

## ***FROM JAPAN: Robert Carl's musical reflection on history, culture, and memory***

American composer Robert Carl has long been interested in Japanese music and culture, and in the spring of 2007 he received a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to travel to Japan to interview Japanese composers between the ages of thirty and sixty—his contemporaries, whom he describes as the “post-Takemitsu” generation. The generation of composers born after the Second World War developed a strong sense of community, conjoined by major developments in communication technology that led to the dawning awareness of what Marshall McLuhan predicated would become a “global village.” Fueled by curiosity, many composers sought the familiar within the unfamiliar, and adopted a multicultural and trans-historical sensibility that both enriches and complicates the notion of a cultural identity. Because factors of tradition and innovation play such important roles in the formulation of a culture, it has been especially challenging for composers in the United States—a relatively young country populated mainly by immigrants—to establish a clear sense of identity. The complex interplay of history, culture, and memory has long occupied Carl’s thoughts, and forms the basis of his musical exploration of Japan.

The relationship between tradition and innovation is also complex in Japan due to the country’s rapid process of modernization, which coincided with a time of rich cultural exchange between Japan and the West. During the Edo Period (1600–1867), Japan operated as a feudal society under the Tokugawa shogunate and, in cultural isolation, fostered many of the values and practices now understood to be “traditional.” The modern era of Japan, beginning with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, saw the re-establishment of a monarchy under the legal jurisdiction of an emperor, and the opening of the country’s borders to external influence. Modeled after the capitalist economy of the West, Japan quickly transformed from an agricultural state into an international center of urban industry and military power.

The Meiji Restoration impacted not only Japan, but also countries around the world whose citizens were exposed to an influx of exotic artifacts from a culture that was previously unknown to them. In a trend known as *Japonisme*, European and American artists, musicians, and writers appropriated various elements of Oriental art and design into their work: the painters Monet and Van Gogh, for example, drew inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints, Gilbert and Sullivan’s popular comic opera *The Mikado* is situated in Japan, as is Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, and the Imagist movement in literature, led by the poets Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, was informed by the aphoristic directness of *hokku* (now known as *haiku*), the genre of Japanese poetry that captures a singular and succinctly defined image of natural beauty. Debussy and Messiaen, whose music explored nonmetric temporality and an extended spectrum of the harmonic continuum, both held an affinity for Japanese music, as did several American composers—including the West Coast experimentalists Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, and Lou Harrison—who incorporated versions of pentatonic scales into their music and examined the dramatic function of instruments that was evident in traditional genres of Japanese theater.

At the same time, Japanese citizens were increasingly adopting Western styles of dress and manner, and by the middle of the twentieth century, many young Japanese artists willfully disinherited traditional practices in favor of modern modes of Western expression. During the Second World War, numerous Japanese heard Western music for the first time on phonograph records and through the U. S. Armed Forces Network, a radio station established for American troops, which became profound musical experiences for impressionable Japanese teenagers like

Toru Takemitsu. “During the war in Japan, listening to Western music was forbidden,” Takemitsu recalls. “So when the war was over, we young people were thirsty for Western music. We wanted to learn things.”<sup>1</sup> After the war, Takemitsu temporarily rejected elements of traditional Japanese music in pursuit of Western modernity, and found an effective vehicle for his diverse artistic affinities in composing music for film, the medium whose images provided him with some of his earliest impressions of the West.

Technology facilitated two distinct but closely related influences with respect to the exchange between Japanese and Western musical cultures. First, the increased facility of communication—via photography, film, radio, phonograph, and television—led to the recognition of important points of intersection, making American and European composers sensitive to the artistic traditions of non-Western cultures and vice versa. Second, the ability to generate and modify sound electronically focused the attention of many Western composers on natural acoustic properties, which often led to the quasi-scientific investigation of sound as an object devoid of its original cultural or expressive context. Additive and subtractive synthesis, for example, clarified aspects of overtone formation, which led to the close examination of timbre as a compositional element. Also, the fluidity of pitch space demonstrated by sliding tones offered an alternative to equal-tempered conventions that restricted musical pitches to discrete steps of a fixed scale. Similarly, the chronometric time of the recording studio—where musical duration is represented by the physical length of tape—persuaded composers to explore temporal continuities that were not governed by a motoric pulse or divided into regularly measured units. All of these features engaged Western avant-gardists such as Varèse, Cage, Boulez, and Stockhausen, who enthusiastically embraced different aspects of Japanese music and culture—especially elements of gagaku, kabuki, and Noh theater—that suggested perspectives of timbre and time that were unconventional by Western standards.

For many, these experiments in the electronic studios represented the most modern developments in music, but according to Takemitsu, several of the European avant-gardists overlooked the essential nature of the musical art by focusing too much on formal properties of sound: “I think, for instance, that in the 1950s and 1960s, Western music grew too intellectual. Composers like Stockhausen, Berio, and Nono made some interesting experiments, and they did many good things. But at the same time, composers began thinking about sound only in terms of its function, and in the process music lost its sensuality.”<sup>2</sup> By assimilating elements of Western modernism while also reclaiming elements from his Japanese musical heritage, Takemitsu represented a pivotal attitude in the modern history of Japanese music, one that set an important precedent for the subsequent generation of composers: an awareness of a global musical culture, an intimate familiarity with recording and production technology, and the permission to draw from a wide variety of genres, styles, and modes of expression.

Historical, cultural, technological, and artistic eclecticism shaped the musical identity not only of composers of the post-Takemitsu generation, but also of American and European composers born after the Second World War. In his music and writings, Robert Carl acknowledges this point of convergence, which serves as the basis for most of his creative work. He maintains the vigorous dissonance, the focus on timbre, and the organic relationship between material and structure that were central to the modern program of the 1950s, but he also incorporates stylistic

<sup>1</sup> Allan Kozinn, “The Arts Festival: A Japanese Composer’s Avant-Garde Concerns,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

elements from earlier and later periods, scripting what he describes as a musical “dialogue with history.” The inclusive nature of his musical language has made his dialogue a veritable palimpsest, “bringing more and more artifacts of my earlier life, earlier music, and other eras into my music, in a play of memory and shadow.”<sup>3</sup> Carl credits Charles Ives as his strongest influence, both for his eclectic musical style and also for the transcendental quality of his music: “That type of individualistic, undogmatic sense of a spiritual reality, which is a kind of pragmatic spirituality, and is very American, I find appealing.”<sup>4</sup> Carl’s music also conveys an unmistakable sensual and lyrical quality—even, at times, a wistful nostalgia—that Takemitsu found lacking in many of the works by the midcentury European modernists.

Finally, in his dedicated exploration of the intersection of time and space, Carl takes advantage of recent developments in music technology—specifically Max/MSP, the meta-software designed by Miller Puckette. Named after Max Mathews, pioneer of digital music and audio research, Max/MSP allows the user to create interactive computer programs for live performance. Highly modular by design, the software permits extreme flexibility in programming algorithmic routines of musical processes, all of which are distinctly represented through graphic displays. “It’s been a dream come true,” Carl states, “to be able to create processes and structures whose complexity or ‘information-density’ would be just too daunting without the computer as a tool. [Max/MSP] helped me to realize what I already wanted to express: time as a spatialized entity.”<sup>5</sup> Carl’s musical tribute to Japan, therefore, goes far beyond a simple fascination with the exotic sounds of a foreign musical tradition or the insight into the nature of acoustics and time; his “dialogue with history” has by extension become his commentary on the artistic, technological, and spiritual fusion of histories that characterizes contemporary culture in Japan, Europe, and the United States.

Carl’s perspective of the relationship between American and Japanese musical cultures was sharpened by his interaction with the composers he met in Japan, and he identifies three main aesthetic differences, all of which characterize the works included on this recording. “In Japan,” Carl points out, there is “a far greater emphasis on perfection of individual sounds” and “a greater understanding of the role of silence, how it frames and highlights sound.”<sup>6</sup> He also notes that Japanese composers tend to conceive of polyphony as “an outgrowth of heterophony; hence there is one melodic line that generates both harmony and counterpoint.”<sup>7</sup> Another salient feature of Carl’s works on this recording is a general sense of suspended time, which from a musical standpoint results from temporal frameworks that are not based on a pulse or governed by regular metric divisions. Instead, within clearly demarcated structures, individual musical gestures are propelled by a different passage of time, one that might be better understood in relation to physiological patterns (such as the heartbeat or the breath) or psychological markers of time (such as the rate of changing thoughts or moods).

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Carl, “Artist Statement,” Faculty website, The Hartt School, University of Hartford, <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/carl>.

<sup>4</sup> Carl, “Robert Carl: The composer in conversation with Bruce Duffie,” *New Music Connoisseur* (March 2002), <http://www.bruceDuffie.com/carl.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Carl, email correspondence with the author, May 6, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Perhaps Carl's most explicit reference to Japanese musical culture is his use of the shakuhachi, a bamboo flute that has served as a meditative device by Zen Buddhist monks since the Middle Ages. The purpose of *suizen*, or "blowing Zen" as the practice is called, is to experience the inseparability of the breath and the sounding of the instrument, which will prepare the mind for the enlightened state of *satori*. The breath of the player determines not only the timing of the phrases, but also the extraordinary variety of timbre produced by the instrument. In *A Clean Sweep*, Carl sets the gentle sound and unhurried phrasing of the shakuhachi in sharp contrast with the unrelenting severity of an electronic drone, creating an open field in which to explore how these opposing entities interpenetrate and color each other. Their superimposition also produces an aural illusion, since the drone is comprised of gradually ascending glissandi that emphasize different overtones of the flute(s), creating a dramatic development of timbre that is in a constant state of blossoming.

*Bullet Cycle* features recorded sounds of the Japanese "bullet train," which are processed in relation to the playing of live performers. Recurring in cyclic fashion, the concrete sounds of the train provide a rigid structure—akin to the clock-like precision of a train schedule—before dissolving into a hazy drone that accompanies the musicians, who play kaleidoscopic variations drawn from a gamut of motives. Max/MSP filters the train's sound into a series of chords whose pitches match the modal content of the musicians at any given point. The undulating structure of *Bullet Cycle* produces the sensation of falling asleep on a train, drifting between consciousness and unconsciousness. The score may be realized by two or three performers: one who plays any plucked or struck instrument, one who plays any sustaining instrument, and a third part that consists of a selection of non-pitched percussion instruments, which may be performed live or presented via a recording or a live MIDI patch.

*Brown Velvet* is an extended lyrical cadenza for a bassoonist and a laptop-generated electronic drone that can be precisely controlled in real time. Similar to *A Clean Sweep*, the structural relationship between the soloist and the drone creates a developmental process that highlights different overtones of the acoustic instrument. Also, the organic phrasing, occasional pitch bends, and jarring multiphonics of the bassoon resemble the style of shakuhachi. There are passages of increasing lyricism and intensity in the solo bassoon, but the form of *Brown Velvet* is essentially shaped by the continuous descent of the drone, which begins in a low register and progresses toward subauditory tones. According to Carl, it was a combination of the Japanese sensitivity toward timbre and the rich harmonies of Debussy that inspired him to use the overtone series as a harmonic template: "I've been using 'screens' of overtones from which to derive new harmonic combinations, and whose common partials create links for modulation. I do feel, however, that the flow and shape of my pieces is closer to natural phenomena than ever before, and the music is more 'itself' than ever, with less need to symbolize something."<sup>8</sup>

Mandala, which means "circle" in Sanskrit, is a sacred diagram representing the cosmos that is traditionally used as a ritualistic image for meditation in Hindu and Buddhist belief systems. For *Collapsible Mandala*, the elaborate circular design provided Carl with a structural model for his portrayal of a Japanese soundscape. Comprised of material spontaneously recorded by the composer over the course of three months of travel throughout Japan, the musical collage presents a host of found sounds that are subjected to a process resembling a series of revolving wheels. The sonic images appear in rotating glimpses, and their unexpected juxtapositions and

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<sup>8</sup> Carl, "Artist Statement."

superimpositions create a spark of meaning, similar to the manner in which the mind alternately reveals and conceals moments of experience and products of memory. *Collapsible Mandala* also contains extended periods of silence between articulations, which provide ample space for the images to impress themselves palpably onto one's consciousness. Carl's deliberate use of silence embodies the Japanese concept of *ma*, or "space," which refers not to distance, but to the visceral experience of an interval or gap between entities. His concept of sound as an expression of space, which can be traced to his early studies with Xenakis, is also evident in the mobile dimensions of the work: originally conceived as an installation, *Collapsible Mandala* can be programmed to fit an almost infinite number of durations, with different overlaps among the sounds and silences—in other words, the musical structure is expandable and collapsible.

Cross-cultural understanding does not emerge from passive exposure to a foreign culture, but from active construction and assimilation based on mutual exchanges. As Robert Carl's experience with Japanese music and culture makes clear, this ongoing dialogue enriches one's understanding not only of other cultures, but also of oneself: "Beyond musical issues," Carl states, "the remarkable thing for a Westerner about Japanese culture is its looking-glass quality—it's so familiar on the one hand, and so completely different on the other."<sup>9</sup> Takemitsu's first experience with Western music was in the Japanese military barracks during World War Two, where an officer played a phonograph record of a French chanson. The windup gramophone lacked a functional needle, so the officer had crafted a makeshift stylus out of a piece of bamboo. This seemingly inelegant and unsophisticated scenario prompted in Takemitsu an impassioned exploration of a foreign musical culture, and it was only after focusing intently on Western music that he came to recognize what he regarded as the "splendor" and artistic relevance of traditional Japanese music: "Had I never been under the sway of Western music I know my appreciation of Japanese music would have been very different."<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, *From Japan* is much more than a sonic postcard or a souvenir of what Carl saw and heard while overseas—the works on this recording reflect his deep impression of how the mechanisms of history and humanity intermingle to create a sense of cultural and spiritual identity within an individual. "My goal," Carl explains, "is to provide the listener with a sense of amplitude, a sort of 'opening up' of the ear and spirit that suggest a place where one can breathe more deeply, sense a broader expanse in which one can listen, and resonate in tune with what one hears."<sup>11</sup> Like a carefully sharpened piece of bamboo amplifying the sound of a European phonograph record, Carl's music resounds with the melancholic serenity and majestic wonder of an imperfect fusion of values and practices, which is the hallmark of a global village.

—Eric Smigel

*Eric Smigel is Associate Professor of Music and coordinator of the musicology program at San Diego State University.*

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<sup>9</sup> Carl, email correspondence.

<sup>10</sup> Toru Takemitsu, "Contemporary Music in Japan." *Perspectives of New Music* 27: 2 (Summer 1989), 201.

<sup>11</sup> Carl, "Composer's Note," *Robert Carl: Music for Strings*, New World Records 80645-2.

**Robert Carl** (born 1954) studied composition with Jonathan Kramer, George Rochberg, Ralph Shapey, and Iannis Xenakis. His music is performed throughout the U.S. and Europe, and is published by American Composers' Alliance, Boosey & Hawkes, Roncorp, and Apoll-Edition. His grants, prizes, and residencies have come from such sources as the National Endowment for the Arts, Tanglewood, Connecticut Commission on the Arts, Camargo Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Ucross, Millay Colony, Bogliasco Foundation, Djerassi Foundation, the Aaron Copland House, Youkobo ArtSpace, and the Tokyo Wonder Site, and the Rockefeller Foundation (Bellagio). He was awarded a 2005 Chamber Music America commission for a string quintet written for the Miami String Quartet and Robert Black. An excerpt from his opera-in-progress *Harmony* (with novelist Russell Banks) was presented in May 2006 in the New York City Opera's VOX Showcase series. He received the 1998 Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2007 he received a fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council for travel to Japan to research contemporary Japanese composers, and his book on Terry Riley's *In C* (Oxford University Press) was released in summer 2009. In 2010 he was the featured composer for the Festival of Contemporary Art Music at Washington State University, and in 2011 he was resident composer for performances and master classes at Hacettepe University National Conservatory, Ankara, Turkey. Other CD releases of his work are found on Cedille, Neuma, Koch International, Centaur, Lotus, Capstone, Vienna Modern Masters, innova, E.R.M., and The Aerial. For fifteen years he was a co-director of the Extension Works new music ensemble in Boston; he is chair of the composition department at the Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford, and writes extensively on new music for *Fanfare* magazine.  
<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/CARL/>

**Elizabeth Brown** is a composer and virtuoso performer on the shakuhachi flute. As a composer, she has been commissioned by such organizations as the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble and the Barlow Foundation, and has received a Guggenheim fellowship. As a performer and student of shakuhachi, she received a US-Japan Friendship Commission grant for a five-months' residence in Japan. She has also written a large and varied body of work for the shakuhachi, for which she has received acclaim in awards in both the United States and Japan.

**Sayun Chang**, a native of Taiwan, is a doctoral candidate in percussion at the Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford.

**Ryan Hare** is an Associate Professor of Music at Washington State University, where he teaches composition, theory, and bassoon. He is also composer in residence for the Washington Idaho Symphony and was recently named "Composer of the Year" by the Washington State Music Teachers' Association. As a bassoonist, Hare performs with the Solstice Wind Quintet, the Intermontane Bassoon Trio, and has been busy as a freelance performer throughout the Pacific Northwest.

**Katie Kennedy** is an active performer and chamber musician in Connecticut and greater New England. She received her B.M. in cello performance from the Oberlin Conservatory and continued her studies with Csaba Onczay at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, Hungary. She is on the faculty at the Loomis Chaffee School.

**Bill Solomon** is a percussionist with Ensemble Signal. He has also performed with Alarm Will Sound, Callithumpian Consort, Wet Ink Ensemble, Azure Ensemble, and has recorded for Mode, Cantaloupe, Naxos, EuroArts, Capstone, and Equilibrium labels. Mr. Solomon performed the solo vibraphone part for Pierre Boulez's *Répons*, in collaboration with the Lucerne Festival, IRCAM and Ensemble InterContemporain with Mr. Boulez as conductor.

**Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn** is a composer and performer of new music. He is an Assistant Professor of Composition at Wichita State University. His music has been performed throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Beginning My Studies*. Included on *Our Heart and Home Is With Infinitude*. Patrice Michaels, soprano; Elizabeth Buccheri, piano. Cedille Records 90000 091.

*Bells Dance, Drums Ring; Die Berliner Hornisse, El Canto de los Asesinados, Haiku of Buson, Lesgedowdaheah, Nell Miller Op. 1, Roundabout*. Robert Black, bass; Jerome Pruett, tenor; Robert Carl, voice; Mark Engebretson, saxophone; The Hartt Contemporary Players. innova Records 596.

"Death" from Symphony No. 2, "Liberty and/or Death." Hartt Symphony Orchestra, Christopher Zimmerman, conductor. Capstone Records 8779.

*Duke Meets Mort*. Vienna Saxophone Quartet. Lotus Records 9722.

*Music for Strings*. Adaskin String Trio; Annie Trépanier, violin; Katie Lansdale, violin; John McDonald, piano. New World Records 80645-2.

*Piano Music*. Includes *Spiral Dances, From Him to Me, Ritratto dei Giorni e delle Notti su Lago di Como, Nach[t(raum)] ist Kommen, Warm Waxing Wail, Swing Shift, The Big Room*. Kathleen Supové, Anthony de Mare, Robert Carl, piano. Centaur Records CRC 2257.

*Time/Memory/Shadow*. Extension Works, Ronald Feldman; conductor. Neuma 450-81.

*Towards the Crest*. John Bruce Yeh, bass clarinet. Koch International 3-7088-2H1.

*A Wide Open Field*. Jeffrey Krieger, electronic cello, The Hartt Symphony Orchestra, Gene Young, conductor. Vienna Modern Masters 3030.

#### *A Clean Sweep*

Engineer: Greg Snedeker; Producer: Robert Carl

Recorded June 26 and July 3, 2010, Riverview Recording Studios, Gill, Massachusetts.

#### *Bullet Cycle*

Engineer: David Groener; Producer: Robert Carl

Recorded May 19, 2009, Hartt School, University of Hartford, Bliss Music Room and Hartt Recording Studio

#### *Brown Velvet*

Engineer: Jeremy Krug; Co-Producers: Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn and Robert Carl

Recorded April 15, 2012, Washington State University Recording Studio

#### *Collapsible Mandala*

Engineer and producer: Robert Carl

Mastering and Co-Production: Scott Metcalfe; Mind's Ear Studios; Baltimore, Maryland  
Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC  
Cover photo: Robert Carl  
Design: Jim Fox

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This disc is in large part the fruits of a fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council which allowed me to travel to Japan and meet with and interview a wide range of Japanese composers, while simultaneously pursuing and deepening my creative work through an intense encounter with the culture. As a result I would like to thank Ralph Samuelson and Margaret Cogswell, respectively ACC's director and program officer at the time. The ACC Tokyo office was unflaggingly helpful in making professional introductions and travel arrangements, under the direction of Georg Kochi, program assistant (and translator) Mikiko Takeuchi, and Misuzu Yamamoto. While in Tokyo I had two month-long residencies, and I wish to thank the Tokyo Wonder Site Aoyama (Yusamku Imamura, director, and Mari Ono, program officer), and Youkobo Art Space (directors Tatsuhiko and Hiroko Murata) for providing the ideal circumstances for both work and relaxation during my extended visit. My partner Karen McCoy also received an ACC fellowship independently, and she pointed me towards several places I wouldn't have thought of going otherwise. And in particular my longtime friend, the composer Jo Kondo, is deeply thanked for his support and extensive knowledge of the field, which helped to make my project proposal successful.

In my work with MaxMSP, I am indebted to several younger composers, all former students of my course, whose selective advice and debugging was extremely useful in refining the works' patches: Lief Ellis, Richard Johnson, and Matt Sargent.

Finally, *Brown Velvet* was a commission from Washington State University, in whose 2010 Festival of Contemporary Art Music it was premiered. I would like to give my thanks to Drs. Charles Argesinger, Gerald Berthiaume, and Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn for making my experience so fruitful and satisfying.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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ROBERT CARL (b. 1954)

*FROM JAPAN*

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1. *A Clean Sweep* (2005) 13:02  
for shakuhachi and fixed media  
Elizabeth Brown, shakuhachi

2. *Bullet Cycle* (2007) 15:59  
for two improvising soloists, percussive timekeeper, and fixed media  
Katie Kennedy, cello; Bill Solomon, vibraphone; Sayun Chang, percussion

3. *Brown Velvet* (2009–10) 7:13  
for bassoon and live electronics  
Ryan Hare, bassoon; Aleksander Sternfeld-Dunn, laptop

4. *Collapsible Mandala* (2008–09) 26:21  
electronic installation

5. *A Clean Sweep* (2005) 13:02  
for two shakuhachis and fixed media  
Elizabeth Brown and Robert Carl, shakuhachi

TT: 75:56

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