

一〇八 - 東京音歩き

108—WALKING THROUGH TOKYO

Essay on “Walking through Tokyo” audio, “sound chaos” and Asian soundscapes

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This audio piece is a recording of various sounds from different areas of Tokyo. Yet when you listen, it becomes clear that this is not a simple field recording, but a soundscape, an encounter of one moment in history as we transition from the 20th century to the 21st century. It is the soundscape emitted from a specific place, Tokyo, which lies within Asia, one area of the world. It is a field recording that has been filtered through the ears of Sarah Peebles, a composer who spent extended periods living in Japan, studying classical and contemporary Japanese music, and collaborating with artists.

Peebles' ear captures the various clamorous sounds of the city, creating a sound sphere of those sounds we would normally dismiss. For those of us living in Tokyo, these sounds are taken for granted. They are no more than everyday noise. Peebles, though, focuses on the living sound coming from this one city in the world, Tokyo, and thoroughly succeeds in portraying the true face of Tokyo. There are various CDs that are recordings of sound effects of Tokyo or are combinations of sound effects and music, but this may be the first CD of a soundscape designed to depict present-day Tokyo as it is. What is unique about this is that if you listen carefully, you will hear not only the contemporary noises produced by this megalopolis, but also hints of historical noise, sounds passed down over the generations. Even for those of us who live in Tokyo, when we listen to this recording, sounds of the city which had become completely ordinary to us, so ordinary that we didn't even notice them anymore, we are moved once again by the dynamism of the soundscape produced by this Tokyo.

Every city around the world has its own inherent history and culture, which has been surrounded and hidden by the ambient noise of various modern economic activities, creating a uniform, expressionless condition. When looking at it from the perspective of a soundscape, however, it is important to carefully interpret the chaotic noise of every-day life in Asia coming out from among the noise. The sensory experiences we have in a place we visit for the first time come from that moment in which we sense the degree to which it differs from wherever we have lived up to that point. Then perhaps, because we tend to adapt to the new environment immediately, it is hard for us to keep that in our memories. As a composer who lives in Toronto, Canada, Peebles is acutely aware of this distinction, and this is distilled into the newly conceived sonic portrait.

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Essay Continued

The soundscape common to all of Asia is hustle and bustle. The noises of a bustling bazaar are indeed proof that the city is vibrant and viable, and this bazaar bustle can be found in any place where large numbers of people come and go, such as in front of a station or at an intersection, or in a shopping center, where this "sound chaos" can be found. This is the same soundscape found in any city around the world, but compared to areas based in a European culture, there is a certain boisterous quality characterizing the soundscapes of cities of Asian culture. This soundscape seems almost to lose the quality of noise, and comes across more as a smell, almost like body odour, so that the noise of the city that might have been perceived as bothersome becomes soothing. In the globalized digital world only uniform information has come to be communicated. It is lacking in that something extra that we perceive only with our five senses. This is why it is more important than ever that we can be given a glimpse of the true face of a city through the refreshing perspective of soundscapes captured by human ears.

Let us analyze the soundscape of Tokyo as captured through the ears of Sarah Peebles. First of all, the typical kind of speech made by some street preacher pours out of a speaker at the intersection in front of Shinjuku Station and shrouds the entire area, filling one with a distasteful feeling each time it is heard. As you listen to "108", this sound gradually starts to intersect, turning into a duo, then a trio and eventually overlapping to form a quartet, transforming into a mandala pattern of sound that intrigues the listener. I thought of "It's Gonna Rain", the piece created by Steve Reich in 1965 that heralded the beginning of minimal music. Reich took a portion of a sermon by a preacher speaking about the Apocalypse from a corner in San Francisco and made it into a loop, giving birth to a "moire" (wavy pattern) type of minimal sound. While perceiving the voice of the Shinjuku preacher as a type of "sound chaos", Peebles makes the soundscape distinct as a time axis. It is this quality of "sound chaos" that seems to have strongly impressed her as a uniquely Tokyo sound, and it appears in numerous places in this album. Yet it flows so naturally that one hardly even notices it.

The "pin pon" chime at Shinjuku Station—a signal for the visually impaired; the sound of the train ticket dispenser; the audio signals on the train platforms announcing the arrival or departure of the trains (each station has their own song); the sounds of the train moving, of the train car itself, and the sounds within the train: all of these reverberate and bounce off each other creating an enormous "sound chaos". Added to this is the sound produced by a pachinko parlor (Japanese automated pinball), a sound which is not only a Tokyo sound but one of those sounds unique to all of Japan. The torrential noise of small metal balls rushing out of the pachinko machines is the fanfare of good fortune to the gambler. For others, it is the depressing sound of people wasting away their lives. In this recording, a futuristic soundscape of metallic sound surfaces and overwhelms the listener, as if shards of stars were scattering over an urban landscape.

The most peaceful and calming section in "108" is the scene of Joya no Kane, the temple bells that reverberate through the dark night on New Year's Eve to usher in the New Year. The title of this album reflects the number of times that these temple bells are rung. In Buddhism, humans are said to have 108 carnal desires and by sounding the bell 108 times these carnal desires can be expurgated and the soul purified. Joya no Kane, the ritual of ringing the temple bells, has been a tradition that has continued since the Edo Period (1600–1868) in Tokyo as a way of welcoming in the New Year. The sound of the bells echoing through the city is indeed a moment in time when a soundscape from the Edo Period is brought back to life. The soundscape of Tokyo that throughout the year starts and ends with a cacophony of sound, becomes quiet and reflective in this moment.

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The sound of the temple bells entices an atmosphere of tranquillity. In fact, these Japanese temple bells are, in a sense, a sound installation designed to create tranquillity. When you analyze the sound of the bell, D is the basic pitch with hints of B and E. In the beginning, the standard for temple bells, based on the root of the (historical Japanese) "ojiki" mode, was actually in the pitch of A. Perhaps, however, because the Chinese equivalent of the ojiki mode—with a root note of D—was considered more attractive than the ojiki mode used in gagaku (Japanese imperial court music)—with a root note of A—many of the bells in Japan are now in D, as can be heard here. Still, it is amazing that a scene like this, that washes the soul clean, remains, and although I have lived in Tokyo for a long time, I felt as though I were listening to it for the first time. The concept in which tranquillity appears out of the sound of the bell, not unlike from a black-hole, is indeed "sound chaos" as a Japanese tradition.

On the first day of the New Year, at daybreak, the students of kendo hold practice matches in cold halls. The fierce banging of the impassioned encounters of wooden stick to wooden stick reverberates, creating an almost bizarre sound reminiscent of a nest full of buzzing bees. Downtown in the Ameyoko shopping area, the voice of a vender follows in the tradition of a Japanese style of vocalization used in traditional theatre, a voice with a rasping quality still heard in Japan today. The voice blends in with the noise of the city and the sound of a train passing overhead, creating the effect of an a cappella opera, and the soundscape of a typical Asian bazaar is complete.

The "sound chaos" that fills Sarah Peebles' ears is somehow unbalanced compared to the sound chaos of a western culture, yet that is why it is an accurate perception of the Tokyo soundscape itself. What I mean here by unbalanced is that the Japanese, through culture or habit, are accustomed to sensing the tranquillity within the din or even creating noise to find tranquillity. I like to call it a culture of relative listening. Peebles is not the only artist who has caught onto relative listening, as there are many others including computer musician, Carl Stone, and Christophe Charles. There is no doubt that in order for Peebles' ears to move toward relative listening, she must have encountered ways of thinking such as John Cage's aesthetics, in which to listen was to create each person's own music, or Murray Schafer, the Canadian composer who developed the concept of soundscape and who has attempted the tuning of the earth's sound environment. The sonic portrait created here is brimming with the joy of listening to the sounds of the city, the thrill of encountering an unknown sound, an interest toward sounds that have a sense of history, and a Pied Piper-like impulse to follow the sounds that beckon, even if one doesn't know the meaning of them. It is a record left behind by the ears belonging to a most accomplished listener of the soundscape as performed by the city. I sincerely hope that the sounds of the city will only go on being refined and "polished" by such listeners in the future.

— Hiroshi Yoshimura, July 2002, Tokyo