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In Conversation with Toshie Kakinuma: Jōji Yuasa, Takemitsu Tōru and Japanese Musique Concrète

Toshie Kakinuma

Born in Shizuoka prefecture, Japan, Toshie Kakinuma is a distinguished musicologist, critic, and translator whose work centers on experimental and vocal music of the 20th and 21st centuries. She received her Bachelor of Music in Musicology from Kunitachi College of Music in 1977 and went on to complete her Master's degree at Ochanomizu University in 1981. Pursuing further research abroad, she earned her Ph.D. in Music from the University of California, San Diego in 1989, where her doctoral studies focused on the American composer and instrument maker Harry Partch.

Upon her return to Japan, Kakinuma held teaching positions at several institutions, including Meiji Gakuin University and Takushoku University, before joining the faculty of Kyoto City University of Arts as Professor of Musicology. At Kyoto, she also served as Director of the Archival Research Center, contributing significantly to the development of resources on contemporary Japanese and American music. Her scholarly interests encompass American experimentalism, modern Japanese composition, organology, and the intersections of sound, language, and the body.

Kakinuma is the author of *American Experimental Music as Ethnic Music* (Film Art Sha, 2005) and *The Birth of "Atonality"* (Ongaku-no-tomo Sha, 2020, The 30th Yoshida Hidekazu Prize), has written extensively on figures such as Yūji Yuasa, Tōru Takemitsu, and Lou Harrison. In addition to her critical and scholarly output, she has produced influential Japanese translations of key 20th-century music texts, including John Cage's *Silence* and Alex Ross's *The Rest Is Noise*.

When she wrote her essay "Yūji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language" (*Ongaku Geijutsu*, October 1984), Kakinuma was an emerging voice in Japan's critical and academic circles, closely engaged with the evolving aesthetics of postwar vocal and electronic music.

Toshie Kakinuma began studying piano at the age of four and has continued to play throughout her life. During her secondary education, she entered a specialized music high school as a piano major. Her teachers, however, soon recognized her exceptional aptitude for analytical and critical thinking and encouraged her to redirect her focus toward musicology. Kakinuma embraced this change, from early on, she envisioned herself as a music critic. In the Japanese academic context, the field of musicology has traditionally encompassed both historical and ethnomusicological perspectives, an interdisciplinarity that would later characterize her own scholarly approach.

Kakinuma pursued her master's degree in musicology at Ochanomizu University,¹ where she devoted her thesis to contemporary vocal music, focusing on the works of Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, and Dieter Schnebel. This early research reflected her growing interest in European avant-garde vocal practices and the ways in which composers extended the expressive possibilities of the human voice beyond linguistic meaning.

After her marriage, she moved to the United States to pursue graduate studies at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) where she studied with both the composer Jōji Yuasa,² and Jann Pasler,³ the latter a specialist in Stravinsky and French modernism.

Kakinuma completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the American experimental composer Harry Partch,⁴ whose uniquely constructed microtonal instruments were preserved at San Diego

¹ Ochanomizu University (*Ochanomizu Joshi Daigaku*) is one of Japan's leading national women's universities, founded in 1875 originally as the *Tokyo Women's Normal School*. It has long been a center for musicological and cultural studies, known for integrating Western music theory, Japanese traditional music, and ethnomusicology within its curriculum. The musicology program has produced several influential scholars in postwar Japan, including specialists in contemporary and experimental music.

→ See: Ochanomizu University official website, Faculty of Letters and Education – Musicology Program, <https://www.ocha.ac.jp>

² Jōji Yuasa (1929–2024) was a pioneering Japanese composer of avant-garde and electronic music. A founding member of the *Jikken Kōbō* (*Experimental Workshop*) in Tokyo in the early 1950s, Yuasa explored musique concrète, psychoacoustics, and the human voice as compositional material. In the 1980s and 1990s, he was affiliated with the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), where he taught composition and electronic music, influencing both Japanese and international students. His works often address the relationship between sound and language, as in *Voices Coming* (1972) and *A Study of the Voice* (1955).

→ See: Yuasa, Jōji. *The Music of Jōji Yuasa* (Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo Sha, 1993); and obituary, *The Japan Times*, July 23, 2024.

³ Jann Pasler, musicologist, historian, pianist, documentary filmmaker, and distinguished professor, University of California, San Diego. Pasler has published widely on new American and French music, interdisciplinarity, interculturality, race, gender, and radio. In recent years, her work on why music mattered in Third Republic France has expanded to music, new media, and governance in the French colonial and postcolonial culture, 1860s-1960s, with particular emphasis on Africa and Vietnam. See: <http://musicweb.ucsd.edu/~jpasler/wp/>

⁴ Harry Partch (1901–1974) was an American composer, theorist, and instrument builder, widely recognized as one of the most original figures of twentieth-century experimental music. Rejecting the Western equal-tempered scale, he developed a microtonal system of 43 tones per octave, constructing his own unique instruments – such as the Chromelodeon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls, and Kithara – to realize this tuning. His music theater works,

State University at the time. She regarded these instruments as works of exceptional historical and artistic significance, warranting close analytical and organological study.⁵ Her research into Partch's oeuvre led her to question conventional notions of tradition and modernity in contemporary composition. For Kakinuma, the use of ancient instruments in modern works does not necessarily signify either *tradition* or *renewal*. In Partch's case, the reconstruction of ancient Greek instruments such as the *kithara* and *aulos* was not an act of historical recovery but one of imaginative creation – a re-invention of antiquity as a new, self-contained system. Partch sought not to preserve the past but to invent an alternate lineage, a visionary continuity that existed outside of historical authenticity.

In Kakinuma's interpretation, tradition itself is a problematic and largely modernist construct. Rather than denoting genuine continuity with the past, it emerges as a conceptual response to a perceived rupture or loss. Tradition, in this sense, is not the persistence of the old but the *invention* of a genealogy that legitimizes the new. Kakinuma argues that Partch's project exemplifies this paradox: his imagined tradition was not a falsification of history but a poetic reconstruction – an act of creative synthesis that entwined invention with resonance, rather than replication.

As a doctoral student, Kakinuma was required to select several areas of specialization, including American experimental music, contemporary vocal music. Under the guidance of Jōji Yuasa, she developed her early inquiries into the interplay of sound and language, an interest inspired by Yuasa's own experimental vocal compositions. Her seminal essay, "Jōji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language" (*Ongaku Geijutsu*, October 1984),⁶ explores the liminal zone between linguistic utterance and pure sound, investigating the non-semantic dimensions of vocal expression. In doing so, she draws compelling parallels between Yuasa's works and those of Luciano Berio (*Sequenza III*), or György Ligeti (*Aventures*).⁷

These early essays established Kakinuma as one of the most perceptive and original

including *The Bewitched* (1955) and *Delusion of the Fury* (1965–66), combine speech, gesture, and ritual. After his death, many of his instruments were kept at San Diego State University (SDSU), where they became the focus of early scholarly research, including Toshie Kakinuma's doctoral dissertation.

→ See: Gilmore, Bob. *Harry Partch: A Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; and Partch, Harry. *Genesis of a Music*. 2nd ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1974.

⁵ Harry Partch's instruments were indeed preserved at SDSU until their relocation to the Harry Partch Institute; cf. Gilmore, B.: *Harry Partch: A Biography*, 1998.

⁶ Kakinuma, Toshie. «Jōji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language», in: *Ongaku Geijutsu*, no. 10, no. 11, no. 12, 1984.

⁷ Luciano Berio's *Sequenza III* (1965) for solo voice and György Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962) are seminal works of the postwar avant-garde, exploring extended vocal techniques, non-semantic utterance, and experimental forms of musical drama that expanded the possibilities of the human voice in contemporary music.

critical voices in Japan's postwar music scene. Her nuanced analyses combined linguistic sensitivity, philosophical depth, and cross-cultural awareness – qualities that would define her later career as a scholar of experimental music and a translator of modernist thought.⁸

Jōji Yuasa and the *Apparatus Called Language*

Jōji Yuasa (1929–2024) was a central figure in postwar Japanese experimental music who treated the human voice as both an instrument and a sonic material, exploring its acoustic potential and electronic transformation. His work aligns with broader trends in Japanese *musique concrète*,⁹ emphasizing sound over meaning. For Toshie Kakinuma, Yuasa's compositions *Aoi no Ue* (1961)¹⁰ and *Voices Coming* (1969)¹¹ represent two of the most significant works in the history of Japanese experimental music for their pioneering use of voice, tape, and early electronic media.

Without basing itself on any text whatsoever, there are only sounds. Unlike Boulez or Berio, Yuasa did not perform the operation of decomposing a text into syllables or phonemes [*onsetsu ya onso*]. This was probably not for the sake of procedural simplification. Rather, the very core of the work lies in not beginning from a text that possesses explicit meaning, but instead returning to a certain prior state of language – to a kind of chaos. Therefore, the text should be something that comes into being *after* the work, not something that exists before it.¹²

The voice in *Voices Coming* was realized through the assembly of pre-recorded utterances, constructed via tape montage. The material existed prior to composition; the act of composing

⁸ With these essays, Kakinuma won a competition for music critics, establishing her early reputation as a perceptive and innovative writer on new music.

⁹ *Musique concrète* is a term coined in 1948 by the French composer, engineer, and acoustician Pierre Schaeffer (1910–1995). He pioneered this new method of composition based on recorded real-world sounds – *objets sonores* – which are assembled and transformed through tape manipulation.

See: Pierre Schaeffer: *À la recherche d'une musique concrète*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952.

¹⁰ Yūji Yuasa: *Aoi no Ue*, electronic music, tape, [27'], 1961.

Libretto: Nō theater text, electronic music / fixed media, Studio Sogetsu Tokyo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6Uc4hrCyKw> [accessed 18.12.2025]

https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_006.html [accessed 18.12.2025]

¹¹ *Voices Coming* (1969), for stereophonic tape, realized at NHK Studio of Electronic Music in three parts: I. Telephono-pathy – II Interview – III A memorial of two men of peace, murdered.

¹² Kakinuma, Toshie: «Jōji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language», in: *Ongaku Geijutsu*, Issue 11, November 1984, pp. 105–109, p.107.

thus consisted primarily in the organization and spatial arrangement of recorded voices, rather than their production.¹³ Unlike Berio however:

Berio, when incorporating recorded conversation into his work, uses it as part of an amalgam with other prose texts and electronic sounds, Yuasa's method is far more thoroughgoing. In *Voices Coming*, the composer restricts himself entirely to *raw recorded speech* as material.¹⁴

As Yuasa's work developed, the question of sound and language led inevitably to a deeper concern: not only *what kind of language* a composition employs, but *what kind of voice* it requires. The issue of the voice's nature became inseparable from the problem of constructing the mechanisms that produce it – technological, linguistic, and bodily alike.¹⁵

Voices Coming, realized for stereophonic tape at the *NHK Studio for Electronic Music*,¹⁶ draws on recordings of telephone communications from an era when operators still manually connected calls. The work eliminates meaningful words from the original dialogue, reducing speech to vocal fragments such as “ah...” and “oh...,” thereby transforming everyday linguistic exchange into abstract sonic gesture.

*Interview [Voices Coming, Part II]*¹⁷ exposes the hidden musicality of language, usually unnoticed by us, by cutting away the meaningful parts from everyday language, which ought primarily to convey meaning. It is, so to speak, the reverse side – the negative – of language. The subsidiary ornaments of language, which could not exist independently in the space of daily life, here come to possess autonomous significance. The everyday meaning is stripped away, and a new meaning is generated. In this way, there arises a twofold act – “the ‘emptying of everyday language and the enrichment of non-everyday meaning’.”¹⁸

¹³ Kakinuma, Toshie: «Jōji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language», in: *Ongaku Geijutsu*, Issue 10, October 1984, pp. 100–103.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 100

¹⁵ Kakinuma, «Jōji Yuasa», Issue 11.

¹⁶ The *NHK Electronic Music Studio* was established in Tokyo in 1955, modeled after the *NWDR studio* in Cologne, Germany. It became a pioneering center for electronic music in Japan, equipped with advanced technologies such as tone-generating and audio processing equipment, recording and radiophonic equipment, *Ondes Martenots*, Monochords and Melochords, sine-wave oscillators, tape recorders, ring modulators, band-pass filters, and four- and eight-channel mixers. Composers associated with the studio included Toshiro Mayuzumi, Minao Shibata, Jōji Yuasa, Toshi Ichianagi, and Tōru Takemitsu. The studio's first electronic compositions were completed in 1955, marking a significant development in the history of electronic music in Japan. See: https://discoverarchives.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/nihon-hoso-kyokai-electronic-music-studio?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁷ Jōji Yuasa: *Voices Coming: I. Telephonopathy*, II. *Interview*, III. *In Memory of Two Slain Peace Warriors*.

¹⁸ Kakinuma, «Jōji Yuasa», Issue 10, p. 102.

In the final section of *Voices Coming*, Yuasa incorporates the recorded voices of Martin Luther King Jr. and Inajirō Asanuma¹⁹ – the latter a Japanese politician assassinated in 1960 – thereby situating the work within the social and political resonances of its time. In Yuasa’s conception, linguistic time and musical time unfold concurrently, generating a third temporal dimension: a hybrid domain in which poetic and musical temporality coincide.

This process reveals that, in such a procedure, words regain their own distinctive and autonomous form and time.

But at that moment, the time of words is no longer merely the time of words.

It is simultaneously the manifestation of poetic time and musical time.²⁰

Another exemplary work employing the human voice is *Aoi no Ue* (1961),²¹ which draws upon the vocal aesthetics of Noh theatre, integrating traditional timbres and inflections into an electronic music composition. The piece demonstrates Yuasa’s ongoing effort to reconcile Japanese vocal traditions with the technological and conceptual innovations of the postwar avant-garde.

Yuasa’s oeuvre is both extensive and diverse. Among his most celebrated compositions is *IKON* (1966),^{22a} a work for white noise that exemplifies his exploration of sound as pure phenomenon, independent of linguistic or tonal reference.

Toshie Kakinuma analyzed Yuasa’s treatment of language and voice in a trilogy of essays entitled “Jōji Yuasa and the Apparatus Called Language”, published in *Ongaku Geijutsu*.²³ In these essays, she situates Yuasa’s work within a broader international context, comparing it to vocal experiments by Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio or Karlheinz Stockhausen. Kakinuma observes that the history of vocal music since the 1950s can be read as a process in

¹⁹ Inejiro Asanuma (1898–1960 leader of the Japanese Socialist Party) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), civil rights activist, use of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience against discrimination.

²⁰ Kakinuma: «Jōji Yuasa», Issue 10, p. 103.

²¹ See footnote 10)

²² Jōji Yuasa: *IKON*, multi-track, white noise [9:21], 1967.

Jōji Yuasa’s *IKON* is a seminal work in Japanese electronic music, composed at the *NHK Electronic Music Studio*. The piece utilizes white noise as its primary sound source, which Yuasa sculpts using bandpass and multiband filter banks to create a dynamic polyphony within the sonic texture. This approach contrasts with Western electronic music traditions, where electronic sounds are often layered to compose music. Yuasa’s technique emphasizes the manipulation of a single sound source, showcasing his innovative approach to electronic composition.

Listen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYEOqtrtCV8&list=PLnAsL5aM-Kf-cWRuau4X5OpM9LtAOpznl&index=30>

²³ See footnote 6, 8)

which language was systematically stripped of meaning, what Boulez once described as “the punishment of dismemberment:”

The history of vocal works since the 1950s has been one in which language was stripped of meaning – a history that, in Pierre Boulez’s words, “sentenced poetry to the punishment of dismemberment.” Karlheinz Stockhausen, in his electronic piece *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956), decomposed the boy’s recitation of the Old Testament into syllables [*onsetsu*] and phonemes [*onso*], synthetically reconstructing them so that words could be apprehended as sound-objects [*onkyō sozai*]. Berio’s *Thema – Omaggio a Joyce* (1958) likewise fragmented readings of Ulysses in English, French, and Italian, mixing them with electronic sounds to present ‘unintelligible words.’

Boulez, in *Cummings ist der Dichter* (1970), transferred the spatiality of e. e. cummings’s calligram poems into music, while Lutosławski, in *Trois poèmes d’Henri Michaux* (1963), used invented words, retaining only the formal shell [*fōrumu*] of language, to create a world reminiscent of a Balinese *kecak* chant. In such works, the human voice is no longer merely a medium for words. Berio’s *Sequenza III* (1965) and *Visage* (1961) pursued every possible vocal gesture – laughter, shouting, tongue-clicks, breath sounds – that could be produced orally.²⁴

Dieter Schnebel’s *Maulwerke*.^{25, 26} also belong to this context. Against this international backdrop, Yuasa’s work represents a distinct trajectory. His compositions pursue the ontological reality of the voice – the moment when speech transcends meaning and reverts to pure sound. Yuasa’s approach is thoroughly modern: it is grounded not in mysticism but in the acoustic and linguistic analysis of utterance. The voice, divested of semantic function, reappears as energy – a phenomenon at once bodily and abstract, situated between language and sound, meaning and vibration.

²⁴ Kakinuma: «Jōji Yuasa», Issue 10, p. 100.

²⁵ Dieter Schnebel (1930–2018) was a German composer, theologian, and music theorist, regarded as one of the most radical figures in postwar European experimental music. Closely associated with the Darmstadt School, Schnebel’s work extends serial and linguistic structures into the domains of gesture, body, and vocal performance. His music often explores the physical production of sound, the limits of language, and the intersection between speech, ritual, and theatre.

See: Schnebel, Dieter. *Visible Music: Selected Essays*, transl. by John Patrick Thomas. Köln: MusikTexte, 1998.

²⁶ *Maulwerke* [*literally mouth works*] is Schnebel’s large-scale composition for vocal ensemble, electronics, and spatial sound projection. Rather than setting text to music, it treats the human mouth and vocal apparatus as instruments producing pure phonetic, physiological, and gestural sounds – breathing, whispering, shouting, consonantal noise. The piece dissolves the boundary between speech and sound, inviting the listener to perceive the act of vocal production itself as music.

See: Schnebel, Dieter. *Maulwerke* (score). Universal Edition, Vienna, 1974; and Cottrell, Stephen. “The Voice as Instrument: Dieter Schnebel’s *Maulwerke*” in: *Contemporary Music Review* 21, no. 1 (2002): 5–20.

Takemitsu – *Sneezing Toward the Sun* – the *Vocal Trilogy*

In 1984, Toshie Kakinuma published a series of studies on Jōji Yuasa's vocal works. Years later, when she was invited to write about Japanese electronic music, she turned her attention to Tōru Takemitsu. At that time, she discovered that virtually no articles or books had addressed Takemitsu's early electronic works in detail, making him a particularly compelling subject. Koji Kawasaki's comprehensive book on Takemitsu had not yet appeared,²⁷ and Kakinuma – already deeply interested in new works for voice since her student years – saw an opportunity to reconsider this largely unexplored field from a new perspective.

Takemitsu's first experiments in electronic sound date from the early 1950s, and his *Vocal Trilogy* – *AI (Love)*, *Tree, Sky, Bird*, and *Clap Vocalism*²⁸ – marks an early culmination of his exploration of *musique concrète*.²⁹ The trilogy was commissioned by *Shin Nihon Hōsō* (*New Japan Broadcasting Company*, now *Mainichi Hōsō*),³⁰ one of Japan's first private radio stations, and was realized in its Tokyo studio. These works represent an important moment in Takemitsu's engagement with electronic composition and sound montage. Conceived for magnetic tape, they combine fragmented vocal sounds with recordings of everyday noises, which are electronically transformed into abstract sonic landscapes.

In the case of A·I, the text is only the word ai, which is composed of the /a/ and /i/ sounds, two of the cardinal vowels. These sounds are therefore the primary

²⁷ Koji Kawasaki is a Japanese musicologist and critic specializing in postwar and contemporary music, with particular expertise in electronic and experimental composition. His book *The Electronic Music of Tōru Takemitsu* (Tokyo: Artes Publishing, 2018) offers a comprehensive study of Takemitsu's engagement with electronic sound and tape composition, situating these works within both Japanese avant-garde practices and global developments in electroacoustic music.

²⁸ Tōru Takemitsu: *Vocal Trilogy*, magnetic tape, 1956–57, in three parts:

- *AI*, [1:45], 1956 – vocal utterances and breath sounds recorded on magnetic tape, meditation on intimacy and distance through electronically transformed human voices. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myG2F3LAOAK> (graphic score by Toshie Kakinuma).

further source: Thom Holmes: *Electronic and Experimental Music*, sixth edition, Routledge, 2020.

https://www.thomholmes.com/post/vintage-electronic-music-from-japan-part-1?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- *Tree, Sky, Bird* [*Ki.Sora.Tori*], [3:42], 1956 – vocal fragments and environmental sounds as an auditory landscape. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YWtBBZVzwE>

- *Clap Vocalism*, [1:45], (1956–1957) – bodily gestures – clapping, exhalation, and nonverbal vocal sounds <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMeHUG6Qv1A>

²⁹ see footnote 9)

³⁰ *Shin Nihon Hōsō* [*New Japan Broadcasting* refers to the predecessor of the *Mainichi Broadcasting System* (MBS). Established in 1951, it was one of Japan's first private radio stations. *Shin Nihon Hōsō* was an early postwar private broadcasting initiative established shortly after World War II, operating briefly before Japan's broadcasting system was reorganized under national regulation. Although short-lived, it contributed to the rapid expansion and modernization of Japan's radio infrastructure, which later enabled institutions like *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai NHK* [*Japan Broadcasting Corporation*] to develop technologically advanced facilities such as the *NHK Electronic Music Studio* (1955).

utterances of humans, fundamental enunciations generated before any word is formulated. [...] The actress, Kyoko Kishida, confirms this, saying, ‘We tried to speak in as many different kinds of manners as possible in order to meet the requirement of Mr. Takemitsu and Mr. Tanikawa’. The composer and the poet, by limiting the meaning of the text and the sounds produced, were able to incorporate a variety of paralinguistic markers into the work. In the next section, we will examine Vocalism A·I to see how these paralinguistic elements are introduced.^{31,32,33}

In these works, Takemitsu deliberately avoided the use of semantic language, focusing instead on the purely sonic qualities of the human voice and its incidental utterances. Unlike Pierre Schaeffer, who deconstructed speech into phonemes to construct *objets sonores*, Takemitsu’s method is less analytical and more poetic. His concern was not to dissect language scientifically, but to rediscover the bodily and experiential dimensions of sound. In this sense, he can be regarded as one of the pioneers of Japanese electronic and electroacoustic music, whose aesthetic rested on a natural, almost organic conception of sonic experience.³⁴

The title *Sneezing Toward the Sun* encapsulates this attitude. Takemitsu once explained that when he looked up at the sun, he would inevitably sneeze – an involuntary bodily reaction. This spontaneous gesture became, for him, an analogy for the act of composition.

Sneezing toward the sun’ apparently refers to a state in which the human body, exposed to the direct rays of the sun, reacts with sound. This behavior represents a state before art, one in which sounds have no meaning or function. He believed that that state was not irrelevant to music, and that *musique concrète* was to realise such a world³⁵

Just as sneezing occurs naturally when the body encounters light, sound arises as a reflexive response to life itself. His approach to *musique concrète* sought to reproduce this process: to create sonic situations that emerge naturally, free from artificial control or predetermined structure. For Takemitsu, the compositional act mirrored this principle – the extension of

³¹ Kyōko Kishida (1930–2006), Japanese actress and voice actress born in Tokyo. Kishida, Kyoko: „Takemitsu Toru o aishita onna no hitori toshite (As a Woman Who Loved Toru Takemitsu)“, in: *Takemitsu tōru zenshū (Complete Takemitsu Edition) 5*, Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2004, p. 356–359, p. 359.

³² Shuntarō Tanikawa (1931–2024), Japanese poet and translator.

³³ Toshie Kakinuma: „Sneezing Toward the Sun: The Human Voice in the *Musique concrète* of Toru Takemitsu,“ in: *Contemporary Music Review*, 2018, Vol. 37, Nos. 1–2, p. 20–35. p . <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2018.1453334> [accessed 25.10.2025].

³⁴ Alongside Tōru Takemitsu, major pioneers of Japanese electronic and electroacoustic music include Joji Yuasa, Toshiro Mayuzumi (1929–1997), Yoshiro Irino (1921–1980), Makoto Moroi (b. 1930), and Minao Shibata (1916–1996), all of whom contributed significantly to early postwar experiments with tape, electronic sound, and the formation of Japan’s electronic-music infrastructure. For more on Mayuzumi, see footnote 37)

³⁵ Kakinuma: «Sneezing», p. 22.

everyday experience into sound. *Sneezing Toward the Sun* describes a state before art.

This notion of a *state before art* directly informs Takemitsu's use of the voice. The voice, in his conception, belongs to daily life before it becomes stylized or formalized by artistic convention. He did not employ poetry or textual meaning but instead created a sound world derived from the ordinary, where the boundary between human expression and natural sound is blurred. In doing so, he distinguished himself from the Western postwar avant-garde, which often sought abstraction and the notion of *pure sound* as an aesthetic ideal.

The human voice is unique among sounds; it is different from instrumental sound or daily noises. The human voice is not a sound in the usual sense, but a special type of sound. Observing the duality of the human voice (its relationship to a word's meaning and its sound), Takemitsu imposes an extensive limitation on its ability to express meaning. In *AI*, the only word used is *ai* (love); in *Ki·Sora·Tori*, he employs only these three words; and in *Clap Vocalism*, he decided to reject the semantics of the language by focusing on the voice calls used in Japanese traditional music (for example, the stylised calls made by the instrumentalists in Noh theatre). To impose limitations on the meaning of words is to feature other characteristics of the voice. The idea prompted the composer to disregard the poem or the literary text and to attend the voice in its daily speech and utterances, to treat it as a sneeze toward the sun.³⁶

Rather than opposing 'Japanese tradition' and the 'Western avant-garde,' Takemitsu's music engages with both as fluid sources of reflection on sound and perception. His early electronic works suggest a sensitivity to the bodily and temporal dimensions of sound, in which the act of voicing and listening precedes the formation of musical structure or meaning. Although he was deeply familiar with Noh theatre and its use of vocal calls [*kakegoe*] – brief exclamations such as 'ya', 'ha', 'yo-i', and 'iya' employed by performers to coordinate rhythm and movement – his engagement with these traditions was conceptual rather than imitative. He did not quote or reproduce Noh chants in his compositions; instead, he drew inspiration from their rhythmic precision, embodied timing, and controlled energy. In this sense, Takemitsu's treatment of the voice and gesture reflects an attentiveness to physical presence and the momentary emergence of sound, rather than an attempt to synthesize traditional and modern styles.

Takemitsu's understanding of sound as something without inherent meaning or function cannot be equated directly with Schaeffer's theory of *objets sonores*. Whereas Schaeffer's methodology involved the analytical segmentation of sound into syllables and phonemes to

³⁶ Kakinuma: «Sneezing», p. 24

erase linguistic meaning, Takemitsu treated the human voice as a living, corporeal event – an involuntary response akin to *sneezing toward the sun*. His music articulates a ‘sound before art’ – a moment where meaning has not yet been imposed, and sound exists as pure energy, bodily and poetic. This conception lends his electronic compositions a deeply human dimension, in which technical experiment and sensory immediacy are inseparable.

***Musique Concrète* and Japanese Electronic Music Studios**

Musique concrète reached Japan in the early 1950s through the pioneering experiments of Toshiro Mayuzumi,³⁷ who encountered European electronic music during his studies in Paris and later composed *X-Y-Z for Musique Concrète* (1953),³⁸ the first Japanese work of its kind. Yet the medium developed under markedly different conditions from those in Europe: Japan lacked the institutional infrastructure of the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM)* or Cologne’s electronic studio, compelling composers such as Tōru Takemitsu and Hiroyoshi Suzuki to work independently with limited resources.

In November 1953, Toru Takemitsu listened to The works for *Musique concrète* ‘X·Y·Z’ (ミュージック・コンクレートのための作品「X・Y・Z」/Music concrete no tame no sakuhin X·Y·Z) by Toshiro Mayuzumi, the first work of *musique concrète* produced in Japan, on the radio station Bunka-hoso. Takemitsu, who was hospitalised with tuberculosis of the lungs at Keio University Hospital from June 1953 to March 1954, presumably listened to the piece in a hospital room.³⁹

In 1956, he worked on a triptych based on the human voice, *Vocalism A·I*, *Ki·Sora·Tori*, and *Clap Vocalism*, in the Tokyo studio of the Shin-nihonhoso station. On February 25, the three works were aired from the Shin-nihon-hoso station on the radio programme ‘A tune in a dream’ (*Yume-no-shirabe*).⁴⁰

Takemitsu’s first experiments therefore took place privately, often in his own home or that of a friend. Around 1952, the composer Suzuki Hiroyoshi,⁴¹ a member of the *Jikken Kōbō*, [*Experimental Workshop*],⁴² acquired a wire recorder, despite its limited sound quality.

Takemitsu began to record sounds with a wire recorder that he borrowed from

³⁷ Mayuzumi, Tōshiro (1929–1997), Japanese composer and pioneer of electronic music, he studied composition at Tokyo University of the Arts and later in Paris under Henri Dutilleux. He founded Japan’s first electronic music studio at *Nippon Columbia* in 1954. Mayuzumi’s experiments with tape-music, concrete sound and early synthesis helped shape the postwar generation of Japanese avant-garde composers.

³⁸ Toshiro Mayuzumi: *X-Y-Z for Musique Concrète*, (1953)

³⁹ Kakinuma: „Sneezing,” p. 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 21.

⁴¹ Hiroyoshi Suzuki (ca.1931–2006), Japanese composer associated with *Jikken Kōbō*.

⁴² For *Jikken Kōbō* see pp. 13, 14.

Hiroyoshi Suzuki, a fellow Jikken kobo (Experimental Workshop) composer. [...] Around 1952–1953, he also became confident of the possibilities of taped music while he was working on demonstration tapes to advertise the tape recorder that the Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo Corporation (now Sony) had developed. However, his hospitalisation interrupted his early attempts, and he heard the first work of musique concrète produced in Japan, Mayuzumi's XYZ, on the radio in the hospital⁴³

Meanwhile, *Tokyo Tsūshin Kōgyō* (*Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering, later SONY*)⁴⁴ was developing the first domestically produced magnetic tape recorders, including the GT-3 professional model and the H-1⁴⁵ for home use. The company commissioned the *Jikken Kōbō* to produce demonstration tapes showcasing the new technology. Both Takemitsu and Suzuki participated in this project, creating tape compositions at Sony's recording studios in Tokyo. The tape recorders at that time were massive broadcasting machines that could not be moved, so all work had to be carried out on-site.

Takemitsu's *Vocal Trilogy – AI (Love), Tree, Sky, Bird, and Clap Vocalism* – was commissioned by *Shin Nihon Hōsō* (*New Japan Broadcasting Company, now Mainichi Hōsō*),⁴⁶ one of Japan's first private radio stations. Takemitsu realized these works at the station's Tokyo studio, marking his first sustained engagement with professional electronic media.

The *NHK Electronic Music Studio*, founded provisionally in 1954 and formally active by 1956, became Japan's first institutional center for electronic music. Before the establishment of such facilities, Takemitsu had already worked at the *National Broadcasting (NHK)* studios and at *Sony Studios*, long before portable tape machines became available. Radio stations played a crucial role not only in the production of early electronic works but also in their dissemination. Programs such as *Gendai no Ongaku [Music of the Present Time]*,⁴⁷ broadcast

⁴³ Kakinuma: «Sneezing», p. 22

⁴⁴ *Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo [Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Corporation]*, founded in 1946, was the predecessor of the *Sony Corporation*. The company played a central role in Japan's postwar electronics industry, developing early magnetic tape recorders and audio technologies that became essential for experimental composers and broadcasting institutions. It officially adopted the name Sony in 1958.

⁴⁵ The GT-3 professional model, a high-stability reel-to-reel tape recorder used in broadcasting and early electronic-music production, and the earlier H-1 tape recorder, one of Japan's first postwar domestic magnetic-tape units, played important roles in enabling tape-based experimental composition.

⁴⁶ see footnote 30)

⁴⁷ *Gendai-no-ongaku [Music of the present time]* was an NHK radio and television program launched in the late 1950s that introduced contemporary Western art music and new Japanese avant-garde works to a broad audience. It played a key role in disseminating serial, electronic, and experimental music, and supported the early activities of composers such as Takemitsu and Yuasa as well as the development of the NHK Electronic Music Studio.

weekly on NHK-FM, introduced audiences to new and experimental compositions, including *musique concrète*. As a student, Toshie Kakinuma regularly listened to this program, which became an important source of exposure to contemporary trends in electronic and experimental music.

By the time of Expo'70 in Osaka, electroacoustic and experimental compositions had gained national visibility, with several Japanese composers presented successfully to a broad audience. This trajectory underscores the pivotal role of radio and broadcasting in shaping the postwar Japanese avant-garde.

Takemitsu and *Jikken Kōbō*

Jikken Kōbō [*Experimental Workshop*] was founded in Tokyo in 1951 as an avant-garde collective of musicians, visual artists, poets, designers, and engineers. Among its principal members were Tōru Takemitsu, Kuniharu Akiyama,⁴⁸ Hiroyoshi Suzuki,⁴⁹ Shūzō Takiguchi,⁵⁰ and Katsuhiro Yamaguchi.⁵¹ The group emerged in the immediate postwar years as a response to Japan's rapidly transforming artistic and technological landscape. It sought to create interdisciplinary, and intermedia works that dissolved the boundaries between artistic disciplines – combining music, visual projection, dance, film, and new sound technologies. Within this experimental framework, Takemitsu began his first explorations of electronic sound and *musique concrète*, integrating them into multimedia performances that anticipated later intermedia and sound art practices.

The formation of *Jikken Kōbō* preceded similar avant-garde and improvisational movements elsewhere. Before *Fluxus*⁵² emerged in New York in the early 1960s, collective and

⁴⁸ Kuniharu Akiyama (1929–1996), Japanese composer, poet, and music critic; a founding member of *Jikken Kōbō* and one of the first Japanese participants in the international *Fluxus* network. He promoted avant-garde music and intercultural dialogue through his writings and curatorial work, including his involvement in the Osaka Expo 1970. See: Luciana Galliano, *Yōgaku: Japanese Music in the 20th Century*, Scarecrow Press, 2002.

⁴⁹ Hiroyoshi Suzuki, see footnote 41)

⁵⁰ Shūzō Takiguchi (1903–1979), Japanese poet and art-critic, introduced Surrealism in Japan.

⁵¹ Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (1928–2018), Japanese interdisciplinary artist and art theorist, commissioner for the Mitsui Pavilion at Expo '70, Osaka (see wikipedia)

⁵² *Fluxus* was an international avant-garde art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by experimental, interdisciplinary approaches that blurred the boundaries between visual art, music, performance, and everyday life. Founded by George Maciunas (see footnote 58), *Fluxus* artists emphasized simplicity, humor, chance operations, and audience participation. The movement had strong connections to Japanese artists, including Mieko Shiomi and Kosugi Takehisa, who contributed improvisational practices that predated or paralleled *Fluxus* activities in New York. See: Higgins, Hannah: *Fluxus Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

improvisational practices had already taken root in Japan. Artists including Mieko Shiomi,⁵³ and Kosugi Takehisa,⁵⁴ who were active in the *Group Ongaku*⁵⁵ and later participated in *Fluxus*, and Tōru Takemitsu – who was not affiliated with *Group Ongaku* – pursued explorations of open form and process-oriented sound practices in academic and independent performance contexts in Tokyo.

At the same time, in the Kansai region, the *Gutai Art Association*,⁵⁶ founded in 1954 by Jirō Yoshihara,⁵⁷ shared a comparable commitment to experimentation, performative gesture, and material immediacy. Though geographically and formally distinct, *Gutai* and *Jikken Kōbō* converged in their emphasis on process over product and on the integration of art and life. Both groups privileged the ephemeral, participatory nature of artistic creation, rejecting the notion of the autonomous, finished artwork.

While Yoko Ono⁵⁸ and George Maciunas⁵⁹ were already active in New York by 1959–1960, before the first *Fluxus* concerts in Düsseldorf in 1962, Japanese collectives such as *Jikken Kōbō* had already laid important conceptual groundwork for what would later become a transnational avant-garde network. *Fluxus* did not originate from a single location but from interconnected nodes of experimentation, and the Japanese avant-garde was among its earliest and most vital contributors.

⁵³ Mieko Shiomi (1923–2002) was a Japanese composer and improviser active in the postwar avant-garde. She studied at Tokyo University of the Arts and participated in early experimental music activities in Japan, including *Group Ongaku* that predated and influenced the *Fluxus* movement.

⁵⁴ Kosugi Takehisa (1926–2018) was a Japanese composer, violinist, and key figure in the Japanese experimental music scene. He was known for his improvisational work, collaborations with early Japanese *Fluxus* artists, and pioneering contributions to contemporary and electronic music in Japan.

⁵⁵ *Group Ongaku [Music Group]* was an experimental music collective founded in Tokyo around 1958–1960 by Takeshi Kosugi, Shūko Mizuno, Mieko Shiomi, and others. It is often regarded as Japan's first improvisation and sound-performance ensemble, preceding the emergence of *Fluxus*. The group explored the use of everyday objects, tape recorders, and spontaneous sound events as compositional material, seeking to dissolve the boundary between noise and music.

⁵⁶ *Gutai Art Association*, an influential Japanese avant-garde group founded in 1954 by Jirō Yoshihara and young artists in Kansai. The *Gutai* group emphasized direct physical engagement with materials and performance-based art, aligning conceptually with experimental and *Fluxus* practices. See: Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁵⁷ Jirō Yoshihara (1905–1972), Japanese painter and influential avant-garde leader, founder of the *Gutai Art Association* (1954).

⁵⁸ Yoko Ono (*1933, Tokyo), Japanese-American artist, musician, and avant-garde figure whose conceptual and performance works have been influential since the 1960s.

⁵⁹ George Maciunas (1931–1978) was a Lithuanian-American artist and architect, best known as the founder and central organizer of the *Fluxus* movement. He promoted experimental, interdisciplinary art practices that integrated music, performance, and visual art, often emphasizing simplicity, chance, and audience participation. Maciunas maintained strong interest in Japanese culture and collaborated with Japanese artists, helping to connect postwar Japanese avant-garde practices with the broader international *Fluxus* network. See: Hendricks, Jon: *Fluxus Codex*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989.

The cross-disciplinary collaborations initiated by *Jikken Kōbō* continued to influence the trajectory of Japanese experimental art and music throughout the 1960s. Members including Takemitsu, Akiyama, and Yamaguchi played central roles in shaping the intermedia and sound installations presented at Expo '70 in Osaka, where electronic composition and multimedia art achieved unprecedented public visibility.

Unfolding nature in music

Tōru Takemitsu reflected profoundly on the interrelations between music, nature, silence, and sound. His engagement with *musique concrète* was not an isolated technical experiment but part of a broader aesthetic inquiry into how sound can reveal the essence of the natural world. This connection becomes evident in works such as *Water Music* (1960),⁶⁰ another of his early tape compositions, which consists entirely of recordings of water and intervals of silence. The piece embodies Takemitsu's concept of nature as sound in flux, a living presence unfolding in time rather than an image to be represented.

Navigating continuously between traditions – East and West, old and new, 'authentic' and experimental – Takemitsu explored the paradox between employing the most advanced sound technologies and his simultaneous desire to compose works that evoke the organic continuity of natural processes. His artistic trajectory thus expanded from technological exploration toward the idea of composing something 'natural' *through* electronic means. The question at the heart of his practice – how to allow *nature* to unfold within the compositional process – remained a central concern throughout his career.

As Toshie Kakinuma observes, postwar Japanese explorations of openness in composition diverged from Cage's systematic use of chance, favoring instead a method that permitted sounds to emerge and coexist in parallel, without predetermined order. Rather, she describes their approach as a form of "this... and this... and this" – a compositional logic that allows each sonic element to exist autonomously, without subordination to a fixed hierarchy. Such a method, as Kakinuma writes, moves "from the concrete to the concrete," affirming the presence of each sound event as a self-sufficient reality rather than as part of a preordained

⁶⁰ Tōru Takemitsu: *Water Music*, [5–6'], 1958–1960 – tape piece, recordings of water sounds – reflecting Takemitsu's early engagement with *musique concrète* and the *Jikken Kōbō*.

An early *musique concrète* composition by Tōru Takemitsu, created using recorded water sounds and tape manipulation. The work reflects Takemitsu's fascination with the natural world and his pursuit of a sonic environment that merges technological artifice with organic sound. It was produced at the NHK Studio for Electronic Music in Tokyo. See: Peter Burt, *The Music of Tōru Takemitsu*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

structure. In this light, Takemitsu's engagement with *musique concrète* may be understood as a distinct Japanese response to the postwar redefinition of sound, perception, and meaning.

Takemitsu gathers concrete sounds in reality and, after working on them, reintroduces them in a reality of fiction by retaining their concrete qualities. His attitude of avoiding abstraction and of moving from the concrete to the concrete is noticeably different from the methods of his contemporaries in Europe.⁶¹

Today, the archives of Tōru Takemitsu and Jōji Yuasa are preserved in the National Archive of Modern Music under the supervision of Toyama Kazuyuki, though the materials remain largely inaccessible to researchers. Their preservation nonetheless signals a growing recognition of Japan's crucial role in the history of the global postwar avant-garde, where the boundaries between technology and nature, silence and sound, continue to inspire new readings of twentieth-century experimental music.

Seen through the perspective of Toshie Kakinuma's critical writings, the postwar Japanese avant-garde appears not as a peripheral echo of Western experimentalism but as a distinct and dialogical formation, in which figures such as Jōji Yuasa and Tōru Takemitsu redefined the relationship between language, sound, and the body. Their works exemplify an artistic condition in which technological mediation and natural resonance are not opposed but mutually generative – each revealing a different dimension of listening and perception.

With many thanks to Toshie Kakinuma for the conversation at the Kunitachi Library, for her generous comments and corrections on the text, and for the inspiring encounters during my stay in Tokyo.

⁶¹ Kakinuma: „Sneezing”, p. 33.

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