes a movement in space, finding its concentrated energy there before it materialises on the paper only to withdraw into space. The same is true of the voice, which leaves a calligraphic footprint behind in space, a “breath crystal”, as a trace of the unsaid from which it comes and to which it silently returns. Voices point to the body as the origin of this sort of acoustic trace, but at the same time to a spiritual domain of which they are the witnesses, never to be concluded, never completed – the “voiceless voice”.

Voiceless Voice in Hiroshima is Hosokawa’s Requiem for the victims of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, his native city, on 6 August 1945. His parents only just got away with their lives, while his more distant relatives perished.

“Deep
in the time crevasse,
by honeycomb ice
there waits, a Breathcrystal,
your unannullable
witness.” (Paul Celan: 'Weggebeizt' (Corroded away), from: Atemwende
(Breathturn).

Lines by Paul Celan, who provided the text for the 3rd movement of Hosokawa’s hour-long oratorio – perhaps the high point of his compositional oeuvre. Lines that also define the poetics of that oratorio: A breath crystal as an “unannullable witness” that has passed through the silence, through death in the honeycomb ice: the expressionless as the horizon to all speech and song.

Zen Buddhist breathing technique and meditation, breathing and heightened awareness, voice and silence – these are the leitmotifs of Hosokawa’s musical thinking, also demonstrable in his compositional detail and form. The intermittent rhythm of breathing underlies the works you have heard today and are about to hear. A regular swelling and fading of the sounds, with longer or shorter pauses between the breathing phases, constitutes its form. The individual note, hesitantly rising as if from deep meditation, is joined by other sounds, accruing into clusters, achieving gestural succinctness by means of dissonant, harshly luminous secondary motifs with an expression that is often painful, then to revert to the single note, to the calmness of exhalation. The objective of this cyclical structure is not teleologically developing variation, completion and reprise, but cyclical rotation and variance, and as such it is the antithesis of all the frenetic bustle of Western music, of its buoyant,

dancing footfalls, its hectic gesticulation. Hosokawa's music does not race. It strides, at best. Mostly, however, it sits or stands, translating the noble gravitas of gagaku court music into the expression of meditative contemplation.

Hosokawa once remarked that unlike his European colleagues, he tries to achieve a state of productive unconsciousness that is simultaneously a different state of spiritual acuity. Sometimes, he says, consciousness has to be switched off in order to achieve that sureness of touch manifested in the movements of the great masters of calligraphy. To see Hosokawa's compositions as music for periods of abstracted reverie would be to misunderstand them. It is quite unsuited to these purposes, which is why the light music industry has never shown any interest in it. Instead its aim is a state of enhanced concentration. Its sounds unfold in a horizontal time dimension, but they build up as you listen and recollect, becoming a form, a soundscape. *In the Depth of Time* is one of many descriptive titles of Hosokawa's instrumental pieces. In the rhythm of the breath, the act of hearing and taking heed extends your thoughts into ever more all-embracing spheres. It follows the sounds along the arrow of time, exploring its form in remembrance. Life can only be understood backwards, as Kierkegaard once said, but it must be lived forwards.

The instruments that Hosokawa selects for this musical and compositional approach could have been created specially for it. This particularly applies to the shō, which you have already heard as a solo instrument and are about to hear again with the accordion. It's a mouth organ with bamboo pipes that probably originated in China. It had the role of providing harmonies in classical Japanese gagaku music, the ceremonial music of the imperial court to which Hosokawa feels particularly drawn, just as he does to Nō theatre. It is utterly unlike the worldly, bourgeois music of the Kabuki theatre, with its boisterous humour and vulgarity. The shō has 15 bamboo pipes, the air inside them being caused to vibrate via a windbox. Up to six reeds can sound at the same time. It is thus possible to produce both individual notes and mobile tone clusters, those harmonies, shifting solemnly from one to another, that are so characteristic of the instrument.

Like its more prosaic European brother the mouth organ, shō players produce sounds by breathing in as well as out. This enables them to generate those almost continuous, uninterrupted flows – or clouds, as Hosokawa calls them – of sound that seem to cast off the bonds of gravity and corporeal substance, even if the pressure of the breath gives rise to the tiniest differences in dynamics, volume and tone profile.

The shō seems to be incorporeal, a sort of vox angelica that transports us to another dimension, where time and space are measured differently.

The discovery of the shō for contemporary music is inextricably linked with the name of Mayumi Miyata. It was through her artistry that the instrument became known, inspiring John Cage, Toru Takemitsu, Klaus Huber, Helmut Lachenmann and others to compose for it. Almost all modern works for the shō were written at her suggestion, and subsequently performed by her. The same could be said of this morning's other instrumentalist, Teodoro Anzellotti, whose artistry has given the accordion – the shō's European cousin – a nobility it had not previously enjoyed. It shares the shō's facility to generate uninterrupted flows of sound, its legato and its harmonic polyphony. But it is less ethereal, its registers are lower, its dynamics are more varied, and, its keyboard capable of faster runs.

Cloudscapes - Moon Night for shō and accordion, composed in 1998, is a little jewel of contemporary music. We experience the intimate dialogue between an Asiatic instrument and its European sibling, perhaps even a night of love, if you will: brother and sister in an incestuous instrumental encounter. Hosokawa takes care to ensure that they are perfectly matched in terms of dynamics, range and timbre. In a loving, elegiac dialogue under a clouded night sky, they embrace – breathing, singing, each listening to the other. Both instruments utter single notes, misterioso and lantano (mysterious, distant). They rise in intensity, gradually coalescing to form tone clusters and increasing in volume, only to revert to the initial note and pause. On the third cycle the accordion executes a melodic sequence that rises from the depths, “as if embracing the figures of the shō”, as it says in the score, then shō and accordion unite, the volume rising to double forte in ever more urgent mutual desire. Hosokawa's music is erotic in the extreme, even if it scorns to make any reference to the physically sexual.

After four minutes of this intimate duet, the two voices disentangle and a moving lamentation ensues, mainly from the accordion. From the depths rises a despairing groan, a hopeless morass of memories and traumas. The shō listens, and joins in. “You release my heart”, says Goethe in his poem *An den Mond* (To the moon): “Every echo from the past / Glum or gaudy mood / Haunts me, weighing bliss and pain / In the solitude.” “What beyond our conscious knowing / Or our thought's extremest span / Threads by night the labyrinthine / Pathways of the breast of man.”

The climax of this night of love and lamentation is a triple forte after seven minutes or so. And now something quite incredible happens: as if from nowhere, a third voice is heard. It's the shō player. While playing her instrument, she simultaneously hums brief cantilenas – as if in sympathy with the Japanese and European instrumental sounds, afflicted with wounds. Hosokawa's music accomplishes what Goethe's poem promises, but in a different way. It makes us fully and fearlessly aware of what "threads the labyrinth pathways of the breast" this night – subjectivity and the unconscious. Made sound and form, it can even be enjoyed.

We can hear something of this painful brightness in Hosokawa's *As a breath in the light* for solo shō that was played earlier, with its characteristic high notes, difference tones, and its frequent use of little secondary dissonances – as if "permeated by eye pain". This work was commissioned by the Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung in Dornach, which administers the Steiner estate. The title of the piece comes from Steiner, who wrote in 1913 that impacted by the "Lucifer-like flooding sea of light", thought could soar, becoming "a feeling that it was as a breath in the light". An expert on Goethe, Steiner was aware of the existential hazards of breathing in the sea of light. "We can look directly at neither the sun nor death (Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement)", as the moralist La Rochefoucauld remarked, and Faust turns his gaze back from the sun to the earth: "Let the sun remain behind me! ... Reflected colours give us life." (Faust II, verses 4702-4727) Man is "destined to see what is lit, not the light" (Goethe: *Pandora*).

Hosokawa once said that he wanted the sounds of his music to transport the listener "to a dignified state of nothingness", a reference to Zen Buddhist meditation as the spiritual and religious horizon of his thinking. But his music transcends the certainties and practices of religious belief. It reflects the painful inner turmoil of modern subjectivity in the mirror of religious traditions and conventional sound idioms. What distinguishes it, what perhaps makes the European ear particularly receptive to it, is the reflexivity of a modern man, troubled and afflicted by the trauma of destruction, and its contemporaneousness between ages and cultures. The sweeter, the more flooded with light Hosokawa's music becomes, the more pungent its aftertaste; the more dazzling its brilliance, the more painful its undertone. Against the backdrop of the catastrophe of Hiroshima and the devastation of the "heartlanders" (Ingeborg Bachmann), the quest for natural innocence and beauty must be understood differently: as a gesture of exorcism, an attempt to overcome traumatic wounds, as catharsis.

Thank you for your attention.