

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2023)

Heft: 43

Artikel: Will you please be quiet, please? : Japan's Kanky Ongaku and the
Bubble Economy in the 1980s

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051763>

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Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? Japan's Kankyō Ongaku and the Bubble Economy in the 1980s

Yosuke Nakamoto

A group of young musicians voiced their concerns about people being subjected to an over-exposure of environmental noise in an urban environment at the beginning of the 1980s in Japan. The group was led by Satoshi Ashikawa (1953-1983), Hiroshi Yoshimura (1940-2003) and other musicians involved in the production of the «Wave Notation» series from «Sound Process» label. Fearing that the auditory ecosystem was beginning to collapse in a mass-commercialised city environment in Japan, they argued that sound and music must be treated as an everyday necessity, in the same way as architecture, interior design, food and atmosphere. (1) These musicians produced the so-called Kankyō Ongaku «環境音楽» (Environmental Music), which was characterised by extracted sounds found in the environment, incorporated into mechanical tones.

During the period of the Bubble Economy (1986-1991), land prices in Tokyo tripled over the course of three years. A rapid increment in real estate market value resulted from the public sector taking on active capital investment due to the lower interest rate, combined with the transition of the industrial structure towards secondary and tertiary sector from the 1960s up until the 1980s. As «immobile» objects turned «mobile», the transformation of the social structure and the lifestyle in the urban environment was spurred by the Bubble Economy. The shift of the industrial structure caused workforce to be concentrated in the urban areas, which facilitated the expansion of nuclear families. The abundance in commercial activities in vibrant urban hubs turned city life into sleepless nights. More time would be spent oscillating between work place and commercial centers indulging in consumeristic activities offered by the city (2), staged and saturated by audio effects and hit chart-music in the background.

In 1985, over a period of 18 days, a series of daily columns «街よ静かに» (City, will you please be silent?) posted for Asahi Newspaper (2nd largest Japanese newspaper), dealt with the issue of noise pollution in an urban environment. The column covered topics ranging from excessive subway advertisement guiding commercial facilities and retailers at each station, background music in department stores encouraging customers to buy and occasionally notifying the staff of the progress of sales, in addition to everyday noise within dense public housing complexes. The series introduced the concept of the «right to quietude» and

sought for potential solutions. (3) They criticised the commercial industry in jamming information and the ubiquitously disseminating the sound through various media devices. On a deeper level, the issue of noise reflects the shift of social structures, the shrinkage of family units and the subsequent division of the community. It reveals an increase of distance among people – a lack of interest and care for one another in a dense yet anonymous urban environment.

In that setting, Satoshi Ashikawa, the founder of the «Sound Process» label, was concerned about the disconnect between humans from their immediate environment. He pointed out that there was too much music, regardless of genre, conveying different messages, which makes it impossible to hear the sound itself. (4) Referring to the Canadian composer and music educator R. Murray Schafer, he argued that «the ears, unlike other sensory organs, are exposed and vulnerable. The eyes can close at will, but the ears are always open.» (5) The basic idea of Environmental Music is to take advantage of this inability to close our ears and play music that is beneficial to us, so that we can live a better life.

Ashikawa felt prompted to create sound in a subtractive manner, designing with silence. (6) He aspired to create a scenery through music composed of a series of still moments, that changes its meaning as it overlaps and shifts with its space, objects and people. Through the «Wave Notation» series, he strove not to produce sounds as a form of self-expression, but rather to construct a system to present the process of the sound itself, so that the listeners would notice something and hence make a discovery in the process. In «Still Way», an album released by Ashikawa in 1982 as the second release of «Wave Notation», nature sound recordings were integrated with the sounds of piano, flute, harp and vibraphone, creating minimal fragments with the extensive use of minor keys and oriental scales generating an altogether ambient sound. (7)

Ashikawa's ambition was to engage himself in the realm of sound design in a broader sense. It was necessary for him to configure the one-and-only sound that is needed for the specific situation, in which music becomes a part of the scenery. He claimed «it would be wonderful if we could design silence, in other words, without sound.» (8) After his unforeseen accidental death at the age of 30, his friends and col-

A



B



C



A The atmosphere of Tokyo during the Economic Bubble as the city of information and consumption is captured. Image: Toyo Ito, Tokyo Nomadic Girl's Pao, 1985, from Toyo Ito: Architecture as Sensation, Tokyo 2020, p. 47

B A night in Roppongi quarter of Tokyo in March 1990. Image: Photo Feature: «The Bubble Era of Madness» Mainichi Newspaper Online, 26 March 2015

C A worker at a department store switching the background music of the store. Image: Asahi Newspaper 10 January 1985

D



E



D Graphic score «Flora», Hiroshi Yoshimura, 1987,
The Museum of Modern Art, Kanagawa.
Image: Ryo Kubo

E Hara Museum of Contemporary Art.
Image: Osamu Watanabe

leagues from the group set up «Sound Process Design Ltd.», continued his legacy and worked on commissions producing music for museums and public spaces.

Hiroshi Yoshimura's inspiration was to create a music that resonates with the whispering of the trees and the wind and with the scenery of the passing clouds that slowly change their forms. (9) He sought for a music that would harmonise with the surrounding, which transforms the immediate space into a transmission of wave. (10) His music has been heard in many forms, having produced music for commissions by a cosmetic company, fashion shows, metro station, and public spaces. Similar to Ashikawa, he inquired the relationship between humans and music through his production for the «Wave Notation» series.

For his amusement, Yoshimura began an exercise sending recorded fragments of music on a tape attached to a postcard to a friend in the Netherlands, which later became a personal routine. (11) Part of his postcard-fragment sounds were created during his visit to the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, a 1920s Art Deco style Urban Villa transformed into a contemporary art museum, whose beautiful trees in the courtyard seen through the large window of the museum left him with a strong impression. Pieces of music were created with the minimal set-up of a keyboard and Fender Rhodes, imagining what sort of music might be suitable to be played in the interior of the museum and trying to capture the «images of the movement of clouds, the shade of a tree in summer time, the sound of rain.» (12) Eventually, he was granted to play his pieces in the museum and they were released as «Music For Nine Postcards» (1982) as the 1st LP of «Wave Notation» series. In the liner notes of the release he wrote «I will be happy if, when you enjoy this album, the surrounding scenery can be seen in a slightly different light.» (13)

In contrast to the conventional models of music that established a vis-à-vis relationship between the producer and the listener, both Ashikawa and Yoshimura saw music as an interactive entity, that could be directly inserted into the environment between the existing sounds, both naturally and mechanically. Japanese environmental music developed from the 1980s to the 1990s partially as a counter-reaction to the urban noise problematic, where musicians worked on subtractive sounds, which emphasised the presence of silence.

Kankyō Ongaku eventually faded out of the scene, marginalised in the market. Only recently was it re-discovered in the West, in a form of compilation mix in LP and CD in 2018 titled «Kankyō Ongaku» released by American musician and music collector Spencer Doran. It was followed by reissues of the various original LPs from the musicians included in the compilation by American and European record labels.

In parallel, the music genre spread swiftly via YouTube, in recent years, thanks to its algorithm. Hiroshi Yoshimura's «Green» released in 1986 attained over 2.8 million views at this date in August 2023. Kankyō Ongaku, which was at first an obscure unknown past movement from the Far East, perfectly matched the demands of a specific crowd of people such as students and researchers, who spend long hours on endless automated playlists on YouTube while working. Its minimalistic set-up and soothing subtlety fading away into the background invited the listener to continue to listen further and beyond the accidental discovery suggested by YouTube. After all, Ashikawa's wish to create a sequence of quiet moments through music, making us forget about time, was fulfilled in a different form.

Through a sound constructed with silence, Kankyō Ongaku initially provided an escape from the fast-changing hustle and bustle of the Japanese metropolises, offering brief moments of pause and quiet for the ear and the mind. As the distance between society and nature continues to widen, the sound of Kankyō Ongaku finds resonance amongst other audiences in a different time-space, with its endless organic serenity. By means of the construction of the tones, it continues to remind us to be aware of the subtle and delicate relationship we have with our immediate surroundings.

Yosuke Nakamoto is an architect and researcher based in Zurich. Originally from Tokyo, he studied at TU Wien and Accademia di architettura di Mendrisio. His research evolves around the cross-cultural exchange of ideas in a range of topics such as shifts of societal structures, forms of education and implications of rural rituals in urban structures.

