

Reflection

Microtonality, Identity and Minority

Minority

Though my starting point of the project was very technical/practical, my focus however shifted slightly, now focusing more on the concept of minority and some of its implications.

At the concert called "Schubert meets Helen Keller", I had the opportunity to play a piece called 'Herzkino' by Bjørn Erik Haugen inspired by a documentary on Helen Keller, and through this project, I started questioning what "ordinary" means, and began reflecting on my own origin and situation.

In Herzkino, Bjørn Erik Haugen is questioning both our language and the Western 12-tone equal-temperament (12TET) when he is writing a work for the microtonal piano, drawing inspiration from the blind and deaf Helen Keller, who learned her language in a very alternative way, as she needed to communicate with the sense of touch, and had to feel the vibrations and movements of the throat and face.

In terms of artistic reflection, this work also opened up to lots of new thoughts.

What is normal, was a key question that rose from our discussion. We were reminded of that the abnormal or the less normal may still be a highly valid alternative, and when we experience it, it is possibly something we learn even more from. Such as in the case with art, which per se is "artificial", and thus not "normal".

In the environment I grew up in, and I suppose also in more or less all societies, there was a strong sense of that "what people normally do" equals "normal" and that the rest is not normal.

When working with 'Herzkino', I had my perhaps first serious confrontation with this idea of 'normality', as we questioned the 'normal' regarding 'language' and also the '12TET', indeed a symbol of Western culture. (ref.: Koizumi, Fumio?). My project was still occasionally met with scepticism, but who was actually entitled to claim what should be the standard, or "the normal" to me? The concept of microtonality as a minority started taking shape, as an emotional yet fruitful sidetrack to my project.

"Musical minority": I myself am a non-western classically trained pianist playing western contemporary music on the microtonal piano.

Though there has mainly been a positive, engaging force throughout the project, I also have experienced negative barriers and resistance due to the "unusuality" . (F.ex. LAB experience).

Focusing on this perspective, obviously leads into to minefields of ethics, and though I will not be able to go in depth into this matter in my research project, I still want to share these thoughts since I find it interesting to view my motivation and project from this angle as well.

The standardized way of sharing research is limiting. It is necessary to have a common language, and the research should be shared, and also refer to others and other research. And so, a simple but difficult question arises in my mind, as our research model is a result of Western culture, and researchers almost only refer to Western literature, at least within the field of artistic research: What happens to the "minorities" – f.ex the research being written in Japan in Japanese (or other languages), without the funding to let it be translated, etc.?

One might find a parallel hierarchy in music, where Western music culture and especially it's tuning system (12TET) has colonized almost the entire planet. Almost all music (old folk songs, instruments etc) has been adjusted to the 12TET. Only some few individuals or obscure groups of "nerds" and ideologists will continue to maintain or further develop the their "minority tunings". Of course, no one thinks this makes the non-western music less valuable. But whenever the minorities are to be researched, they must necessarily be compared with a standard, again the Western standard, in order to articulate how extraordinary they are.

I am a Japanese artistic research fellow within a Western system that I deeply admire, and try to learn from. At the same time, I think I might bring something valuable to the project through my experience as Japanese/non-Westerner. I would very much like to raise some awareness both to myself and others about this issue – both about the non-Western and the non-standardized – the minority - through my project.

Identity

- Intro

Several projects made me confront my own identity. This led me to look back at things and people who helped shaping who I am today, and to analyse and think more deeply about how it/they had affected me.

I think it is relevant to this project that my formative years (until I had past 20) were spent in Japan.

By analysing and unravelling, and through my work with Harada and others, my interest in Japanese culture has admittedly increased, such as with the "ma" in **Noh** theatre, and the minorities of the north and south of Japan; the **Ainu** and the **Ryukyu/Amami** culture.

- Identity

Following the **Haugen** project, my exploration of identity deepened through my collaboration on the **Passage** project. This endeavor involved singing Japanese-sounding lyrics that had been intentionally rendered nonsensical through multiple translations, accompanied by a keyboard set to microtonal scales. Each of the three songs was prefaced by a brief narrative, which I had freely interpreted from the music and the timbre, not the lyrics.

This experience marked a significant departure for me, representing a sudden transition into the role of a singer-songwriter and a wholly new approach to performance and composition.

In a similar vein, **Magalhães**'s composition, **Tecelagem** (Weaving Room), from 2022, also prompted introspection and artistic growth. Inspired by **Anni Albers**' tapestry, Six Prayers, this piece evokes a sense of weaving when performed. The influence of Albers' work, introduced to me as "compositional inspiration" by the composer, further enriches my interpretation. The "weavery" of Tecelagem is a profound reflection of Six Prayers, Albers' tapestry created as a Holocaust memorial, and may be viewed as an interpretation of the text and form of the Torah. It intricately weaves together various materials and groups of threads, including silver threads that catch and reflect light before gradually fading as the light shifts across the earthy surface over time.

[\(Anni Albers Link\)](#)

Picture of 'Six Prayers' and further information on it, with references.

I would like to explore my artistic journey and identity, I reflect more on various compositions that have shaped my perspective. From Jon Øivind Ness's Cairns and Rawgabbiting to Harada's 唄-媒-培 (BAI-BAI-BAI), each piece resonates with unique cultural influences and personal experiences.

First, I turn my attention to Jon Øivind Ness's composition, Cairns, which resonates with my formative years spent in Japan. During our collaboration, I contemplated the Western influence on traditional Eastern cultures, a theme echoed in the literary work of Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, notably in "In Praise of Shadows," wherein the author juxtaposes Western and Eastern ideologies regarding light and darkness.

[\(Jun'ichirō Tanizaki: In Praise of Shadows\)](#)

A recurring theme among many Japanese writers and other artists throughout the 20th century was the Western influence on traditional Japanese culture, whether for good or not.

The author Tanizaki writes about this in "In Praise of Shadows" (1933)[1], where comparisons between light and darkness are used to contrast Western and Asian cultures. The West, in its pursuit of progress, is portrayed as continuously searching for light and clarity, while Tanizaki believes the muted forms of

East Asian art and literature value shadow and subtlety. He describes a collision between the magical semi-darkness of traditional Japanese buildings and the cold, white light of modernity.

Cairns embodies a fusion of diverse cultures, offering a sonic canvas that invites unique interpretations dependent on the listener's background and musical references. For instance, for me, the opening notes conjured memories of the Indonesian jungle, reminiscent of the film "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence," whose setting includes a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on the Indonesian island of Java.

(Pop, Rock Link)

JAPAN, Sakamoto and so on, with references.

At one point in our conversations during the Rawgabbiting collaboration, I wondered how I should react when the composer gave me an album (the British band JAPAN's last album, from 1981) where the cover shows a white man with glasses eating rice with chopsticks in a room with a picture of Mao, and the band is called JAPAN..., but from the moment I played the CD, all sorts of thoughts came into my head.

Vocalist David Sylvian and the Japanese musician Sakamoto (and his Yellow Magic Orchestra) inspired each other, and worked together several times, including on the soundtrack to the Japanese-British film "Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence".

The Japanese rock band L'Arc-en-ciel, who were among my heroes for a long time, were strongly inspired by JAPAN, and this can be heard/seen both in terms of singing style, the "sound", and the themes.

Link: Forbidden colours (David Sylvian) and Forbidden lover (L'Arc-en-ciel)

In Rawgabbiting, it revealed additional layers of mutual appreciation for popular music, including David Bowie arrangements and the animated film "Spirited Away." These shared interests provided fertile ground for exploring cross-cultural influences and narratives.

Lastly, Harada's composition 唄-媒-培 (BAI-BAI-BAI) emerged from a desire to capture the distinctive vocal technique known as "guin," characteristic of the folk singers from the Amami region. My engagement with this work afforded me the opportunity to delve deeper into the rich musical heritage of the southernmost regions of Japan, complementing my existing knowledge of the northern Ainu culture.

These compositions serve as testaments to the ongoing dialogue between Western and Eastern traditions, highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity formation and artistic expression. They underscore the significance of embracing diverse cultural influences and encourage continued exploration of the dynamic relationship between music and identity.

Animation film "THE MICROTONE"

- VISUALIZATION

Ever since the world premier of Three Studies for Microtonal Piano, I had imagined that some kind of visualization of this solo work could become very interesting.

As the Covid-19 situation resulted in a lot of cancellations and postponements, I decided to set aside some time to actually make it happen.

- Method regarding the music video version

Before making any film, I first intuitively wrote down the visions that I imagined in the different short sections of the work. I wrote my own chronological list of rather spontaneous associations - with events/atmospheres in the work that I imagine could be treated visually, in a mimetic/commenting or contrasting relation to the music.

All notes were in my mother tongue, Japanese - I realized it was easier to both reflect on and express myself more intuitively by doing so. I asked Nedrelid to create a storyboard based on the rather spontaneous associations I go through when performing the work. Quite soon, I thought it seemed to be successful as a visual music video because the general flow of the story had already been completed. (Example 2)

After a while, I noticed that several of my associations probably had been colored by my increasing awareness the last year of the general conflict of majority vs minority - the microtone being one of many metaphors for minority. These ideas now became the driving force of the "plot" in our little film.

However, as I read my "list of associations" over and over, and watched the film several times, I thought something important was missing. In the autumn 2020, we all realized that my free imagination didn't really take dramaturgy into account, and even though we always imagined some surrealism, we had reached a dead end: There were too many elements that couldn't be united, and that became more confusing and disturbing, so we ended up inviting the theatre director Eliot Moleba, to guide us back on track. This proved to be very helpful, and he managed to structure the minority concept in a much more coherent way.

The original list of associations is however still influencing the ending result, as it creates and colors events on a more detailed level, and it will later be interesting to compare these first spontaneous ideas to the finished work.

- *Obstacles for microtonality*

When discussing the minority concept with Eliot Moleba (director of the animation film "The Microtone"), he asked me to make a list of the "obstacles for microtonality", as this could offer him some parameters to work on when structuring the plot. Though the list I sent him, might seem simple and banal, I choose to show it as this turned out to be an important step forward for our project:

- Most people are not used to it, and even don't get a chance to experience it and know about it. (Today, almost everywhere)
- The minority is laughed at (regarded as "dirty", "out of tune!"), even before it's really listened to. (Today, almost everywhere)
- It is not included in mass production. (Mass production of pianos (and also most other instruments) in Europe, the States, ever since the 19th century...and later also in Japan, Korea, China.)
- "Standardization is safe" (Not time/space specific, I suppose, but this interestingly very much describing the time we're living in, too. Standardization is, I suppose, also a result of the Industrial revolution)
- The majority ignoring sensitivity/nuances. (Not time/space specific, I suppose)
- Colonialism – powerful countries rule. In music, ancient and non-western scales have been squeezed out, forgotten, or made insignificant. (Europeans in the 19th century brought their tuning system to cultures in f.ex East-Asia. Music conservatories (for western classical music) appeared in many cities. Of course, this is not a bad thing in itself, but it started to dominate almost all music genres. But this in fact also happened to European folk music, not least in f.ex. Norway.