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► **To cite this version:**

Jeremy Corral. Recorded sound in electroacoustic music and the representation of the social subject in post-war Japan. Trajectories in Sonic Japan: An interdisciplinary workshop, Jun 2023, Tokyo, Japan. hal-04149481

HAL Id: hal-04149481

<https://hal.science/hal-04149481>

Submitted on 3 Jul 2023

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Trajectories in Sonic Japan: An interdisciplinary workshop, 21 June 2023

**Recorded sound in electroacoustic music and the representation of the social
subject in post-war Japan**

One of the distinctive features of early electroacoustic music is that its material is recorded sound: it is composed of sounds that are fixed on a medium – usually magnetic tape – and then transformed using specific tools. The world of sound as experienced in everyday life is certainly reframed and transformed by the process of remediation of sound, but what remains of this sound in the musical product is its known material and discursive origin. In this way, recorded sound constitutes a surface for interaction between the artist and his environment: it is the place where sensitive reality is captured, but it is also the place where collective representations are confronted with the individual imagination. Through the double gesture of recording and transforming sound, composers understand that the active exchange with the world of sound symbolically recentres the subject, as a notion that enhances the ability of human beings to be self-aware and to shape their own destiny through social engagement¹.

I propose that the way in which a composer thinks about sound and works with it by means of recording is linked to the modalities of collective representation of the individual's relationship to the society in which he or she participates. In order to

¹ BERTUCCI Marie-Madeleine, “La notion de sujet” (The notion of subject), *Le Français aujourd'hui* (The French language today), n° 157, February 2007, p. 11

ascertain this, this paper will explore the evolution of the relationship between the apprehension of recorded sound and the perception of social space and the Japanese subject in the post-war era, using a few examples of specific electroacoustic music. The time frame chosen extends from the first experiments made possible by recording technology in the mid-1950s to the mass production of consumer recorders and the democratisation of creative techniques around the 1970s.

Recorded sound broadcasting, in other words the reproduction of recorded sound, recontextualises in the here and now sounds which, through recording, have been taken away from the continuity of reality and which, by being fixed on their support, are out of time and out of place. With each encounter with recorded sound, there is a process of meaning-making on the part of the listener. In the case of post-war broadcasting, which was largely underpinned by the exploitation of recorded sound, the ubiquity of mediated sounds also helped to construct a collective experience of the world of sound, through which a shared time and space were created and the imaginary bonds of the national community were strengthened.

In the early 1950s, the tape recorder attracted the attention of artists and composers, who realised that sound could be a working material with plastic properties. Recording on magnetic tape made it possible to grasp the sound environment and examine it in new ways. Recording also opened up music to a whole new world of sound. Industrial and radio organisations were therefore committed to supporting artistic research into sound production equipment. Through the establishment of collaborative programmes, the sound engineering, arts and media communities benefited from new resources made available to them, and they worked together to develop technique. These research programmes generally led to the creation of studios for experimental music, commonly known today as

‘electroacoustic music’. These studios gave composers privileged access to new sound technologies with which to develop new musical forms.

Composers Mayuzumi Toshirō and Shibata Minao were among the first to propose new ways of thinking about music through recording. They were both keenly interested in the new musical currents coming out of Europe, to which they responded by means of a creation that they strived to make meaningful through a dual local and international anchoring. Mayuzumi and Shibata created music with a field of sound possibilities considered at the time to be unlimited through recording.

The first part of Mayuzumi's 『ミュージック今クレートのための作品「X.Y.Z.」』 *Myūjikkū konkurēto no tame no sakuhin* “X.Y.Z” (1953) is mainly made up of sounds of industrial origin that can be likened to those of war: metallic beats, sounds of planes in flight, sounds of artillery pieces, sirens. We can propose that the parts consisting of highly distorted sounds can be associated to uncertainty, the loss of individual autonomy and the perversion of the sense of ethnic community at the time of propaganda. The approach invites thinking of history no longer as an overarching force that determines the movement of the world, but as an active environment with which the composer must ‘compose’ musically and ‘negotiate’ both psychologically and socially.

Shibata's 『立体放送のためのミュージックコンクレート』 *Rittai hōsō no tame no myūjikkū konkurēto* (1955), on the other hand, is free of any discursive element. It is made up of sounds of different kinds – sounds linked to natural elements, sounds expressing the living, mechanical sounds – which follow one another in an abstract development. The choice of these sounds seems rather symptomatic of the difficulty with which the breadth of sound material offered by the recording was

considered. There is, however, an attempt to suggest rhythmic correspondences between the various elements². This is probably to indicate that the composer was now taking his place in a rich sonic environment that he was discovering thanks to the tape recorder. In more abstract terms, it is also possible to consider the approach as a desire to symbolically reposition the individual within a social, natural and technological environment with which relations would henceforth be symmetrical. This takes on particular meaning after the period of conflict, which was marked by the subjugation of the people for the war effort.

In both cases, the creation of music is the concrete result of a compositional process underpinned in part by the subjective interpretation of the sounds available to the composer. It is thus suggested that, insofar as this process takes place within a historical context imagined as ethnically shared, the individual imagination and the social imaginary considered in its national dimension enter into resonance and symbolically orient the understanding of the social subject in the post-war period.

I skip ahead to the end of the 1960s and highlight what is noteworthy in comparison with the electroacoustic production of the early 1950s: a general change in the nature of the recorded sounds used, which probably goes hand in hand with a change in the way of imagining the relationship with sounds, within a technical ecosystem conceived at that time as promoting symmetrical relationships between composers and technicians³.

² SHIBATA Minao 柴田南雄, “Myujikku konkurēto shimatsuki – Sono ichi” 『ミュジック・コンクリート始末記 その一』 (Account on musique concrète – First part), *Ongaku geijutsu* 音楽藝術 (Art of music), vol. 14 n° 4, April 1956, p. 34

³ CORRAL Jeremy, *Pratiques et esthétique de la musique pour bande japonaise : le cas du studio de musique électronique de la NHK (1952-1970)* (Practice and Aesthetics of Japanese Tape Music: A Case Study of the NHK Electronic Music Studio (1952-1970)), PhD dissertation under the tutoring of LUCKEN Michael, Inalco, 2021, p. 224-231

Using recordings of recordings, Ichiyanagi Toshi in 『東京 1969』 *Tōkyō 1969* (1968) and Shinohara Makoto in 『ブロードキャスティング』 *Burōdokyasutingu* (1973) made use of significant elements of everyday life: they used already mediated sounds from television and radio broadcasts, rock music albums and popular songs, to which they applied effects of entanglement and transition. The sonic space that is created is confused and noisy; in this way it embraces the structure of a daily life marked by the sensitive reception of a multitude of non-hierarchical sound information. The questions here are: what are the causes of this change in the perception of the sound environment, and what does this change tell us about the way one think about and reappropriate social space?

To answer the first question, it should be noted that with the development of radio, television and the recording industry, the presence of mediated sound was becoming increasingly important, in both private and public spaces. To answer the second question, mediated sound embodied the socially organising dimension of the mass media. It reflected new lifestyles and new forms of sociability based on consumer practices. Although in the 1960s the programmed stimulation of consumption was seen to some extent as a way for the government to divert public attention from the political question, the fact remains that consumer practices contributed to the emergence of new ways of asserting the individual. What we can probably hear in the two works presented through the staging of mediated sounds is the structure of a national space that is no longer to be imagined as belonging to a community united by the traumatic experience of history and by the need to reinvent itself through a process of collective self-determination, but as fragmented by a multitude of individual everyday experiences that intersect and overlap.

At the same time, the market for personal tape recorders was developing. It is likely that the interpretation of the sound environment by electroacoustic music composers around the end of the 1960s echoed the move by manufacturers and the media to promote tape recorders. From the 1960s to the 1970s, Sony produced a series of increasingly lightweight and handy devices, aimed at the professional market but also popular with amateurs. It represented a commercial success that can probably be explained by the emergence of a new social category made up of young adults who were enjoying a higher standard of living than their elders did at the same age, and for whom consumption and leisure were part of the conditions for fulfilling themselves as individuals – a situation that coincides with the country's rapid economic development⁴.

From the 1950s onwards, an amateur practice of ‘hunting’ for sound developed in Japan, known as *namaroku*. Around the 1960s and 1970s, many competitions were launched. They were organised by various press organs, industrial groups, record companies and distributors. The aim was mainly to promote equipment. The made works represented individual accounts of an encounter with sound and an active exchange with it, aimed in particular at reconfiguring socially constructed space and time. Whether the sound creations retraced for example ten years of discussion between members of the same family or several hours of train journeys within the national territory, these were entirely new experiences of everyday life that were imagined, created in a format of just a few minutes, and shared with other sound consumers through the limited edition of records. In this way, private and public, individual and collective spaces merged and were reconfigured within a technical recording economy in which the production of sound was henceforth as much in the

⁴ SMITH Martyn David, “Sound hunting in postwar Japan: Recording technology, aurality, mobility, and consumerism”, *Sound Studies*, 2021, vol. 7 n° 1, p. 69

hands of consumers as it was in the hands of experts. Through these amateur practices of sound recording, sound served as a value of social exchange between individuals whose relational model was re-hierarchised compared to the general context of radio production. It cannot be said that the model for the production of electroacoustic music for radio had been completely transformed by this synchronous movement of amateur sound creation. It is undeniable, however, that a convergence was taking place between the two systems in three ways: 1) the establishment of a production ecosystem supported by a network of non-hierarchical inter-individual relationships; 2) the choice of sounds and the way in which these sounds were organized; 3) the way in which these sounds were related to the collective ordeal of a fragmented daily life of individual experiences.

To conclude, this brief overview of the development of the use of recorded sound in post-war Japanese electroacoustic music shows that the manner in which sound is thought about and worked with is linked to changes in sound technology and the ways of producing and receiving sound, the representation of society and the ways in which the subject acts. Examining sound in the contemporary era means examining, in a specific spatial and temporal context, the real and imaginary relationships between individual, collective, and national space, between imagination and the imaginary. From a historical perspective such as the one we are interested in here, we understand that sound allows us to understand in new terms the relationship between technological and technical developments and the evolution of social and cultural representations within a given territory.