

The Distance between Performers and the Audience

A Comment on the Paper "Listening: Ethnomusicology
and Performance Studies" by Deborah WONG.

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The paper by Dr. WONG has made it clear that there are important differences between Japanese American taiko music and western art music in terms of the meaning of composition, the function of notation, the collectivity in the listening and so on. These differences are related to the fact that the uniqueness of each performance is regarded more highly than the uniqueness of the work in Japanese American taiko music. But here we face a difficult problem. How can the audience tell this fact, and how can this fact affect a single performance? For example, the variable potential of a work is obvious for players who play the work many times, but how can the audience of one performance become aware of this variable potential? As a supplement to the paper by Dr. WONG, I want to think about this problem by considering the presence of the performer's body because it can be an index of the uniqueness of a performance.

First, I want to look at the status of the performer's body in western art music. To make the argument clear, the subject of this consideration is limited to absolute music. As Dr. WONG has pointed out, there is a strong assumption that the music is noted in a prescriptive way. So we tend to think that a musical work is represented completely in notation. Consequently, players on the stage are ignored and the music analysis only deals with notes in the score. Of course, this schema is too simplified and very problematic, but at least we have to admit that this kind of schema still binds us to some degree.

However, much attention is being paid to issues of performance these days, including the bodily sense of performers. Many things are argued about the body touching the instrument. If we take a musical score not as the prescription of

musical sounds but as the prescription of fingering or some bodily actions, it suddenly turns into choreography, and we can get a rich sensation of the performing body from it. But these arguments lack the consideration of how such a sensation can be transmitted to the audience. So the importance of physical sensation in music yet remains to be fully touched.

Now we shall consider the situation of Japanese American taiko. What Dr. WONG has explained about bodily feelings in taiko music is mostly from the viewpoint of a player, but in my opinion there are two other important points. The first is that bodily movement can tell the audience something in its own way, i. e. through visual sensation. She gave us a good example in "Aranami" where there is no sound except shimedaiko. From her "microanalysis", we know that this is not a rest but a quite strained moment. The bodily movement in taiko playing is not subordinate to musical sounds. The second point is that choreography is not something incidental but has a decisive influence on the identity of the work. These two points tell us the importance of the visual appearance of performers. So the audience has to turn their eyes on the stage intensively, and at this very moment the distance between performers and the audience is revealed.

In western art music we do not take physical distance into consideration because music is not something that stands outside of us. Physical space is indeed important for sound waves, but if we take them as musical sounds, the distance disappears. Music occupies our sense of hearing and the distance between players and listeners almost vanishes. It can be explained by the weak relationship between bodily movements and musical sounds. In the instrumental playing, bodily action is converted into musical sound by instruments. But the process of this conversion is extremely complicated in western music instruments. On the other hand, in the case of kumidaiko, the process of conversion is quite clear because there is only simple taiko drumming. Owing to this fact, the body in taiko playing has much to do with the music. So the audience has to concentrate on performers standing somewhere to catch visual information that cannot be separated from the music. The distance from the stage to the audience has essential meaning.

Please note that I do not mean the relationship between performers and the

audience is weaker in kumidaiko compared with the case of western art music but I mean a process of participation is indispensable to Japanese American taiko performance. In western art music, there is no chance for listeners to participate because as soon as music starts they are in the music. In such a situation, the presence of players and listeners is hard to grasp. But in Japanese American taiko, physical distance gives the opportunity to make performers and the audience aware of their individualities, and at the same time the invasive sounds of taiko weave all the participants into a strong group. And the clear awareness of who are participating and of when and where it is reveals the uniqueness of a performance.