

Dusting Underneath the Table: Morton Feldman and Toru Takemitsu in Conversation

[Transcribed by Chris Villars]

On the 30th November 1977, Toru Takemitsu's orchestral work A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden was premiered by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Edo de Waart. Takemitsu and his wife, Asaka Takemitsu, visited the US for the occasion. A few days after the premiere, they visited Buffalo as guests of Morton Feldman, and, on 4th December, attended an all-Takemitsu concert at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. The concert was given as part of the Evenings for New Music concert series presented by the University of Buffalo's Center of the Creative and Performing Arts. Seven pieces by Takemitsu were performed: Voice (1971), Garden Rain (1974), Eucalypts I (1970), Stanza II (1971), Piano Distance (1961), For Away (1973), and Waves (1976). By way of introduction to the performances, Feldman and Takemitsu had a short public conversation. A transcript of this is given below. In making the transcript some false starts, hesitations and repetitions have been omitted to improve readability. Three dots in square brackets indicate where short phrases unintelligible on the tape have been omitted. The transcript is reproduced here by kind permission of the Estates of Morton Feldman and Toru Takemitsu. The original tape recording of the conversation is held in the Morton Feldman Papers at the Music Library of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Special thanks to John Bewley, Associate Librarian/Archivist there, for help with the transcription.

MF: Good evening everybody. And I wanna thank Mr and Mrs Takemitsu for actually going out of their way to be with us this evening. And I wanna thank you for all of us involved with this concert and...

TT: Oh, thank you very much. I must say something before you... You gave me such a beautiful opportunity here. First, before starting our conversations, I have to apologise that my English is terribly bad. So I can't express even one tenth of my ideas and musical thoughts. So would you please imagine with your imagination what I wanted to say!
[Laughter] Thank you!

MF: Well, my own personal feeling is that just one tenth of Toru Takemitsu ideas would be very important! You know, usually sometimes one has a colleague and you're not too happy that they're writing. There's just something about it that just doesn't make you too happy. But I was always fantastically happy with your music. I felt that it gave contemporary music a much needed credibility. And I just wanna thank you for...

TT: Oh, thank you! I feel the same things with your music! [Laughter]

MF: I thought this was gonna be a conversation! [Laughter]

TT: But I'm getting very nervous because tonight several of my pieces are performed. Once or twice I have experienced one whole evening concert of my music. But I know that Buffalo is very famous place, especially this place for this concert, and people should be very strict and severe please. Anyway, I thank you very much to hear this concert and to hear my music. I hope you will enjoy my piece, given I don't enjoy my pieces!

MF: Before we came here you showed me your sketchbook of an orchestral work that was just done the other evening in San Francisco Symphony. And the sketchbook was extraordinary because though there are a lot of notes in it, the way one would expect a

composer's sketchbook to look like, there are also constellations of birds in flight. And there was one very beautiful one with a little blackbird in the middle. And it turned out that the little blackbird was F-sharp! [Laughter] And it seemed that that little bird was the common tone of various scales that Takemitsu used in the piece. And, as I read on, I saw that there was just a beautiful scenario, what happens to these constellations of birds was just beautifully drawn. And I always find it very interesting the pre-compositional ideas of a composer, how they finally get it down on paper.

TT: Because I haven't musical training, and so I, before I write music I *see* music [...]. Usually I'm doing like that before I write a piece. Sometimes two or three sketchbooks, just drawings. And sometimes I draw some funny, strange, imaginary garden map, and put many paths. And then the title, the title appears in my mind. [...]

MF: But there didn't seem any anxiety to get down the kind of notes that would ensure some kind of structural success of the piece. But when I saw the score it was this massive orchestral score, precisely notated, in beautiful detail. You know, I have a very humorous story about a few days before you came. I was getting my house in order for the Takemitsus. And I was dusting. And very nonchalantly I started to dust underneath a table.

TT: Oh yes!

MF: Now, I usually don't dust underneath a table, but I think you influenced my house-cleaning. [Laughter] And I'm really very serious about that because immediately...

TT: I thought you are always keeping like that! [Laughter]

MF: But not underneath the table! Just on top of the table like everybody else. But immediately when I started to do it that way I laughed at myself and I started to think about you and your music, and this fantastic detail, as if you yourself are dusting underneath the *note*, and looking at it in various ways. And that's what interests me about your work. And what also interests me is the pre-compositional ideas. How, in a very cool and a very relaxed and a very calm way, you go about writing the composition. Also, I feel that perhaps, not so much that you're visually oriented, but you do see things, you do have graphic images.

TT: Yes, maybe because I was very much influenced from the Japanese traditions. For example, *emaki* [Japanese illustrated handscrolls]. [...]

MF: You said something very interesting this afternoon about the... We were talking about, naturally, the East and the West, and the difference in our cultures, and what we go to each other for. And Takemitsu was saying that the problem with Eastern music, or Japanese music especially, is that it can't travel in manuscript. And I would like if you could talk a little more about that.

TT: Oh it's my opinion, and especially I strongly felt that it is so in Japan. Also in Indonesia. Two, three years ago I was in Bali. I heard gamelan, some Balinese music. And that time I recognised this kind of music is not portable, not carrying out. Western music should be carried...

MF: Could be carried.

TT: Could be carried, yeh? Could be carried. For example, same notation in Japan. Even Japanese now we can play Beethoven and many contemporary musics. We have a score and through notation we are able to understand it, what the composer want to say. But Oriental music is very difficult to take out, to bring.

MF: I remember about ten or fifteen years ago, Japanese composers that I knew tried to make a synthesis between - like [Maki] Ishii - tried to make a synthesis between the West and the East. But I don't feel that there's any synthesis in your music. I feel it's as if it's your own culture. It doesn't remind me of Eastern music and it doesn't have the pacing of Western music. A lot of it doesn't have the, the finesse, the exquisite finesse and detail of Western music. It's the detail in your work that I love so much.

TT: Yeh, I love sound. It's sound which is living, which has own living self. And each sound has its own cycle. And we don't have same sound at all. If we have a clear, clean ear, we could find differences between even the same note I think. You understand what I say?

MF: Yes, yes.

TT: So, if I could speak in Japanese it's much easier! [Laughter]

MF: No, I think you're doing fine.

TT: I'm so sorry!

MF: You know, unfortunately, a lot of people, when they hear a contemporary composer talk, they feel that the composer is a spokesman for modern music. And so being that I'm supposed to more or less...

TT: Spokesman?

MF: A spokesman for modern music. In other words, the people ask me: Well, what do you think about modern music? Or: What do you think about the music being written at this time? It's a, it's a tricky question. I'd like to ask *you* that question! [Laughter]

TT: I think the...

MF: Because you know, you know everything that's going on!

TT: Mmm... No. [Laughter] I recognise bits as very romantic composer. And this is not a step back. This is my right direction. I don't care to use even tonal, atonal, twelve-tones, micro-tonal. I don't care to use. Most musicians are very much sensitive. I mean, too nervous about music. Like in terms of men and women getting very nervous about marriage. [Laughter] [...]

MF: So you're almost ready to leave music at any time? Is that what you mean? [Laughter]

TT: Yes.

MF: Well, you know, many students, especially in the past twenty years, they... No matter how much you talk about technical things, say to a student, finally, after it's all over, they say to me: Well, have you got a good definition of music? But you don't think of music as music. What do you think about? What do you think about when you write a piece? Do you think you're a composer? Do you think, do you think it's a dream?

TT: Well, I'm a composer, yes. If after listening to my music people could be changed a little bit, for me it is very happy [...].

MF: Do you feel that you're in any way involved in contemporary music? Do you feel relationship with anybody?

TT: Well yes, I mentioned that I like your music very much. Related, very deeply. And the John Cage also. Many, many composers.

MF: John Cage was very influential in Japan wasn't he?

TT: He was influenced from Japan also. Each other... Oh, I like to hear music now!

MF: Yes.

TT: I hope my music's better than my speaking! [Laughter and applause]

MF: OK, thank you. [Applause]