Miki’s ‘Autumn Fantasy’ (1980): International, Japanese or Asian?

Kimi Coaldrake

A colourful flyer inserted into the October 2004 edition of a monthly Japanese music journal announced the performance of the Asia Ensemble directed by Miki Minoru (Hōgaku Jānaru 2004). This concert for the newly established ensemble on 9 November at Tsuda Hall in Tokyo was to feature outstanding soloists on p’ipa (Chinese four string plucked lute), da san xian (Chinese large long necked three-string plucked lute), morin huur (Mongolian horse headed two-string spike fiddle), Japanese 21-string koto, and shakuhachi (Japanese vertical bamboo flute). The flyer announced that the programme would include ‘Origin’ written for the group by Miki as well as one of his most popular works, ‘Autumn Fantasy’ (‘Aki no Kyoku’) (1980). This concert was just one of many taking place in Tokyo in 2004 to celebrate forty years since the establishment of the ensemble Nihon Ongaku Shūdan (also known as Pro Musica Nipponia or Ensemble Nipponia) and the rise to popularity of the genre now known as gendai hōgaku, a contemporary tradition that incorporates new music for traditional Japanese instruments. These concerts are part of the postwar articulation of cross-cultural fusion that has had great audience appeal in Japan and elsewhere in the world.1

Such crossing of cultural traditions is certainly neither new to Asia nor to the musical world more generally. Constructions of Asia as the ‘East’, the ‘Orient’ or the ‘Other’ have persisted since the late nineteenth century. For Western countries represented by Europe and the United States of America, the exoticism of Asia has been articulated as part of the discourse of ‘Orientalism’ associated with the seminal writings of Said (1979) in which Western cultures have characterized their engagement with Asia in
terms of a binary opposition between ‘East’ and ‘West’. At the same time, Asian and other non-Western cultures have embraced the notion of the ‘West’ under various headings such as ‘modernization’, ‘globalization’, ‘internationalization’ (see Baumann 2000) or interculturalism (see Um 2005). In the context of these representations, composers such as Takemitsu Tōru, Tan Dun, John Cage or Lou Harrison are seen by some (e.g. Corbett 2000) in terms of engaging in asymmetrical power relationships that simultaneously show and subvert this ideology of ‘otherness’ through their music in order to seek legitimacy. As Everett (2005, 176) has argued, it is time to set aside such constructions to consider the way that postwar composers reveal highly individual aesthetic ideologies or poetics of interculturalism that ‘demonstrate marked attempts at reconciling differences between or seeking a confluence across cultural traditions and norms’.2

This chapter examines the composition ‘Autumn Fantasy’ for shakuhachi and 21-string koto3 in order to explore Miki’s sensibilities and aesthetic goals in his attempts to reconcile differences across traditions of Western and Japanese music. It explores the ways the work performs Japan at two historical moments – in 1980 at the time of its premiere, and then in 2004 during celebrations to mark thirty-five years since the development of the 20-string koto. It argues that while ‘Autumn Fantasy’ articulates Miki’s vision to internationalize traditional Japanese instruments, it both supports and problematizes Japanese notions of identity. In order to situate ‘Autumn Fantasy’ within this broad issue of the contemporary construction of cultural identity, this chapter also discusses the way that music performance has been a site for the negotiation of cultural identity in Japan at times of national and global change.4 Constructions of cultural identity in recent times have undergone subtle but important changes (see Iida 2002, esp. 1–24).5 For example, the serious scholar of Japan and Japanese culture cannot ignore contemporary debates over the theory of cultural nationalism in Japan and elsewhere (see e.g. Starrs 2004).6 This theory is concerned with the distinctiveness of the cultural community as the essence of the nation, and how this notion is often utilized to regenerate a sense of national community ‘creating, preserving or strengthening a people’s cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking, inadequate or threatened’ (Yoshino 1992, 1). Cultural nationalism is closely linked with the 1970s intellectual debate that raged among elites over nihonjinron (literally ‘discussions of the Japanese’). It promoted the uniqueness of the Japanese people and drew from aspects of everyday Japanese culture to illustrate its perspective. By the 1980s the limitations of the model were emerging, with scholars arguing it had developed in response to the threat created by