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Playing Off Site: The Untranslation of *Onkyô*

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Around the turn of the millennium, a new music genre developed among a small group of performers in Tokyo.[1] The emergent style was closely connected to various forms of contemporary improvisational and experimental music, but quickly came to be known by the name *onkyô,* which is most simply translated as "sound." *Onkyô* is typically performed with electric or electronic instruments, and its performance is often predominated by silences and pauses between sparsely placed singular sounds. In fact, *onkyô* concerts are often so quiet as to place an emphasis on the environmental sounds of the performance space, and players minimize expressive physical gestures.

In its overseas circulation in the early 2000s, *onkyô* became known as a new Japanese genre in the international circulation of improvisatory and experimental music. The genre was represented by a distinctive set of performers, including a charismatic leader (composer/performer Ôtomo Yoshihide, whose past work stretched from free jazz to rock to experimental noise). *Onkyô* was explicitly linked to a specific place of origin: the spartan Off Site, a tiny "live-house" (*raibuhausu*) that became the focus of intense overseas appreciation for its newly local creative style. *Onkyô* and Off Site quickly became so well-known that its regular performers began to be considered as a stylistic "school" (*onkyô-kei*) and also as a formal generic category, *onkyô-ha.*

But the name *onkyô* and its claim to a new local style was debated and recontextualized as the music circulated overseas among audiences in Europe and North America. *Onkyô* became internationally famous for improvised performances that emphasize emptiness and stillness, and for the extremely sparse use of sound material. *Onkyô*'s extreme quietness, coupled with its powerfully localized reception at Off Site, contributed to its reputation as a unique Japanese music culture. Lorraine Plourde has recently described how the "disciplined listening" developed at Off Site can be characterized as part of local cultural practices, as a "learned bodily technique" that reflects the emplacement of listeners in a Japanese urban discourse of social behavior (Plourde 2008). While I agree that *onkyô* represents a powerful Japanese cultural specificity, here I am concerned primarily with showing that these localizing practices have emerged within the discursive circulation of popular music between Japan and North America and Europe. Indeed, *onkyô* could only represent its local place within

a broader Japanese modernity imagined through its coterminous relations with the West.

In this paper, I describe *onkyô* as a transnational coproduction of Japanese cultural difference, which was realized both through the "untranslation" of musical genre names and the attribution of local origin to aspects of sound and performance. Within these conflicting interpretations of *onkyô,* Japanese musicians attempted to produce and control the critique of their own locality. In a global circulation, to be represented as local is in some way to be perceived in relation to an original or native cultural site. Localization has begun to account for aspects of cultural difference and equivalence previously determined by the historical contingencies of race and ethnicity. The transnational staging of *onkyô*'s local Japaneseness in the early 2000s—as a contemporary problem consistent with the dialectical history of Japan's modern relationships with the West—was definitional for its emergence as a new musical genre, both within Japan and overseas.

Japanese cultural aesthetics of silence strongly influenced *onkyô*'s innovative performance style. As I will show, concepts closely related to silence have been historically important in Japanese discourses of musical listening and environmental perception. But the Japaneseness of *onkyô*'s silence derives from postwar discourses of development and nation-building that have been crucial to Japan's modernization. The historical force of this international relationship connects *onkyô* to a Japanese perceptual aesthetic called *ma,* which became a complex term of translation for "silence" among postwar composers (most significantly in response to the compositional influence of John Cage).

By juxtaposing their site-specific performance against a global circulation of musical genres, *onkyô* musicians voiced the ambivalence inherent in the "task of the translator" (Benjamin [1923] 1968). Through the resonance of overseas reception, their improvisations with silence became a local sound—a Japanese new music. This reception fed back into musicians' perspectives on the autonomous status of their creative identities. In an intertextual global field of popular musics, *onkyô*'s experimental critique of genre became a project of untranslation. The untranslatability of *onkyô* was its essential feature, crucial to its authors' aesthetic intentions and inseparable from its effects in circulation. Eventually, as I will show, *onkyô* musicians developed a poetics of untranslation to make specific claims dis-identifying their work from the genre, and from its local birthplace.

Making *Onkyô* at Off Site

Most narratives of *onkyô* begin by describing its emergence in the small Tokyo performance space Off Site, which operated from 2000 until 2005. Off Site was crucial in establishing *onkyô*'s links with overseas free improvisation and
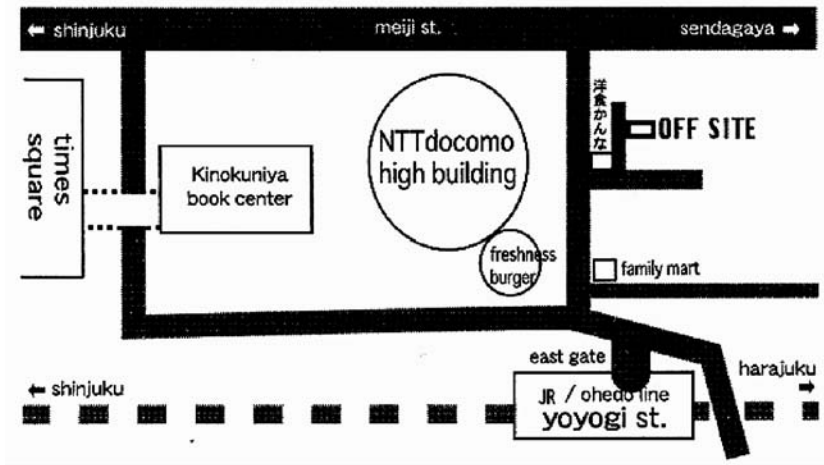
Figure 1. Flyer depicting location of Off Site.

experimental music scenes of Europe and North America (in conjunction with underground music clubs like The Stone in New York City, or performance collectives like the London Musicians' Collective [LMC] in London). *Onkyô*'s localization at Off Site helped to inflect its transnational circulation with a very particular sense of place.

There were a number of factors that contributed to the association of *onkyô* with Off Site, ranging from its physical space to the social networks of musicians, performances, and media it housed. Over the course of its short life, Off Site developed an international reputation as the cradle of a new sound. Cofounder Itô Atsuhiro described Off Site to me as a "free space," somewhere between an art gallery, a coffeehouse, and a music club (Itô 2003). Located in Yoyogi, in the heart of central Tokyo, Off Site occupied one of a handful of small traditional wooden houses hastily rebuilt in the years after World War II. A tiny patch of these residential units still remains in the shadow of the DoCoMo Tower skyscraper, just south of the imaginatively named Takashimaya "Times Square," the largest shopping center in Japan (see Figure 1). Every week a core group of musicians, including Sugimoto Taku, Nakamura Toshimaru, and Akiyama Tetzuji, gathered for "Meeting at Off Site," an improvisational concert series that helped associate the new genre exclusively with this space (despite the fact that *onkyô* musicians sometimes performed elsewhere, and that the group began the series at a different bar under the name the "Improvisational [alternately Experimental] Meeting at Bar Aoyama").

Off Site helped to locate the origin narrative of *onkyô.* The associations between a particular physical locale and a social group of musicians and listeners dedicated to a new sound can serve an important role in the creation of musical

genre history. Linking a new form to a particular local performance site (e.g., New York punk at the underground club CBGB or bebop at Minton's Playhouse) is especially common in popular music. In Japan, too, small nightclubs (often called "livehouses") have been crucial to the public imagination of popular music scenes as emplaced social realities (Condry 2006; Matsue 2009). Off Site, then, legitimized *onkyô* as an independent musical style that could circulate within the larger transnational field of experimental and improvised music.

The performance space was simply a single, simple white-walled room—about 6 by 2 meters, and which fit only about 15 people—in the front room of an old house that also served as an art gallery for various exhibitions of visual art curated by co-owners Itô Atsuhiro and Itô Yukari.[2] Writers described the tiny room as the birthplace of *onkyô,* and listeners worldwide heard recordings of Tokyo's new musical form as if to tune into the liveness of this singular, if marginal, spot. Some musicians claimed that *onkyô*'s performance aesthetics sprung from Off Site's physical limitations. The space was so small and close to other houses as to require quiet performances, since neighbors would complain if sound leaked through the thin wooden walls. The quietness of the space became a hallmark of *onkyô*'s performative silence, as well as the special kind of listening associated with the genre, as audiences came to Off Site prepared to listen with deep concentration.[3] Nakamura Toshimaru has commented on his appreciation of the sounds in the surrounding alleys, which filtered in through the often-open door. Live performances in the tiny street-level room became a mix of performed and environmental noises, of which Nakamura cites particularly localized sounds such as "the whistle of the tofu vendor and the wooden clappers of people calling 'beware of fire' as they walk through the neighborhood" (Nakamura 2004).

Off Site was strongly identified with a core group of musicians, including the aforementioned Sugimoto, Nakamura, and Akiyama, as well as Sachiko M, Yoshida Ami, and Ôtomo Yoshihide. Although he was not a founding member of "Meeting at Off Site," it was Ôtomo Yoshihide's presence as the defacto leader of this group that put Off Site and *onkyô* on the map, both in Tokyo and overseas. His broad stylistic reach connected the emerging genre to local histories of free improvisation and experimental music. Ôtomo was strongly linked to the historical free jazz scene in Tokyo, as a student of guitarist Takayanagi Masayuki, one of the pioneers of 1960s and 1970s Japanese free improvisation. But Ôtomo is also identified with the more experimental outgrowths of "Noise" and "downtown music" in Japan, especially through the avant-rock group Ground Zero, and in his turntable-based collaborations with North American and European experimental musicians such as John Zorn and Luc Ferrari. Ôtomo's eclectic personal history helped represent *onkyô* as an emergent style connected to other branches of experimental music in Tokyo, as he began to identify his new direction with this younger group of innovators.
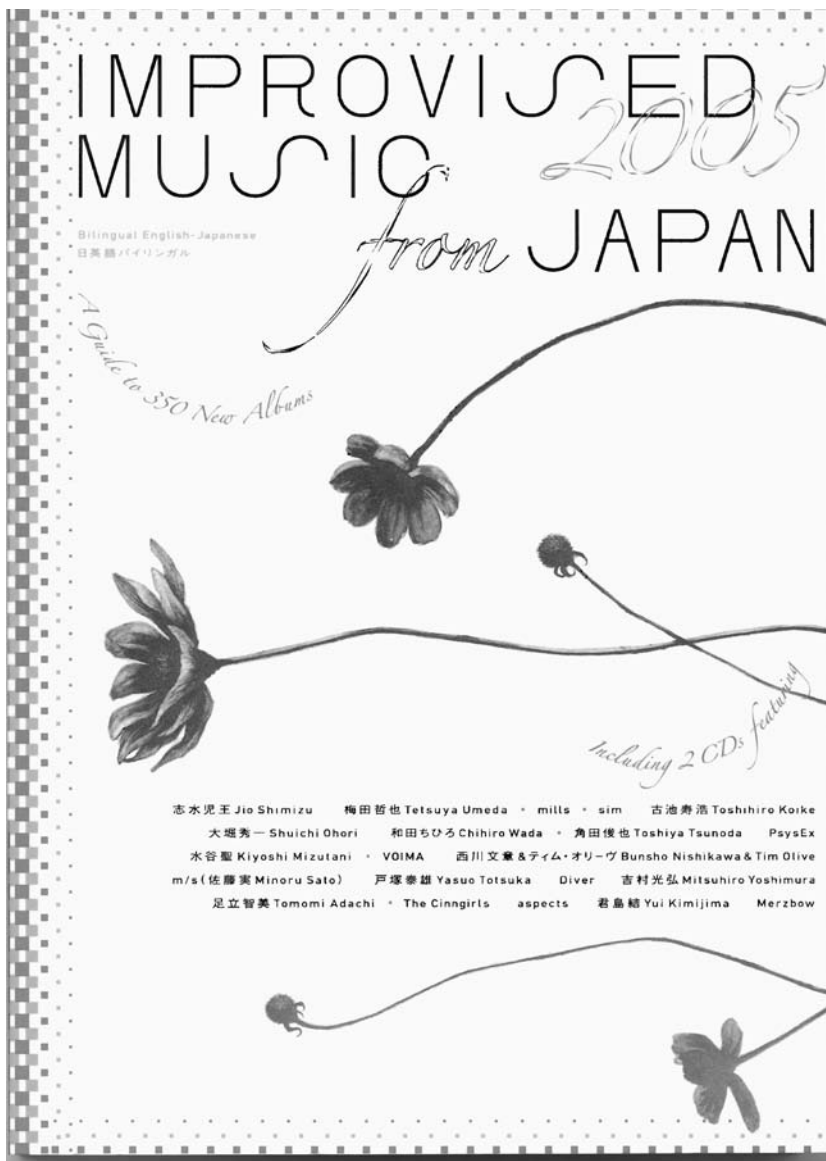
Figure 2. *Improvised Music from Japan* magazine.

In addition, *onkyô* performers became the central subject of a bilingual website called *Improvised Music from Japan* (aka *IMFJ*), which helped represent the scene to European and American fans by giving biographical profiles and performance schedules for a core group of artists (see Figure 2). Under the tireless effort of organizer Suzuki Yoshiyuki, *IMFJ* became a print magazine and

Figure 3. *Meeting at Off Site,* vol. 1 cover.

an independent label with a unique graphic look developed by house designer Tanabe Masae (see Figure 3). The label sells the majority of its releases in North American and European markets, and both the magazine and liner notes are translated into English by Suzuki's American wife Cathy Fishman (Suzuki 2001, 2003). Through the recordings released by *IMFJ,* the "Meeting at Off Site" concert series became a prototype for *onkyô* performance events and the model for a new improvisational protocol.[4] The "Meeting at Off Site" was both local and movable: it identified *onkyô* as a Tokyo-based music, but was open to anyone and could potentially be practiced anywhere, as a new paradigm of improvisational performance. However, *onkyô* continued to be associated almost exclusively with Off Site's core group, especially in festivals meant to introduce the style to new audiences, such as the "*Onkyô* Marathon" at the Japan Society in New York City in 2004, or the "Japan-o-Rama" tour of England in 2002.

Provincializing *Onkyô*

Through these associations with specific individuals and places in Tokyo, the genre name *onkyô* acquired a powerful sense of Japanese locality among international fans of improvisation and experimental music. But taken literally, the term is extremely unspecific; it translates, in its most basic sense, simply as "sound." Like new music, organized sound, Noise, or other terms of experimental music, the totalizing abstraction of the name allows performers to defer the descriptive burdens of musical categorization (Novak 2006). "It's just sound," musicians would often say when dismissing the notion of *onkyô* as a fixed genre. They often argued that the name was meant not to correlate to any specific musical features, but to point out the practitioners' focus on the more philosophical and ambient qualities of sound. In fact, *onkyô* does not necessarily even imply

musical sound, but implies a more technical reference to sound as an acoustic phenomenon. The word is often used for designed technological environments of sound management such as *onkyô sekkei* (acoustic architecture), *onkyô kûkan* (acoustic space), or *onkyô setsubi* (PA system); many Westerners know *Onkyô* as a brand name for Japanese-produced home stereo equipment.

As a term of musical genre, *onkyô* was intended to critique the putative boundaries of classification in popular music. This critique, in itself, is not necessarily Japanese. It is common for performers invested in creating new music to invent abstract names for their work, partly to emphasize the originality of the sound material that they attempt to name, and partly to evade the discursive continuities of modern musical history. *Onkyô* is no exception; the word was put forth by critics and musicians because it is one of the most unspecific descriptors of sound. But as recordings and reviews began to circulate overseas, the word was transformed from an abstraction about qualities of sound into a specific stylistic reference to a musical genre. *Onkyô* was reinscribed in overseas interpretation not just as a sound of Japanese "new music," but as a specific product of local culture—the sound of "new music from Japan."

In many ways, *onkyô* is in line with other contexts of experimentation in which musicians refuse generic specificity to evade the limitations of musical categories, moving from "jazz" to "improvisation," to "creative music," "original music," "the new thing," or simply "the music." But even as the new terms of "improvisation" slowly became detached from "jazz," they were reattached to new categories: first as "free jazz"; then "free improvisation"; moving to just "improvisation," often shortened to "improv," which in Japan became "*impuro.*" In her influential ethnography of jazz performance, Ingrid Monson argues that improvisers deliberately avoid generic labels as their work travels outside of their immediate community into a commodity circulation. To be named is to be localized and particularized rather than empowered to circulate broadly: "the music that is labeled, they realize, is somehow the one that carries less prestige, the one that is considered less universal" (Monson 1996, 101).

Seeking to avoid the detrimental effects of canon formation, many musicians rename their music in order to maintain authorial control over their own history. For example, part of what led the Chicago-based collective Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) to choose the term "creative music" in the late 1960s was to "challenge the use of jazz-related images to police and limit the scope of black cultural expression and economic advancement" (Lewis 2004, 10). Universalist terms such as "creative music" and "original music" helped musicians develop counter-terms against the markers of racialized locality attached to jazz. By the 1970s, improvisers worldwide began to connect their practices to the postwar academic lineage of composition articulated by John Cage and other American experimentalists.[5] Crucially, the postwar category of

"experimental music" was disassociated from specific racial and national contexts that had been definitional for improvisation as a province of jazz.[6] Japanese musicians, too, could keep the "free" aspect of "free jazz" without the cultural history of its authorship (Atkins 2001; Soejima 2002; Molasky 2005). The universalist goals of "experimental music" and "free improvisation" were conflated in a futuristic social vision that would connect a world of musicians from New York to Berlin to Tokyo in a new intercultural musical practice.

Naming a new form of music, then, is part of the way that musicians and listeners experiment with the historical resonances of cultural identity. This process was especially ironic as a nonsignifying signifier—*onkyô,* which was deliberately chosen by Japanese performers for its universal reference to sound—was circulated overseas. Its untranslatedness became evidence for its Japaneseness, as an abstract general term for sound was reinterpreted as a signifier for cultural particularity. As I will discuss next, the untranslation of *onkyô* reveals how ideologies of cultural difference, far from being minimized in experimental and improvised music, instead enabled the music's representation as a "new music" genre in the United States and Europe.

Untranslating New Music in Japan

The genre name *onkyô* began as a fragmentary reference to a local subset of the Tokyo underground. Suzuki Yoshiyuki and others told me that the term was first used at a small record shop in the West Tokyo neighborhood of Koenji, called *Parii-Pekin* (Paris-Peking). In that store, *onkyô* was used to identify the minimalist sound of electronic music recordings released on the tiny Tokyo label Musica Transonica, which simply did not seem to fit into any other section of the store. At this early stage, local critics wrote about *onkyô* as an approach to sound and its effects in listening. Rather than naming a new musical genre—*onkyô* as the "sound" of a certain group in a certain place—*onkyô* described a "sound" that demanded a new kind of listening. Influential writer Sasaki Atsushi was among the first to make explicit links between *onkyô* and the emergent "quiet" performance style among Off Site musicians like Sachiko M, Sugimoto Taku, and Nakamura Toshimaru. Although Sasaki initially described *onkyô* as a "quiet phenomenon" of "heavy silence" rather than as a name for a specific genre, the term was widely applied to the musicians who played at Off Site, who began to occasionally use the name to describe their new work.[7] Other Tokyo writers and overseas critics began to take notice of the emerging scene, excited by the idea of a new genre coming from this yet-undiscovered musical underground.

The genre name *onkyô* touches on both a history of international participation and the paradoxical "double life" of Japanese modernity created by translation. Genre names for Japanese popular music are formed in complex relations of

translation and its contexts—both cultural and linguistic—of difference and equivalence. Because popular music in Japan is heavily dominated by Western taxonomies, *onkyô* is fairly exceptional in being named with a Japanese-language term. Most popular genres are rendered as direct transliterations from English, and are written in *katakana,* the script for foreign words, or romanized (e.g., *rokku, jyazu*). To choose a Japanese conceptual term for a style of popular music would ordinarily mark a musical form as local folk vernacular, possibly even premodern. But because *onkyô* is such a generalized and coldly technical reference to sound, it does not connote such a relationship to traditional Japanese culture. And yet, simply by virtue of its Japanese-language genre name, *onkyô* is ideologically separated from the broader sphere of popular music in Japan. It becomes a strange untranslatable object, a subject of difference for both foreign and Japanese logics of classification.

Two Japanese-language terms—*jikken ongaku* and *sokkyo ongaku*—are occasionally used in Japan to refer to, respectively, "experimental music" and "improvisational music." But neither phrase encompasses *onkyô* comfortably enough to be regularly used. *Jikken ongaku* literally translates as "experiment music," and is usually associated with a specific group of postwar academic composers in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the influential Tokyo collective *Jikken Kôbô* (Experimental Workshop).[8] The word *jikken* means "experiment," and is most often used for scientific laboratory work: when attached to music, it generally identifies electroacoustic music or mechanically produced sounds. *Sokkyo ongaku* references the concept of "improvisation" in a more generalized manner. *Sokkyo* means "made-up on-the-spot," and is used to denote spontaneity and instantaneous creation, often in everyday talk or performance. Because *sokkyo ongaku* can be used to describe any improvisational form, it names "improvisation" as a basic process of music making and not as a specific musical history or genre like "free improvisation." Complicating the scenario further, contemporary Japanese genre terms also include the transliterated phrases *ekisuperimentaru myuujiku,* from "experimental music," and *impurobizeishon,* often shortened to *impuro,* from "improvisation" and "improv." Any of these generalized terms—e*kisuperimentaru myuujiku, jikken ongaku, impurobizeishon,* or *sokkyo ongaku*—would have been adequate, at least temporarily, to describe the general musical realm of *onkyô.* But *onkyô* maintained its Japanese-language name, while other terms (like *jikken ongaku*) were translated when circulated overseas.

Even if translation had been attempted, the word *onkyô* itself does not translate perfectly to the English word "sound." While the first character *on* 音 means "sound," the second, *kyô* 響 indicates "reverberation" or "echo," marking sound's movement from its source and its subsequent radiation through space. Both musical and nonmusical sounds are encompassed in the word *on,* which is the root of many generalized words for sound, such as *ongaku* (music) and also for words

for noises, such as *sô-on* (cacophony). It is the second character, *kyô*—sound as an emanation from something and its subsequent fading away into silence—that points to the specific resonance of local cultural agency in *onkyô*. The *kyô* of *onkyô* connects to local environments of sound, and relates the act of listening to the placement of sounds in relation to silence.

Onkyô's balance of sound and silence is highlighted in the use of electronic instruments. *Onkyô* became known overseas in part through the innovative use of consumer electronic equipment in live performance, especially by Sachiko M and Nakamura Toshimaru, whose instruments are described as "empty" or "no input" to indicate their lack of input signal.

Nakamura (see Figure 4) uses the "no-input mixer" (a mixer without source material) while Sachiko M (see Figure 5) plays an "empty" sampler (a sampler without samples). "No-input" or "empty" instruments are nonidiomatic because they contain no sound sources of their own. Other than their own self-noise, the instruments create no sonic material, and so (unlike a saxophone, for example) will not make sounds that refer back to any recognized musical vocabulary. The "no-input" concept reflects the technical background of some performers. Sachiko M, for example, began working with sound as a sound effects technician for live theater, and does not consider herself a musician. Nakamura, on the other hand, was an accomplished guitarist who deliberately created the "no-input mixer" setup in order to force himself to create in context for which he possessed no existing musical technique. These electronic instruments, like

Figure 4.   Nakamura Toshimaru with no-input
mixer. Photo taken by Zama Yuko.

Figure 5. Sachiko M's empty sampler. Photo taken by Zama Yuko.

their performers, attempt to be "empty" of outside signal, but still admit no "input" within their own enclosed systems, relying instead on feedback loops and built-in noise.

"Empty" and "no-input" instruments metaphorize *onkyô*'s incommensurability with historical narratives of musical style and performance. Nakamura and Sachiko M do not use an existing language of sound, and their instruments are not "speaking" in and of themselves; instead, they create a separated context of mutual silence. *Onkyô* performances do not operate as "conversations" between musicians in an improvisational structure of communication. Sachiko M, for example, told me that despite performing regularly with her partner Ôtomo Yoshihide in the duo Filament, their performances were more like "double solos" than conversations; they do not listen to one another, but hover independently in a collective mix of sound and silence.[9] Nakamura Toshimaru told me that his performance was oriented toward the performance context as an environmental space:

> When I play with other musicians, I don't play *with* them, I play with the space including this musician—not directly human to human. If you're a musician, okay, let's play together. But I don't play with you—I play with all of the elements around you, around us. So I don't really confront you as one individual—you are part of many other elements in the space around you.[10]

The quietness and noninteractive space of *onkyô* challenged conversation-style approaches to performance in contemporary international free improvisation scenes, in which the exchange of individual statements is common practice.

American improviser Jason Khan, who performed in one of the first "Meeting at Off Site" concerts, described *onkyô* as a genre in which "it's more important *not* to try to be anything":

> It moved away from this pulling and tugging approach to improvisational music—the call-and-response, power playing with huge waves of sound with saxes and drummers going crazy, then getting mellow and plinking and plonking for a while, and then going back to the huge waves again. It was getting away from physicality, from instrumentality, but it was also getting away from musicality . . . No one wanted to take solos, there was none of this hierarchy that you have even in free jazz. (Khan 2001, 77)

Onkyô was compelling to Khan because of its dynamic transcendence of familiar social and musical hierarchies. But crucially, this is a difference dominated by mutual attention to sound's emplacement in the "silence" of the performance environment, rather than relationships of interpersonal communication.[11] As if to mirror the stillness and lack of interaction in the musical movement, *onkyô* musicians and audiences often remain physically still. Nakamura describes this stillness as an honest and natural part of his musical performance, but it is sometimes experienced by outsiders as an excruciatingly strange environment. Some visiting improvisers critiqued the "restraints" of Off Site's quietness, which they considered a hindrance to free expression, and worse, a predictable situation. They told me that since improvisation is based on individual vocabularies of sounds and extended techniques, the implied rule of still and quiet improvisation caused the overall sound to be static. One prominent British saxophonist told me that "within 3 seconds of it starting, you know exactly what it's going to sound like for the rest of the evening." Besides, he continued, improvisation is about playing *with* others in a free and open context, so forcing sonic limits onto the voices of others wasn't really natural.

But because of this palpable difference in the approach to performance, Off Site quickly became known as a challenging destination for the international improvisation scene. Performing with *onkyô* players in Tokyo was a way for European and American performers to stake out new ground in a circulation that places a high premium on its own frontiers of newness and difference. The tiny club became a destination for jet-setting improvisers, who were regular participants at the weekly "Meeting at Off Site," and returned home to spread the word about *onkyô*. The genre was championed abroad to the point of overexposure as a new and innovative Japanese style of "silent improvisation." Controversial audience responses only drove the stakes higher for *onkyô*'s importance as a new Japanese movement. While European reception was largely positive, protests spontaneously sprang up during the 2002 "Japan-o-Rama" tour in Northern England and Rome, some resulting in threats of physical violence.[12]

All of this attention was astonishing and somewhat resented by European and North American musicians who felt that *onkyô* really wasn't different enough from other performances of experimental improvisation to deserve its own name. Some argued that the style was simply a "Japanese version" of other subgenres of improvisation represented by non-Japanese performers (e.g., the "lower-case" music of Francisco Lopez, or "Berlin minimalists" such as Axel Dorner). Meanwhile, Off Site musicians themselves continued to deny the Japaneseness of *onkyô* in interviews, but to no avail. One promoter told me that he had heard an English musician say sarcastically, "Uh, so like, Japanese silence is better than English silence then, isn't it?" An American dissenter, more caustically, updated the "tree falls in the woods" Zen koan to characterize *onkyô* as a recapitulation of older, but less documented styles of quiet improvisation: "What if it's been done before but no one was there to hear it in the first place?"

The Transnational Echoes of Japanese Silence

Onkyô's silence lives a double life. In fact, the attention to *onkyô*'s silence, both in Japan and overseas, connects to a complex historical moment in the development of experimental music in Japan. In postwar experimental music, "silence" is strongly associated with the work of American composer John Cage, who discovered that (in his legendary visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in the 1940s) even in a "silent" room, his own bodily sounds were still audible. Cage concluded that "there is no such thing as silence" and in any context "something is always happening that makes sound" (Cage 1961, 195). For Cage, silence became a natural context of experimental listening to environmental "sounds in themselves," which were foregrounded as part of musical performance in his famous piece *4′ 33″*. Silence became the lynchpin of a new postwar American experimentalism promoting a sweeping musical relativity that appeared to welcome participation on a global scale. But Cage's ideas about the environmental balance of silence and sound were heavily influenced by Asian art and literature and furthered by his close contact with Zen scholar Daisetz Suzuki. Although he vociferously denied being a Buddhist, some scholars have argued that Cage borrowed ideas from Japanese cultural aesthetics in order to create an unfamiliar avant-garde intervention into Western discourses of contemporary music (Corbett 2000; Nicholls 1996).

While it has been fruitful to plumb the depths of Cage's work for Japanese influence, it is equally important to mark the effect of his concept of silence on Japanese musical modernism. After Cage's ideas were retranslated back to Japanese composers in the early 1960s, "silence" became a paradoxically marked term for Japanese postwar experimentalists: especially composers like Takemitsu Tôru, Yuasa Jôji, Ichiyanagi Toshi, and other composers who had been working

to introduce Western new music to Japan. In the wake of what was labeled "Cage Shock," they were now in the odd position of responding to a "new music" that appeared to bear a significant relation to their own native concepts of silence. Japanese postwar composers felt their new imperative strongly. Either they must create a specifically Japanese new music that incorporates traditional genres—"translating" them into modern forms—or they must avoid associations with local culture so as not to provincialize themselves in a global avant-garde exchange. "Japan," noted Yoshida Hidekazu, "was even more isolated than we had imagined. The so-called new music of Japan sounded old in Europe" (Yoshida 1969). The situation demanded a conceptual response to Cage's silence that was progressive and experimental enough to equate to the scale of international modernism, but which could also register as a distinctive product of local creativity.

Several composers began to emphasize the term *ma* 間, which is translated as "interval" or "space." The character for *ma* depicts a gate that frames the sun, and implies a state that can mean "between" and also "during." As a gate, doorway, or frame for the world, the ideogram itself makes reference to the relationship between human perception and the natural environment, characterizing the "in-between-ness" of space and time inherent in audition of sound. *Ma,* then, is more than an aesthetic ideal, but is an elemental mode of perception that can refer to an interval of time; or a physical space between things; or the distance between people and places.

As Yuasa Jôji put it, *ma* is a "substantial silence" and "an expressive force [which] has a value equivalent to sound" (Yuasa 1989). Dan Ikuma described *ma* as a way of "thinking in the silences"; as a pregnant emptiness that accompanies the "decay" of a sound in the progression from its emergence to its disappearance in "silence" (Dan 1961, 201). Adopting *ma* as a feature of modern experimental music identified a way of listening that could be thought of as particularly Japanese (in religious connotations of Zen emptiness [*mu*]), and perfectly universal at the same time (as part of the human perception of acoustic sound). *Ma* is still a commonly identified aspect of everyday musical performance in Japan. Musicians often demonstrate *ma* by making a sound and then remaining still, listening and waiting for the sound to fade away. But *ma* has also become a powerful metaphor of cultural survival in the face of modernization.

The strategic invocation of cultural difference in the term *ma* cannot be separated from the large-scale "invention of culture" practiced by modernizing nation-states (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The argument for a native aesthetics was a way of countering (or in the hopeful and anxious term of the famous 1942 nationalist symposium, "overcoming") modernity and the domestic effects of Western influence (Karatani 1993; Ivy 1995; Minamoto 1995; Vlastos 1998; Harootunian 2002). When framed as a postimperial reconstruction of Japanese

cultural practices, the rediscovery of *ma* reveals itself in dialogue with contemporary American experimental music. *Ma* responded to Cage and American imaginaries of Asian spiritualities, while downplaying the contingencies of traditional culture. This in-between-ness of *ma* was characterized by artist Isozaki Arata (in his famous 1979 exhibition in Paris "Space-Time in Japan") as a "void moment" of waiting for change, related to the Japanese appreciation of evanescence in "the fading of things" (Isozaki 1979, 78). But his later writings qualified the "Japan-ness" of *ma* as a native concept, stating that the term "must have attained common usage only after the importation of Western ideas," and that *ma* "ought best to be thought of as 'gap,' or an original 'difference' immanent in things" (Isozaki 2006, 95).

A similar critique of Japanese difference lies beneath Takemitsu Tôru's description of *ma* as "a metaphysical continuity" between intense experiences of silence and the space of sound. In his famous 1971 essay, "Confronting Silence," Takemitsu described *ma* as the "unsounded part" of musical experience that can "measure up to the sound" and thus "removes it from its position of primacy" (Takemitsu 1995, 51). *Ma* defines musical sound through individual reception, rather than in relation to a chain of historical influences. In other words, all sounds are localized in the context of *ma.* Music takes its place in the silent connection between the listener and the world, which is, ultimately, the subjective environment of performance. Takemitsu's *ma,* then, can be distinct both from Cage's "silence" and from *chinmoku,* the typical Japanese word for silence. *Ma,* for Takemitsu, refers to a modern mode of musical perception that is preeminently subjective and local, but also universal to human experience.

With *onkyô*'s transnational circulation in the early 2000s, silence again metaphorized the incommensurable remainders of local cultural difference. The aesthetic conversations about *ma* at Off Site echoed the postwar struggle to define Japanese musical creativity without resorting to nostalgic demands for an essentialized local culture. During the period of my fieldwork from 1998 to 2003, *ma* was used as a nativist aesthetic term among *onkyô* performers, who sometimes qualified the word with reference to its inherent Japaneseness. While they considered it unreasonable to expect Western performers to respond to local Japanese aesthetics, it was not uncommon for a performance by a Western visitor to be critiqued in terms of its lack of *ma.* However, the inability to possess, recognize, or reflect *ma* could also be a problem for Japanese performers. A performer's musical expression should work with the acoustic environment in a way usually described by the term *shizen,* or "nature." A lack of *ma* hindered the feeling of the sound and blocked the listener's experience of the natural space. By creating a specific (if marginal) space for the creation of *onkyô,* Off Site redefined the space of improvisation as emanating from a natural-but-local environment.

But the naturalization of silence is strongly related to the contingent position of Japanese cultural translation in a global field of musical forms. *Ma* may appear to dovetail neatly with Japanese aesthetics of naturalism, but it is also a way of sounding out the limits of one's self-determination. "Rather than saying, 'I'm going to make this kind of sound,'" says Off Site improviser Unami Taku, "I'm interested in saying, 'This is the only kind of sound I could have made'" (Unami 2003). For *onkyô* pioneer Sugimoto Taku, to allow *ma* into performance "means neither theme and variations, nor chained and dancing . . . there is almost no distinction between improvisation and composition to accept *ma*" (Sugimoto 2003). In this context, listening to silence becomes a way of claiming the boundaries of a local sense-world as a new musical frontier. To truly improvise at Off Site, musicians must listen to and accept the sounds of the outside world as counterpoint to their own sounds; all must play quietly to hear what is really going on. Transposed against the broader circulation of music, their attention to the space of performance and listening is neither a Cagean renewal of "silence," nor a disingenuous attempt to re-place improvisation. Rather, it is an untranslation of genre that rethinks the mapping of cultural difference onto categories of sound and performance.

Onkyô stresses the emplacement of sound as a basic condition of musical creativity. Just as *ma* became an essential marker of Japanese perception, *onkyô* allowed a new breed of Tokyo improvisers a local "right to remain silent" in a transnational circulation of universalist improvisation. The genre was defined by its deep attention to a specific performance environment—the tiny one-room space of Off Site. But crucially, *onkyô* took shape in the lack of equivalence between this particular local experience and its overseas representation as a musical form. To conclude, I will return to the effects of *onkyô*'s circulation abroad, and then to the backlash against the term itself, to give some indication of how the sonic markers of local culture can disappear as quickly as they are sounded.

Escaping Off Site

Onkyô shows us how Japan's modern cultural space is instantiated by transnational relations, and how its new musical inventions can only be perceived as original when they remain incommensurable. This is not the transmission of an original local genre to the outside world—a context in which *onkyô* might simply be a case of failed communication, of poor or mistranslated meaning. Instead, *onkyô* emerged by poeticizing the incommensurability inherent in the translating project of genre itself. Sakai Naoki reminds us that the untranslatable can only exist where relations of translation have already been established (Sakai 1997). In transnational media circulation, the equivalence of cultural

and musical differences sets up the possibility for the crucial discontinuity in the untranslatable term *onkyô.*

Almost immediately after its birth, *onkyô* began to take on the burdens of its untranslatable status. The genre was debated among listeners who defined it either in universal terms as an extreme form of minimalism, or in its cultural particularity as a Japanese practice of Zen improvisation. In his review of the 2005 "*Onkyô* Marathon" at the Japan Society—curated by American musician Carl Stone, who described the genre as a new kind of computer-based experimental music—*New York Times* writer Anthony Tomassini warned that we must not expect to understand *onkyô* as purposeful sound: "You can't complain when a sound environment runs on or seems aimless. Such concerns are not the point" (Tomassini 2005). But for others, *onkyô* was rapidly losing the valuable newness that accrued to its cultural difference. The genre was already ossifying, as one new music website put it: "recent releases seem to confirm that the stylistic conventions have frozen . . . the rules of the game are relatively simple: dynamics remain low . . . sounds should be as abstract as possible . . . ensemble playing is a question of simultaneity rather than interaction, etc." (Warburton 2003). One revealing public debate on *onkyô's* Japaneseness occurred on the discussion pages of ihatemusic.com, where a U.S.-based author argued that the genre displayed roots in Zen Buddhism. Despite repeated denials of Zen influence by prominent *onkyô* musicians and record producers, the author made the case that if the similarities between *onkyô* and Zen "have come unconsciously, it is further evidence of the permeation of Zen Buddhist aesthetics into the common thread of Japanese culture." A later poster agreed, interjecting "isn't it Zen to say 'I am not Zen'?"[13]

Of course, being pegged as a game of cultural strategy—whether as Zen sound art or as a set of rules for improvisation—is not part of any international musician's *modus operandi.* And so the very name *onkyô* has increasingly been denied by its central proponents. I was told by many performers that there really is no such genre as *onkyô,* no special style, no typical rules, no continuous history; and after all, they say, it just means *sound.* Guitarist Sugimoto Taku, often cited as the inspiration for the genre, vilified Off Site as a "tiny academy of the *onkyô*-order," and quit the "Meeting at Off Site" after its first year (Bell 2003). As far as the special silence recognized overseas as a Japanese quality, Nakamura says, "we were only playing quietly because the neighbors would have complained if we played any louder" (Nakamura 2004).[14] On the idea that *onkyô* is fundamentally Japanese, he pointed out that the "Meeting at Off Site" has included many foreign performers such as Jason Khan, Brett Larner, and Sean Meehan (although admittedly, these non-Japanese participants are rarely considered *onkyô* musicians themselves, either in Japan or in overseas circulation). In 2004, the "Meeting at Off Site" dissolved, and the core group of musicians moved on to

other, louder projects (Akiyama Tetsuzi's next album was called *Don't Forget to Boogie*). Finally, Off Site itself closed in 2005, leaving only the silent traces of *onkyô*'s locality in the global scene, as they reverberate back through the concrete valleys of downtown Tokyo.

Conclusion

The story of *onkyô* encourages us to reconsider privileging locality as the primary narrative of musical meaning. *Onkyô,* too, moves the discourse of genre away from the canonizing projects of musical history, and toward recognizing modern music circulation as an ongoing reinvention of sonic values and social evaluations. If *onkyô* is Japanese, it is a Japanese improvisation with the terms of cultural and musical difference, which alternately valorizes and erases the conditions of its own localization. Its emplacement as a genre returns us to a set of questions about the function of cultural categories in the classification of music. Both "improvisation" and "experimental music" are presented as ideal intercultural forms, new open-form languages that allow unhindered access for all participants, who could experiment globally in a *tabula rasa* with no culturally imposed rules. But such visions often overlook historical environments of miscommunication, untranslation, and the brokerage of cultural difference, all of which determine the natural space of creative music making in modern Japan.

Was *onkyô* ever its own word, or rather, a silent passage to the world? Or does the power of its cultural critique rest in its untranslation, giving proof to the proverb "you are the master of the unspoken word, but once it leaves your mouth, you are its slave"? At stake in the transitory world of *onkyô* is the intercultural form of musical creativity and communication in a global public sphere. *Onkyô could* just mean sound after all: it only takes on the mantle of a Japanese style in its untranslated circulation. *Onkyô* allows us to listen to the experimental performance of musical exchange, as its musicians and distant interpreters echo their cultural localities by moving off site: to another sound, and another silence.

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Notes

presentations of this paper at the 2004 Columbia Music Scholarship Conference and the 2005 meeting of the Seminar for Ethnomusicology. All names are printed Japanese style, family name first. Variations in the romanization of proper names reflect the preferences of the individuals. All images are reproduced with permission.

[2] The white-walled box of a room is so nondescript that photographs of the room ended up being judged as unusable for an otherwise excellent 2003 story on Off Site by Clive Bell for British experimental music magazine *The Wire.* Instead, the magazine ran shots of a different, slightly larger space, which also sometimes hosted *onkyô* performances, to illustrate the story. (The article was reprinted on Bell's personal website with a photo of the actual Off Site space at http://www.clivebell.co.uk/offsite.htm.)

[3] Sasaki Atsushi, a Tokyo-based critic, describes this type of careful audition as *mimi wo sumasu,* to hear attentively in order to "clarify" one's listening. Through this action, Sasaki argues that the individual sensation of one's listening becomes the primary experience of *onkyô* performance (Sasaki 2001a). See Plourde (2008) for a close reading of this practice among Off Site audiences, and Novak (2008) for a historical discussion of hyper-attentive listening practices in Japanese "free music" coffeehouses.

[4] On rare occasions the "Meeting at Off Site" was even reproduced elsewhere, as in the "Meeting at Off Site in Osaka" in 2003, which imagined transporting the improvisatory space of Off Site to a totally different physical site.

[5] In England, collectives such as AMM had a significant impact in extending the musical form of improvisation outside of the historical imprint of jazz. The LMC, founded in the early 1970s, remains active in the European improvised and experimental music scene, promoting foreign tours, running a local and web-broadcast radio station (Resonance FM), and editing the powerfully influential monthly experimental music magazine *The Wire.* See McKay (2005) for a detailed cultural history of the politics of free improvisation and experimental music in Britain.

[6] George Lewis's essay, "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970–1985," argues that despite important contemporary contributions to the experimentalist challenge to genre, practice, and cultural reference, black improvisers were cordoned off from the internationalist space of the recognizably experimental postmodern "downtown" scene in 1970s and 1980s New York City because their radical sonic contributions were racially contained in the generic boundaries of "jazz." As Lewis points out, the constant reinscription of (putatively failed, late) "jazz" on all African American new music refuses the interpenetration and spontaneous generation of musical forms, and "cannot account for either the breakdown of genre definitions or the mobility of practice and method that informs the present-day musical landscape" (Lewis 2001).

[7] Sasaki (2001b). In another early attempt to delineate the genre, Ôtomo Yoshihide published an annotated list of *onkyô* recordings in 2003, but later disavowed the word as a meaningful category, specifically citing its misinterpretation by Western critics and audiences.

[8] *Jikken Kôbô* was an extremely influential group both within Japan and in Europe and the United States, and is central to the historical narrative of Japan's postwar national music development. Takemitsu, Ichiyanagi, Yuasa, and others were instrumental in establishing intercultural networks that included John Cage, Fluxus, Karlheinz Stockhausen,

and many others (Tezuka [2005] provides a detailed account of the collective's national import). Mayazumi Toshiru, Takemitsu Tôru, and Shibata Minao were part of a contemporaneous group commissioned by the Japanese national television company NHK during the 1950s and 1960s to produce the first tape music and electronic music pieces in Japan. See Fujii (2004), Galliano (2002), Tanaka (2001), Herd (1989), and Loubet (1997) on postwar electroacoustic music in Japan.

⁹ Cathode, one of Ôtomo's many groups, performs under the explicit rule that no performer respond to a sound any other performer is making, so that "the direction of the whole would not be determined by the will of any one musician or composer" (*Ensemble Cathode* liner notes, IMJ-502 2002).

¹⁰ Interview by author, January 2003.

¹¹ Music writer David Toop described *onkyô*'s quietness as a break not only from the increasing canonization of free improvisation, but also as an interruption in the overflowing circulation of recorded media. During a performance, he wrote in a 2001 article in the *New York Times,* "you might wonder whether the music is still happening," but that "this placidity is a refreshing withdrawal from media excess" (Toop 2001).

¹² In Northern England during the "Japan-o-Rama" tour in 2002, for example, an audience reacted to the extended silences and high-pitched sounds of a performance by Sachiko M by shouting and throwing objects at the stage in what the London promoter described to me as a "near riot." During an Italian tour the same year, the vehicle transporting a group of *onkyô* musicians from a festival was reportedly surrounded by angry fans who blocked the passage of the car and beat their fists on the roof (Hood 2002).

¹³ These posts were promptly shouted down by others on the list, including Jon Abbey, owner of experimental music label Erstwhile, who argued that it's "at least mildly racist to cite Zen Buddhism when the artists have gone out of their way to tell you otherwise." "Zen and *Onkyô*" thread, posted October 16, 2006, at ihatemusic.com.

¹⁴ Nakamura 2004, personal interview. This sentiment was reiterated by most Off Site performers, who stressed the social need to play quietly in order to appease the neighbors. Nakamura also told me that although the focused quietness of the "Meeting at Off Site" series was the perfect place to develop *onkyô,* he was more challenged by the earlier and much noisier setting of the "Improvisational Meeting at Bar Aoyama," where struggling to find one's sound was like "searching for treasure in the clutter and noise" of the space.

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