

**Wabi Sonics: Tea Aesthetics, Zen, and Composition
in Experimental and Ambient Music**
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Introduction

Wabi is an aesthetic approach that has long been part of the Japanese tea ceremony. It embodies simplicity and a lack of sophistication, and emphasizes natural forms and the inherent beauty of imperfection. For many, including the Japanese (Tanaka 1973), *wabi* is something that is felt rather than clearly articulated. This paper looks at the surprising connection between the Japanese tea ceremony, contemporary composition, and the experience of hearing music.

Tea History

Though the situation and time surrounding the first appearance of tea in Japan is under some debate, it is generally agreed that the practice of drinking powdered tea began around 1191. Eisai Myo-an, monk and founder of Japanese Zen Buddhism, returned from his studies in China with tea (Tanaka 1973). It was called the "the elixir of immortality," and was used as medicine and as an aid in meditation. For several hundred years tea was integrated into the lavish social gatherings of the upper-class. Gradually, over time, this began to change.

Murata Shuko is considered to be the first tea master (Morris 2003). His approach to serving tea was very unique, and reflected his background as a Zen priest. He preferred a small, intimate setting with a few number of guests, and sought to include domestic utensils in addition to conventional Chinese utensils. Shuko's tea style, known as *soan cha* or "grass-hut" tea, marks the beginning of the tea ritual as a spiritual exercise (Morris 2003). The next important tea master was Takeno Jo-o, who lived during the sixteenth century. Under Jo-o, the *wabi* style of tea came into being (Sen 1979). It was practiced in a small hut using modest utensils and was void of all pretension. Rusticity was a key component of Jo-o's *wabi* style tea, and it was this approach that set the stage for the development of the tea ceremony in years to come.

Sen Rikyu first studied with Jo-o when he was nineteen years of age (Sen 1979), and in his life's work, perfected the *wabi* style of tea. He is regarded as the greatest tea master of all time. Under Rikyu, tea became a lay approach to Zen (Morris 2003). He is known for using simple, organic materials in the design both of utensils and the overall environment of the tearoom. Rikyu emphasized four basic principles: harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. These are at the core of *chado*, the Way of Tea, and ultimately the way of life (Sen 1979) embodied in the practice.

The Tea Ceremony

Where *chado* is considered a way of life so is *chanoyu*, the tea ceremony itself (Okakura 1989). In the words of Rikyu, the tea ceremony is simple:

Tea is nought but this:
First you heat the water,
Then you make the tea.
Then you drink it properly.
That is all you need to know.
(Sen 1979)

In "Tea Life, Tea Mind," Soshitsu Sen XV presents a beautiful impression of the tea ceremony and its setting. A garden path called a *roji* leads to the tearoom. It usually has a well-kept, natural appearance and provides a few moments of reflection to "discard worldly title, position, and means" (45). Tearooms are very small; slighter than the slightest of houses. Guests must bow to enter through a low door. This is intentional, as it induces a humble mindset in even the smallest person. Kakuzo Okakura writes that though the tearoom has an unimpressive appearance of "refined poverty," the cost of a tearoom is often greater than the cost of a mansion due to the precise selection of natural construction materials and exemplary craftsmanship (77).

The interior of the tearoom is sparsely decorated. The few ornaments that are present serve a very specific purpose relative to the guests, or the particular theme or season of the gathering. Nothing is used or positioned arbitrarily and there is an intentional lack of symmetry. A scroll with a painting, poem, or saying of Zen wisdom usually completes the alcove of the room. This is often accompanied by flowers, arranged per Rikyu's teaching, "as they are in the field" (Sen 1979).

Guests enter in silence and remain so throughout. The only sound is that of the boiling kettle, which has pieces of iron arranged in its bottom to produce a melody reminiscent of distant rain or water (Okakura 1989). The tea is prepared using a wide variety of utensils. These are all very special; each has a unique purpose and natural beauty that is appreciated in the moment of its use. Like the construction of the tearoom the utensils have an impeccable design that is deliberately humble and efficient.

Sen writes that tea is served in bowls that have been specifically designed for drinking. The movements of the body, both for serving and drinking tea, have been standardized by Rikyu (49). This was done to address practical concerns of efficiency during the preparation and execution of the tea ceremony. While these steps are important to the tea tradition it is acceptable to use variations. However, any changes or

substitutions must be made in the spirit of preserving the relationship of host and guest (49). This connection is essential to the essence of *chanoyu*.

Wabi Aesthetic

The *wabi* aesthetic is vital to the Way of Tea as a foundational concept on which the way is based. It influences the way traditional Japanese arts—architecture, gardening, flower arranging, pottery, and calligraphy—are integrated into the Way of Tea and the spiritual attitude it conveys (Morris 2003). Its meaning translates as "rusticity," but *wabi* is also a state of mind that is described with the words frugality, simplicity, and humility (Sen 1979). Understanding *wabi* is difficult. Some say that it is best described as a feeling. For this reason, it is a concept that is best taught with a poem serving as a metaphor rather than by direct explanation (72). Rikyu thought this poem best exemplified the *wabi* spirit he imparted in the Way of Tea:

To those who long for the
Flowers of spring
Show the young grasses
That push up among the snowy hills.
(Sen 1979)

This poem challenges conventional ideals of beauty by suggesting that it takes a more refined sense to find beauty in the incomplete or "in progress." Using a slightly different translation of this feeling, Leonard Koren describes this aesthetic in more definite terms:

Wabi-sabi is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold landscapes.
Wabi-sabi is about the minor and hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral:
things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes (50).

Wabi is elusive, yet it is present in many things if you look for it. See, for example, many of the materials that construct objects around us: rice paper and the way it transfers diffuse light, clay and the way it cracks as it dries, the changes of color and texture of metal as it rusts. These fleeting processes are reminders of the working of the world we inhabit (Koren 1994). Most importantly this reminds us of the impermanence of our immediate environment. Seasons come and go; plants sprout, blossom, and wither. Between the conventional "peaks" of these processes are a few fleeting moments where beauty is at its most profound for the patient and discerning beholder.

In the Afterword of Kakuzo Okakura's "The Book of Tea," Soshitsu Sen XV writes that *wabi* can bring about new awareness; and that in it we sense the "re-emergence of the world with new vitality and meaning" (157). This kind of awareness is present in those who practice the Way of Tea. And with this awareness there lies a readiness for the unfinished or unexpected to present itself in a wholly new and beautiful fashion.

Musical Practice

One of the motivating factors behind Okakura's "The Book of Tea" (1906) was preservation. It was written in English to communicate the essence of *chanoyu* to a western audience and to help sustain these attitudes that were failing at home (12). It is interesting that years later, western musical genres would emerge and value many of the same aesthetic principles.

In his 1959 essay, "Poetics of the Open Work," Umberto Eco defined the Open Work as "works of art that call upon performers, readers, viewers, or listeners to complete or to realize them" (Eco in Cox and Warner 2004). Works can be made "open" through a variety of processes. Near the time Eco wrote his essay, indeterminacy and chance operations were first being used in musical composition. Approaches such as optional sequencing, open-ended notation, and variable duration leave a musical work in an unfinished state. Inevitably, in any performance there is an open-ness that is created due to differences of interpretation. The Open Work embodies these kinds of variations to a much greater degree, where opportunities for the unplanned or unexpected are written into the composition.

Michael Nyman takes this idea further in his book "Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond." He looks at the idea of the Open Work and sees it as an entire musical shift. The word "experimental" in music refers to music initiated by processes where "the outcome of which is unknown" (Nyman in Cox and Warner 2004). As with the Open Work, any kind of compositional approach may be used as long as it produces unpredictable results: a deck of cards, roll of dice, or computer program, for example. Ultimately, this stream of random information is used to shape the composition in one way or another.

Works of experimental music are unfinished, as are Open Works. An important characteristic to understand with these works is that given their unfinished state, any single performance of a work is still representative of that work in spite of differences from previous performances. Eco says that every performance of an Open Work repre-

sents a "complete and satisfying version of the work," and that simultaneously this leaves the work incomplete, as it is impossible to render all possible "artistic solutions" the work is able to permit (Cox and Warner 2004). Nyman makes reference to this by quoting composer Christian Wolff, who observes that in this kind of music, "One finds a concern for a kind of objectivity, almost anonymity—sound come into its own" (220). Both Wolff and Eco observe an intentional incompleteness in the music, for this is the quality that enables surprise and unexpected delight. In fact it is these very phenomena that create the essence of the music. In many ways they are more important than the notes or sounds that make up the composition.

This aesthetic approach also has importance in the genre of Ambient music. In reference to the open and experimental works of John Cage, David Toop notes:

a place in which forms and features are allowed to emerge and coexist regardless of the personal desires of the imaginer, has come to be a central compositional device in the ambient music that has followed Brian Eno's initiative. (Toop 1995)

The influence of Cage is seemingly everywhere. Eno doesn't compose his music using Cageian techniques, but he certainly works in this spirit. Compositions using loops and phasing structures such as "Music for Airports," (Tamm 1995) or feedback systems like "Discreet Music" (Eno 1975) not only represent an appreciation of the open, experimental, and unfinished aesthetic, but they are representative of processes that have influenced the course of music in the 20th century (Toop 2004). Indeed these approaches will continue to be influential into the 21st century.

Wabi-Sonics

Appreciation of open-ness, and veneration of the imperfect and unfinished, embody the *wabi* aesthetic and serve as core tenets of The Way of Tea. The tearoom and utensils are designed without symmetry to allow "...the play of the imagination to complete" (Okakura 1989). The process of completion on the part of the observer is where the spiritual value of *chanoyu* lies. In Taoist and Zen thought, true beauty can only be discovered through a process where one must mentally complete the incomplete (Okakura 1989). When presented with something that is unfinished or in progress this kind of discovery becomes possible.

Open Works, Ambient, and Experimental music put their audience in this situation. The music is composed to be incomplete; and not until the performance and re-

ception of the work can it be considered "finished." However, because one performance is representative of limitless other performances of the work, it is always open. This creates one instance of the music from, what Brian Eno calls, a "hypothetical continuum that it is not especially directional." (Eno in Cox and Warner 2004) This quality reminds us of the timelessness of nature, the continuous cycle of death and renewal, and the veiled beauty that *wabi* reveals throughout this process.

In Zen it is said that truth can only be attained through the understanding of opposites (Okakura 1989). This spiritual tenet carries over to the Way of Tea. The *wabi* aesthetic has no provisions for "valuable," since that only implies "not valuable" (Koren 1994). If we mirror this approach in composition, one could say that there is no "music" since that implies "noise." Rather than make sharp distinctions between what we think we do and do not want to hear, we should aspire to value all sounds in the moment they are heard and appreciate them with all perceived imperfections. Here, as in the tranquil moments of *chanoyu*, can we uncover true musical enlightenment.

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