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► **To cite this version:**

Jeremy Corral. Feel the power of my exoticism: Japanese noise music and claims of a distinct Japanese sound. *Sound Culture Studies and Modernity in Asia*, Sep 2018, Tokyo, Japan. hal-03919606

**HAL Id: hal-03919606**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03919606>**

Submitted on 3 Jan 2023

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**Sound Culture Studies and Modernity in Asia Conference (September 2018)**

Feel the Power of My Exoticism: Japanese Noise Music and Claims of a Distinct  
Japanese Sound

Japanese Noise Music is characterized by its blatant lack of traditional musical architecture; it evolves from schemes that ignore melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic progressions. It is thereby commonly considered as a brutal and radical expression of Postmodernity. In certain regards, Noise can indeed be interpreted as a general ecology of interference whereby the junction between human activity and nature can be re-evaluated with sounds, through a violent criticism of structures and exclusive systems. According to Mikawa Toshiji (1960-), a historical pioneer of Noise<sup>1</sup>, it nonetheless fails to break from order: its diffusion at an international scale makes it subject to the classification imposed by stylistic and cultural categories. Thereby, he says, although the Japanese prefer to think about the world in terms of vague and sensitive relationships rather than through a systemic and precise ordering of all things, Noise is at the same time unavoidably and abusively subject to the supposedly extreme strangeness and exoticism of its country of origin. Mikawa's statement is important as it brings to light the phenomenon of reference between man-

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<sup>1</sup> MIKAWA Toshiji, « Nihon no noizu (zenpen) » (Japanese Noise Music – Part one), *Japanoise.net*, January 2004. URL : <http://www.japanoise.net/j/incapa14.htm>  
*Id.*, « Nihon no noizu (kōhen) » (Japanese Noise Music – Part two) *Japanoise.net*, January 2005. URL : <http://www.japanoise.net/j/incapa15.htm>

made sound and its cultural origin – as if the properties of this sound could provide insights into the society that generates it. The sound of Japanese Noise is thus projected onto the bedrock of “Japaneseness” – whatever its nature may be. Likewise, as emphasized by recent Japanese studies<sup>2</sup>, since modern times, Japan, as a society “on the outskirts” of the referential West, has been building itself by mirroring various aspects of this centre. In other words, Japan makes itself in a movement of going back-and-forth with the West. Therefore, it appears reasonable to think that in fact, the idea of Noise music as being tinged by an intense strangeness and exoticism is nothing more than the result of strategies of variation and differentiation maintained within the building process of contemporary Japan in contrast to Western nations. Within this presentation and through the prism of Noise in Japan, we will be questioning ourselves on how the enjoyment and production of sound in an artistic capacity can be linked to the creation and development of cultural characteristics; this will be done both in the context of contemporary society and, by extension, in an ahistorical, essentialized fashion. Noise as a research vector is an interesting choice as, by going beyond a strictly musical framework, it convenes the culture of sound in a broader sense.

Even though the musical genre called Noise in Japan – with its technical and aesthetic idiosyncrasies – only truly appears from the second half of the 1980s, it is commonly agreed that its premise emerges at the end of the 1970s in the wake of Psychedelic and Experimental Rock music. At that time, the rise of Rock forms in Europe and the United-States lead to the creation of multiple expressions such as Punk, No Wave, and Industrial Music; all proved exciting for their subversive character, their novel sound discoveries – sometimes borrowing from the forefront of

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<sup>2</sup> See SAKAI Naoki, *Translation and Subjectivity – On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis / London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 231 p.  
LUCKEN Michael, *Les Fleurs artificielles – Pour une dynamique de l’imitation*, Paris, Publications du Centre d’Études Japonaises de l’Inalco, 2012, 158 p.

contemporary music, and most of all for their spontaneity. In an era where records produced in the West were still little circulated in Japan and expensive, the music they contained epitomized a certain ideal of modernity for Japanese youth, able to answer their desire for relaxed technique and expressive requirements. It constituted, in a way, a model for creating with no prior formal training. Following its introduction however, this music was not merely imitated as people actively sought to personally reinterpret it; this endeavour was not as much about synthesis as it was about transcendence towards new singular and audacious forms. Within this process, the various creations were therefore marked by a strong subjectivity, in a climate prone to artistic rivalries. The outline of what would later be known as Noise emerged, in an effort to rationally group this sound production: some kind of travesty of Rock music as it was imported, stripped bare of its formal structures, leaving only its raw energy delivered in the most forthright and violent fashion. Yet the protest value of Noise music was significantly milder than its models: as Mikawa Toshiji<sup>3</sup> says, information reaching Japan was fragmentary and the political dimension of this music in its original environment was sometimes misunderstood; in any case, it was not a case of projecting its cultural properties onto the realities of Japanese society, but rather to use it as a purely cutting-edge and defiant sound material. Although Noise music is not very politically loaded, in that it conveys no clear message against capitalism or the government the way Punk does for instance, it constitutes, at best, a space for collective catharsis, where the harshness and inconsistencies of daily life are staged as ruled by social norms and driven by institutional and consumerist needs.

The ethnomusicologist David Novak observes that, as Noise sets itself as an established genre and its disc production starts spreading on an international scale, the United-States and Europe start developing an imaginary picture depicting a national

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<sup>3</sup> MIKAWA Toshiji, *op. cit.*

“noisy” scene that forms “a cohesive, politically transgressive, and locally resistant community<sup>4</sup>”; that is, like “a version [for Westerners] of their own ideal musical world in an unknown cultural space<sup>5</sup>”. As a consequence, Noise is given a doubly “extreme” character, first relative to the radically anti-musical nature of the sound it produces, then to its origin in the Far East onto which are projected ideas of difference, oddity, and fascinating esotericism. The stereotypical image of Japan, outside time, evolving in an indeterminate space “between tradition and modernity”, sensual, perverse, made of a people with cryptic and alienated customs, makes up a prism through which the understanding, or rather non-understanding, of Noise is refracted. In other words, Noise music appears vague and disturbing in part because the society that generates it is itself thought of as fundamentally “foreign” and because this otherness is aurally and brutally forced upon its audience.

David Novak rightly says that the “extreme” nature of Noise is truly formed in the crucible of the circulation of works, of creators with an international audience<sup>6</sup>: as a testimony, we can see what happens over time to the typical pictorial aesthetic of compilations targeted at the foreign markets, in general taking advantage of a fantasy composed of eroticism, weirdness, and grotesque, of fuzzy “tradition” and “modernity”. Noise ends up forging its identity through what could be called a vulgar exoticism, wished by the receivers and maintained by organs of distribution that respond to this demand. Mikawa Toshiji asserts that this representation of Noise is totally narrow, even wrong with regards to its primal reality; there is a danger that it will in turn influence musicians who will thenceforth think their art through this

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<sup>4</sup> NOVAK David, *Japanoise – Music at the Edge of Circulation*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

framework<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, we can wonder if the development of this peculiar exoticism is not the logical outcome of creative approaches set up by the authors of Noise themselves. To answer this question, we need to go back to the origins of Noise and its underlying phonic ambitions.

According to Hino Mayuko (1959-), musician and performer, sound produced in the context of Noise practices in Japan relies primarily on listening modalities specific to the Japanese people<sup>8</sup>. She asserts that the aptitude of Japanese to grab the sounds of Nature is high, and that this is expressed for example through an old interest imbued with a fairly sophisticated appreciation for the whisper of water flowing in the mountains, then the singing of birds and cicadas: sounds that, melodious and pleasant to the Japanese, would be but background noise to Westerners<sup>9</sup>. Here, we can think that Hino likely makes reference to the social seasonal practice of *mushi kiki*, which consisted during the Edo period in going to some specific location to listen to the singing of insects. The *mushi kiki* contributed to the development of a regional market for selling insects and cages to keep them, market about which the British – later naturalized Japanese – author Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) published a short but important text in 1898, estimating its emergence around the seventeenth century<sup>10</sup>. The text is reissued many times, in Japan as well, and as a result *Mushi kiki*, although not observed today, still lives in a number of discussions to express what is thought of as the specific nature of Japanese aural culture. After mentioning the existence of this practice to highlight some kind of natural opposition with Western culture, Hino Mayuko carries on by saying that

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<sup>7</sup> MIKAWA Toshiji, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> HINO Mayuko, JIBIKI Yūichi, « Interview with Hino Mayuko », *Eater*, vol. 6, spring 1999, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> HEARN Lafcadio, « Insect-Musicians », in *Exotics and Retrospectives*, Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1917 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1898), p. 45.

nowadays, the Japanese urban environment – extremely rich in auditory information – constitutes a pool of natural sounds close to the people<sup>11</sup> apparently from which to draw in order to create. In this regard, Noise must be understood as decidedly positive as it weaves a direct link between modernity and tradition that we reactivate in the process, between listening modalities and production of sound, then between what comes from spontaneous cultural practices and the idea of a common cultural background. This perspective echoes Mikawa Toshiji's aforementioned statements, according to which Japanese creation relies on the means of a truly national sensibility whereby things are captured in their movement and variation, in opposition to the dry systematic rationality of what is considered to be Western thinking. The idea that Noise captures the sensory reality of the world permeates most of the production. Thus, even though it borrows certain forms from Western counter-culture, it is with the sole intention of keeping only its aural substance, a type of raw energy cleared of its structures, be they musical, cultural, or social. The erotic aspect of Noise, excessively emphasized as mentioned earlier, is therefore understood as the figurative extension of its assertion of the organicity of the sound thereby produced.

The dialectical opposition establishing the Japanese as a people that perceives and consequently produces sounds differently from Westerners is not new; some similar traces can be found in the work of the musical avant-garde after the war, when Japan, newly turned towards an international context, had to reinvent its art. The famous piece *November Steps* (1967) by composer Takemitsu Tōru (1930-1996), whose structure exposes the contrast between Japanese traditional music and Western classical music, is an example of this trend. According to Takemitsu and many other composers from the same generation, indeed, in contrast with Western music which organises itself around sounds with fixed pitches articulated within a strict temporal

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<sup>11</sup> HINO Mayuko, JIBIKI Yūichi, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

framework, Japanese music favours loose rhythms and impure sounds in an attempt to reproduce the richness of sounds found in Nature<sup>12</sup>. While noise and musical sound refer to traditionally opposite spheres in Western countries, Japan rediscovers at that time that they do not need to be distinguished. What was yet up to that time but a vague technical detail consequently finds itself conceptualized by composers and musicologists; it becomes one of the major and considered timeless foundations of Japanese musical art. It goes without saying that performing a comparison of Japanese music criteria with those of Western music using elements specific to the latter, only compounded differences as they were created. In the wake of these new musical theories, the taste for the non-discrimination of noise tended to transcend the context of art to be reused in the essentialist speech of a few thinkers; this speech being meant to justify the alternative modernity, at the same time universal and particular, of Japan. There is the well-known case of physician Tsunoda Tadanobu (1926-) who, in the 1970s and 1980s, studied the reaction of individuals from different ethnicity to various audio stimuli and came to the conclusion that, in short, language plays a central role in the configuration of brain functions and, consequently, leads to the formation of specific cultural practices<sup>13</sup>. Following this approach, a physiological justification was given for the pronounced interest of the Japanese for the sounds of nature and their unique ability to treat them. The work of Tsunoda received an enthusiastic popular reception in Japan – in spite of some doubts raised by some researchers as to the validity of the results. His work was particularly influential among composers and musicologists who could then use scientific evidence to support their task of restoring Japanese musical theory. The impact of these ideas was far-reaching, as today they fully pervade, as we can see, the abstract foundation of Noise. In this light, it seems

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<sup>12</sup> TAKEMITSU Tōru, «Hitotsu no oto» (A Unique Sound), in TAKEMITSU Tōru, *Chosakushū I* (collection 1), Tōkyō, Shinchōsha, 2000, p. 201-202.

<sup>13</sup> NUSS Steven, «Hearing Japanese, Hearing Takemitsu», *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 21 no. 4, p. 36.



clear that the extreme exoticism that determines Noise is not simply the result of the fantasies of an international audience: if this element of exoticism proves so prevalent when defining Noise, it is first and foremost because it accounts for the created chasm, in Japanese imagination, between a referential Western musical culture and a national particularism, hence “something else“, that responds to it.

Noise is one of the rare Japanese musical expressions to have really found an audience internationally. Although it has influenced the world’s “noisy” production and thereby acquired a certain universal character, it still remains purposefully and solidly bound to Japaneseness, for it is by emphasizing its proclaimed exoticism that it distinguishes itself and thus exists as an authentic object. At a time when international exchanges are dense and where cultural differences tend to fade away as they get tangled in the sphere of globality, the construction of a specific culture of sound proves essential for resisting the onslaught of totality, which is necessarily Western. Of course, this culturized stance varies strongly between artists; it is unavoidable to position one’s work within a wide stratified space whose extremities are the global and the particular. However, and finally, as the musicologist Christian Utz appropriately states, while research tends today to consider cultural identities as constructions, it is necessary not to attenuate the cohesive forces of individuals around such imagination to the benefit of purely individual analysis: it is indeed through the construction and deconstruction over time of concepts related to cultural identity that audio production – by digging in differences – remains alive, stimulating, and source of enquiry<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> See UTZ Christian, « Neo-nationalism and Anti-Essentialism in East Asia Art Music since the 1960s and the Role of Musicology », in OH Hee Sook (dir.), *Contemporary Music in East Asia*, Seoul, Soul National University Press, 2014, pp. 3-28.