



special movements make
 "music"
 catch-wave, 1967
 T. Kosugi

FISHING FOR SOUND

An Interview with Improvisational musician/sound installation artist Takehisa Kosugi
 by John Hudak

Takehisa Kosugi is an improvisational musician who composes and performs structured improvisations using various instruments and non-instruments, and also constructs ingenious self-interactive sound installations for various international art galleries and shows. His performances with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company have been comical and amusing in both sight and sound, sometimes causing distress to some audience members who perceive the work as a distraction to the dance. Previous to his permanently joining the Cunningham Dance Company in 1976, he was a member of the "Taj Mahal Travellers", an electro-acoustic/multi-media improvisational group that performed in many different environments including the beach, snowy mountains and even Taj Mahal. His first job after graduating college was working with the sound effects team for the Japanese cartoon "Astroboy".

Takehisa Kosugi (K) John Hudak (H)

H: Tell me about working with the sound effects for Astroboy. Was that your first workings in music?

K: I studied music history and musicology at the Tokyo University of the Arts, going in two directions: one

was improvisational music, and the other one was "objects of sound"...sounds other than the melody/rhythm oriented music...every sound including music. It is called "sound objects" for me. For the tape music of Astroboy, I joined in this part of the sound effects of film, and in this case, I worked with creating "sound objects", not with a conventional musical approach; for instance, Astroboy walking...

H: Like a squeaky sound...

K: This is the effect of walking, but for me this is also a type of "sound object". We can use this sound independently from the film. At that time, I was assisting a sound effects team, and there were several people working together to create this type of sound effect in one week to complete a 20-minute film, so we worked with electronic sound generators...

H: Synthesizers...

K: At that time in the 60's we didn't have high-tech music synthesizers, we used a sine wave generator and a square wave generator to get a variety of electronic sounds and we also manipulated the tape recorders overdubbing and half speed or high speed of tape running and we also played the recorded tape by hand...without the movement of the motor...and then we could make very unusual sounds, and I think the walking of Astroboy, the sound of walking..."peyup, peyup,peyup"...it wasn't my idea, but one of the artists working there got them. I think I remember that they came from previously recorded marimba sounds..."bom, bom, bom", then they were played by hand on a tape recorder (both hands on the reels moving back and forth without using the motor) and tape delay echo was added to it...so this is how to make the original sound of Astroboy walking. For making these types of "sound objects", we did a lot of chance performances...an improvisational approach to creating this type of "sound object" so the "sound object".

H: What does improvisation mean for you?

K: Improvisation for me is not like orthodox traditional improvisation like Indian music or jazz. Although these types of music are essentially improvised, they must be based on conventional tonal systems, and my approach to improvising is very much out of tonal systems; for instance, if I play violin, and I play melody, I play the melody as a "sound object"...a kind of compound sound with a system of randomness, so I can create quite unexpected sounds with my instrument. In the beginning I did very free improvisation with friends of mine, sometimes four, five, six people together, and at that time we said the music was played by the automatic method, automatism, like the action painting of Jackson Pollock...this is kind of by chance, the paintings were by chance, dropping the paint by action, not so much controlled by the hand. My music is not so consciously controlled by hand. Sometimes I need to make my movement of playing the instruments quite random and this is part of the automatism of the music, automatic.

H: So you mean the thinking about it is not connected to the hands?

K: My music performance is of course connected to the hands, and to certain patterns of movements of sound, but when it's played, the patterns change instantaneously. At the moment of creating a sound the performer gets a very instantaneous approach at the same occurrence/events of sound. It's not predetermined for my hand movements.

H: So you are making the choices at the moment you are playing?

K: Yes, it's just composed of this type of action, apart from ordinary conscious actions, something like automatic writing in literature.

H: Automatic writing was where you wouldn't directly be thinking about what you were doing and the writing would come directly out of the unconscious...

K: Well, this very moment, when it comes up, I just get it, grasp it, I recognize it, so music is coming from somewhere, not from me, but from outside myself.

H: Do you make a choice as to whether it's good or bad, or does it just come?

K: It just comes, but this is a very instantaneous event, very very very instantaneous, so my reaction should also be very instantaneous. This is an essential part of improvisation. So I think this is not like measuring time, in the ordinary time scale, or conscious scale...It would be related to the consciousness of the performer. So in this case, sometimes time stays there, doesn't continue. This is strange to say, but in my consciousness, when I play, music sometimes stops and I just play spacially or timelessly. The performer

does not feel time. The performer can stay at this stage, without time consciousness.

H: In the present moment...right now...so when you make a sound you are in the moment making it spontaneously, you don't think about what happened before and what you think might sound good next?

K: Automatic performance...I say it's random, but it's not totally random like scattering sounds...like collecting many different sounds and mixing together randomly. This is really purely random. Certainly we have controlling, but also...it's difficult to explain...it's like I have a different type of consciousness. I feel it's like we have a vaster consciousness and move out. So we don't have any certain created timing figure of sound, we have a lot of distance. At the moment of the performance we go from distance to distance and moving around. I have a piece called "Tender Music". One man manipulates some object, keeping a distance between the object and himself. At that time, I manipulated the objects with strings...attached strings to the objects and I manipulated them.

H: Picked them up?

K: Well, not exactly picked them up...as the instructions go..."to manipulate them through six different actions: 1) tip over, 2) tip back, 3) slant, 4) slant back, 5) tip over the slanted one, and 6) slant the tipped one over." The important thing is that this is different from my performance with ordinary musical instruments, but the structure relates to my other musical performances.

H: Although the objects made sounds too...

K: Yes, sounds too, but if it doesn't have sound that's ok too, but automatically this has sound, but this is not sound-oriented music, this action is a kind of total performance. It's not dance, but people who like action will appreciate watching it and sometimes listening to the occasional sound. This is not only sound nor action oriented, it's a combination of sound and action together.

H: And visual...multi-media.

K: Even if it's an empty Coca Cola bottle...for this piece it's also related to improvisation...the automatic from the consciousness...using these strings, or any material...if we use these chopsticks to manipulate with, well this could be with string or chopsticks, but without direct manipulation by hand.

H: You lose control slightly.

K: I lose control, and this is very important to use these media.

H: It makes it somewhat random or influenced by chance...

K: Yes. This is my sense of improvisation. This is a very good example of indirectness. It's not so easy to control an object with string or chopsticks. It is easy to play a tea container with direct hand operation, but we have to find a way to make it unusual. Then we need some instruction...we need choreography. But using chopsticks is already unusual...we can find a new phase of this...time and space event. So this is another direction of my approach to making music.

H: As time has gone along, have your ideas about sound clarified/changed directions? Could you explain your melodious music?

K: I've certainly changed my style of improvisation. At the beginning when I started improvisation, my sound was very atonal, not melodious. Early on I listened to the European avant-garde music, so I had a certain influence from this type of sound, and also "sound objects", not only for the noise sounds. Then later when I played with the Taj Mahal Travellers, my music became very melodious, something like Indian music, a little blues melody.

H: Would you say pretty? Like songs?

K: I combined with other performers and electronic sound devices including echo machines, filters, and electronic sound generators. That time I had a concert called "Catch Wave/Catching Wave". Wave means audio wave as well as supersonic or light wave. I had an electronic sound system, a very simple one...combination of radio transmitter and receiver. The radio wave is not an audio wave, but when they meet together in an electronic circuit, a beating sound occurs. One radio frequency and another radio frequency, if they are tuned very close to each other, the difference between each frequency/radio signal became an audio signal...called heterodyne. So I found this phenomena when I was testing a radio transmitter - a very cheap wireless guitar transmitter over the AM radio. When I put this transmitter close to

the radio receiver, I got this beat signal/audio signal...and this phenomenon is so beautiful, and if the position is changed, the beat is also changed, so I put these materials, the receiver and the transmitter, actually suspended them with string from the ceiling, sometimes a tiny transistor radio here and about seven inches apart from the transmitter, both hung together from the ceiling or from a suspension, the suspensions have three movements by air current, so this is one of my approaches to mixed media. This air movement creates this movement of material sound...transmitter and receiver.

H: It makes random sounds? You said there was a clicking sound...it's not feedback?

K: It's not a click, it is a continuous sound from the radio receiver. The receiver itself has a superheterodyne system. A superheterodyne radio has an oscillation for the radio frequency signal inside, so if there is another radio signal close to it, a beating sound audio frequency wave will occur. Any way, this special setting of the materials - radio transmitter and receiver - sometimes I put this transmitter on a fishing pole, then the fishing pole is like the manipulation piece I explained before (using the chopsticks or strings to manipulate an object instead of direct contact), the string and the fishing pole make a very delicate setting for action. It's like fishing for sound, sound fishing.

H: It must have been very comical.

K: Yes, very funny to see. This radio wave is wireless, so this action makes a spacial and visual performance, entertaining. In another version, I used an oscillating electric fan to move these objects. There are so many versions of this piece. This is for me a mixed media piece.

H: When you play for the dance company, do you always do improvisations?

K: No, not always. For Merce Cunningham I make compositions, but the compositions for these dance pieces are not written like conventional notated music. I make a composition using a combination of materials, I choose materials and I compose the sound system - how to connect this line to another - sound oscillators and effectors, then there is a kind of selection out of this composition for improvising or not improvising.

H: Do you yourself do all the playing?

K: Sometimes I play with other performers. The electronic crickets (he brings out a whole box of plastic rectangular boxes the size of pill containers...each has two circular piezio disks at either end, a solar panel on the side and a small circuit in the middle) were originally battery operated...the sound is much stronger with the batteries, and this is originally from a Cunningham piece called "Interspersion", because these cricket sounds are very interspersed, very intermittent, very slow...one pulsation in about 10 seconds, very slow emission or pulsation. But each cricket has different timing...the combination of the different crickets is very random. So it is like singing crickets. This is a part of my composition, a very automatic setting for the sound events, but it is also very composed for the randomness, because this is an automatic performance of an electronic sound system. And for the Cunningham piece, I included another part in the sound materials...water bottle caps I found in France. The cap is from the French water "Evian" and this cap is very beautiful, for when it is spun and then slowly stops, it makes a beautiful sound. I also used another sound source of bamboo skewers held on a table with one hand and plucked with the other. This sound is a little similar to the cricket sound when it is amplified through a microphone. We can find very different sounds in the skewers...a sound lower in pitch when the skewer is longer, and higher in pitch when it's shorter. I also found several different sizes of bamboo skewers - thicker and thinner, and each have different sonorities. Sometimes reading text with this timing of the crickets...I listen to the cricket's sound...I choose several crickets, let's say three, and I follow with this sound timing, I take this rhythm for my reading of text. Every click a word or two...this is a kind of interspersion idea, following the timing of the crickets. This was the original idea of this composition for the Cunningham dance, and I played together with another performer.

H: It sounds like an improvisation, but it is a composition in a way...there's a loose structure...you have these sound objects you want to use...you know what the sounds are, but you don't know how they are going to occur...

K: The possibilities are so varied...today I do text reading...the next day I do something else.

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