



JAPAN FOUNDATION
SÃO PAULO

INTERVIEW

OTOMO YOSHIHIDE

One of the most important improvisers and composers of the contemporary music scene.



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Guitarist • Turntablist • Composer • Film Score Composer • Record Producer

Otomo Yoshihide is one of the most important improvisers and composers in the contemporary music scene. At the end of 2017, He visited Brazil as well as in other countries in Latin America. In Brazil, He played in the prominent experimental music festivals such as Novas Frequências, FIME and Improfest. We interviewed him on his vast activities in the recent years and his music adventure up to now.

1 THE REASON FOR COMING TO BRAZIL

Why did you come to Brazil?

One day a person from the Japanese Agency of Culture Affair called me and asked me if I would like to be a Japan Cultural Envoy. At first I thought it was some joke but it came out to be true.

From the beginning, did you plan to come to Brazil?

I wanted to go to some country where I had not been to yet. So I wrote on my Facebook page whether someone would like to invite me to play. I expected to receive a request from African countries or Middle Eastern countries, but it did not happen. On the other hand, I received many requests from Latin American countries. More than half of them came from the region. That way, I decided to go to Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico.

So you yourself decided the place to go?

Yes, my policy was that I go where there are people who want to invite me to play. Also, I was determined to go somewhere, directly negotiating with organizers and musicians this time. This kind of thing is what I was doing during my twenties and thirties when I used to go to Europe, USA, Hong-Kong, and Korea. Unlike in the past, I did not stay at the squatting-place (Laughter).

How long will you stay in Latin America?

During 31 of October to 14 of December 2017, I have concerts almost every day, and there are very few days off. I always wanted to come to Brazil, because I like the Brazilian music. If I were to come here in the past, I would have probably stayed for longer.

2 AVANT-GARDE MUSIC

What do you think of the significance of noise and avant-garde music?

Generally speaking, music emerges from specific regions or an ethnic group. It is like a sort of language. Then in the modernization process, music, free from those backgrounds, appeared. I think classical music was the first of that kind, and later pop music arrived with the commercialization of music. Though it seemed homogenous on the surface, when you listen to The Beatles, you still feel the English taste in it, and when you listen to Brazilian music, you can find the Brazilian taste. Anyway, Music was no longer consumed merely by the locals. Music was consumed within the broader areas in a country, in the area where they speak the same language or beyond the border of states, finding the market in them. That happened in the 20th century.

I think avant-garde music is even more radical than pop music, and it no longer binds itself to the concept of a country or the area where they speak the same language but still connects people with its "attitude."

For example, I am still kind of surprised that there are people who listen to my music in Brazil. People related to a particular type of music can share some common ground and communicate with each other. This is where I see the significance of avant-garde music.

Do you think that the music other than avant-garde music has a similar kind of significance?

I think everyone has their taste in music. I do not believe that avant-garde music is the only one type of music that has the potential to connect people. It is ok that each person likes different kinds of music and, from now on, they will diversify with a blending of different types of music.

So you think the power of music connecting people to each other is the most important?

For my next project, I am researching the modern Olympic game. I think it is invented to prevent war between countries, and it was the wisdom of the human being. But now the war is not anymore between nations, and also the modern Olympic game has become hyper-commercialized. Hence, it does not play the same role as it did in the past. Now, I think that the idealism that the modern Olympic game carried is realized on the micro level, or between individuals and communities through music, internet or that kind.

What I would like to do now is to realize this peaceful connection, starting in the East Asian and the South East Asian regions.

Was there any motive for you to start thinking that way?

I came to think about it through the project which I did with the Japan Foundation Asia center. My project is called Ensemble Asia¹. I had been networking since the 90s but the support which I received from Asia center since 2014 made a significant change. For this project, I went to the countries that I had not been to yet. There, many people did not know me or my music, so I had to explain why I was doing this kind of music and why I tried to make networks of musicians. It made me reconsider my activities thoroughly and also forced me to

verbalize them. An important reference for me was what improvisers such as Derek Bailey² and his pals, and alternative musicians such as Fred Frith and Chris Cutler did in the past.

I can say that they and what they made cannot be separated from the complicated European historical context, but those musicians intended to overcome the past to a certain extent.

Could you explain about the music scene in Asia?

From three years ago when I started my project, the musicians from Asia began to get connected very quickly. Of course, it is not merely because of my activity; probably the time was mature for it. In the past, there were barriers such as language and so on between us, but now people from each country get information from the internet, and their expression has diversified, too. I can say that the time has come for creating these networks. What we have to do from now on is to create actual encounters to widen and strengthen this network. I think Asia would be more and more exciting place because of this exchange.

Is there any characteristic of avant-garde music from the emerging asian countries?

It is not easy to compare, but I think in Europe there is a precondition that music is a type of artistic expression.

In the Asian countries, people did not consider music as such, and it was far more closely associated to the daily lives, but simultaneously this could lead to a sense of less respect for music. That is a negative point. Anyway, from a certain perspective, they are free from the European concept of art. So you can misinterpret the Asian music, utilizing the concept of the avant-garde, which is deeply embedded in the historical context of European art. It is a characteristic of such alternative music in Asia that they try to establish common ground, creating diversity along the way. I think this is what is exciting and unique about “avant-garde” music in the Asian region.

3

ENCOUNTER WITH THE BRAZILIAN MUSIC

I heard that you like the Brazilian music a lot.

I do, I used to belong to a samba group in Tokyo, and I played surdo for three years, fully committed. Our samba team won the samba competition in Tokyo at that time.

Why did you stop playing samba?

I thought about what type of music is vernacular for me. When the Brazilian musicians played the rhythm of samba, it was quite intense, and there was no way to recreate it for me. That is why I stopped with Samba. Though, what I learned from Samba influenced me enormously in regards to music.

Who was your favorite Brazilian artist during that time?

I would say Nelson Cavaquinho. He was full of primitive energy concerning his singing as well as his guitar playing style. Of course, his iconic happy face was great, too.

I asked myself why I liked him so much and I found that because he kept something important that music had started to lose along the line with refinement in the 20th century.

A similar thing happened to jazz, as well as to the Japanese pop music. I prefer something intense and raw to refinement in music.

Apart from the music of Nelson Cavaquinho, were there any points in which you were interested regarding the Brazilian music?

Harmony is entirely European, yet rhythm has a strong "dialect". This "dialect" evolved a lot and it is quite complicated to write down on as sheet music. This unification of the western element and the non-western element are similar to 70s Japanese pop, and I found it quite interesting.

I understand but samba music and avant-garde music are quite different. I assume that the musicians involved in both are entirely different as well, right?

(Laughter) Of course. Those people from the community of Avant-garde music were only music specialists, while people from samba group were much more diverse. The leader of the group was the Brazilian musician but the rest was different, there was a doctor and salaryman. Person who was quite active in the group was a fish seller.

(Laughter) A Fish seller...

There was also a guy working for a trading company, speaking Portuguese fluently, homemakers, etc... we gathered on Sunday morning, it was an truly lively gathering. People from the avant-garde scene were mostly male, but the samba group was different, there were many women, too. So the gender balance was better you know. I had always been into the avant-garde music and its scene, but sometimes people there seemed to be a bit fundamentalist. I had an internal conflict because I did not like the fundamentalism but also did not intend to step entirely out of the avant-garde world.

Did you have a fear of going out of avant-guard scene?

A lot. I was playing music with Masayuki Takayanagi, those people flocking around him were a bit like the avant-garde fundamentalists. I also played a role to strengthen this tendency, which I regretted later. This is why I wanted to step out of the community. From that time on, I quit participating in one type of music community.

I guess it was quite rare for some to do that at that time.

Yes, since I stepped away from one type of music Jazz players said to me that I was not a Jazz player, but that I was a rocker. Rockers told me that I was a jazz player. For the noise musicians, I was an improviser, and for the improvisers, I was a noise musician. They criticized me with these types of comments, which I was comfortable with but also made me feel lonely at the same time. I did not want to belong to anywhere, but I liked all these music forms.

At least you enjoyed your freedom, it is excellent.

I am not sure I had freedom. But I did not want to be any authority in any particular kind of music genre and also want to avoid supporting authority.

The Japanese Jazz player from 60s-70s also played in the back band of Japanese pops to survive daily life, but they found the fact uncomfortable. However, I found playing pop music in addition to Jazz to be quite exciting and fresh. I was searching for the pop music which those Jazz players played in back bands. They managed to create something wholly unique. That is what I wanted to do as well.

Do you think that Takeo Yamashita³, you covered, had similar kind of internal conflict?

(Laughter) I believe that Yamashita did not have any problem in working in the commercial music industry at all. On the contrary, he enjoyed working in the commercial context, so he was free from what you call avant-garde identity. When offered to make music for the battle scene of the monsters in the TV anime, he chose free jazz. I could say he was the guy who released the first recording of the Japanese free jazz. It was in 1967. Officially speaking, the first Japanese free Jazz recording was done by Takayanagi in 1969. Yamashita's experiment was two years earlier.

Great! it seems like sampling technique used by current electronic musicians.

Probably that is because the image is a bit like sampling by nature. When you put music to the image, you are free to do whatever you do as long as music fits it. I also enjoy being free from my music, when I make music for the image. I had a similar attitude when I composed music for Amachan⁴. The music encouraging you to cheer up Amachan was the most suitable music in this context.

In terms of creation, how do you separate your work from putting music to image. Do you have some system for doing it?

Depending on the schedule, I devote myself to a specific project. But I usually do not separate creation. Sometimes, an idea for pop music comes to me after playing avant-garde performance. Of course, it does not happen to me on stage though.

Do you stock music ideas?

I do not stock. I put out everything I come up with. When I stock something, I would probably find it boring later. In terms of creating the soundtrack, it is best to improvise in a constrained condition.

Talking about stocking ideas, do you collect records?

Up to my mid 30 years old, I was collecting a lot. But I stopped doing it because of space limitations in my apartment. My room was totally full, and there was no space to sleep because of records. I think the sizes of apartments in Tokyo are not for collecting records or something. At that time, I got rid of almost 70 percent of records and books. That was in 1999, and I sold them to the nearby record store.

That must be precious record collection.

The next day when I sold the records, I went to the same record store to check them out and found that they were having record sale only with my avant-garde records (Laughter). In exchange for them, I got almost 1 million yen (equivalent to 10 thousand dollars), I bought a laptop so that I could do home-recordings.

What kind of records did you keep?

I would say the early recordings of John Zorn, Derek Bailey, Christian Markley and old Japanese pop. I also got rid of magazines which covered me.

4 ARCHIVE

You are artistic director of Sapporo International⁵ Art Festival, right?

Yes, I did. There were many exhibitions which constantly changed with improvisation. Daily troubles, works by the citizens and archive of particular individual life, train becoming noise train, everything in the city was incorporated in the festival, which made it different from other festivals.

However, if I showed the art pieces only from the present, the audience might miss some contexts, so I prepared exhibitions of archive material which disclosed the artist's past works and the history of Sapporo. It was more interesting than expected.

When I exhibit the archive successfully, the audience has a better idea of why artists are doing such performance and making such works. That way, it starts to stimulate the audience to think about history from a new perspective.

I see history as many trunks crossing and dispatching. It is three dimensional, and it is different from history stemming from a single thick trunk.

History is not based on a linear evolutionism. It looks different from which ever perspective you take, which is why I think it is important to exhibit archive material. For example, when you describe Jazz history, you can do it, referring to Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Coltrane. When you do it, it is like constructing history based on evolutionism. However, the reality is not that simple. For instance, the records of Duke Ellington arrived in Japan, and it was massively influential for Japanese pop music. It is a tiny story, but history is the collection of micro-stories. The most important thing is that it changes its surface from where you see it. When you look at history closely, you can find the vast and infinite richness which connect the present and the past. Hence, it is important how you treat archives; it opens a door for histories.

With the age of the computer, people tend to think that the archive survives automatically, but it is not the case. We have to keep and organize the archive intentionally. Otherwise, they disappear entirely, and very easily. I do not have the flyers for my concerts 10 years ago.

It is quite thrilling to think that history ends up being a collection of micro histories.

You start to see the infinity of history even when you look at personal history or mini boomer. When you gather these historical fragments, things get three dimensional. Right now, we are living in the age where diversified communities are appearing beyond regions and borders. The attitude regarding how you see history becomes even more and more critical in this context and archive plays a significant role in it. On the other hand, keeping archives is such a troublesome work, and it is beyond what we can do personally. Archives require public support, including financial support.

What made you think about the archive that way?

When someone keeps committing himself to avant-garde expression, others think that he has an interest only in the future, not in the past. But in my case, I always have a massive interest in what others did in the past and how they influence me. But when I refer to other's work, I was quite doubtful about approaching them with a linear evolutionism perspective. At the same, when I started to play outside of Japan, many people asked me how traditional Japanese music influenced me, which I felt strange. This kind of question puts me in the

stereotypical Japanese history. I was quite influenced by the soundtrack of TV anime or drama, old Japanese pop music, an amateur rock band formed by my classmates in junior high school rather than by the traditional, sophisticated Japanese music.

When you connect with musicians from the East Asia or the South East Asian, it is important to look at the personal history or local history not at the national history. Otherwise, you might make mistakes.

The reason why I came to think about it is that I started playing with mentally challenged children in 2005. They did not have any interest in musical history, which I was studying. To play better with them, the only way to do is to look carefully at each one. Additionally, the Great East Japan Earthquake compelled me. What I thought would always exist disappeared in an instant. Archives vanished too. The incident made me reconsider the concept of history. From that time on, I started to feel what it matters to me is micro-histories of people I meet.

Referring to history ends up making future. For that reason, I do not want to make mistakes by respecting great histories prepared by someone else. That is why I think the archive is essential. In Sapporo international art Festival, I believe that I could realize what I said just now to some extent.

Nowadays there are so many art festivals in Japan. How did you differentiate it from the other festivals?

Indeed. In Japan, many art festivals are starting in the 21st century. In Japan, there is no long history of the art festival. However, they say that there is art festival boom now. One reason behind is that art festivals successfully have revitalized small villages or cities with a sluggish economy. We call it "Machi-okoshi," or the revitalization of a town. I consider it positive independent of the cause of festivals, actually many exciting art festivals appear in Japan in this context.

Sapporo is already a vibrant city, which does not require art as economic stimulation. For that reason, I ask myself what the motive for the festival is.

That made me bring up the theme " what is art festival" and share it with everyone involved. It provided public discussion and many people came up with exciting ideas, which ends up establishing the festival based on improvisation and archive, including the participation of the citizens.

The previous art director of the festival was Ryuichi Sakamoto, wasn't it?

Yes, I think to have a musician as an artistic director is rare, especially twice in a row. I assume that the reason for that was because I organized the "Bon Festival Dance"⁶ event in the former edition of the festival. That became quite popular among the citizens. After I did it for the first time, the Bon Festival Dance in Sapporo turned into the new annual summer festival.

An important Japanese sound artist, Akio Suzuki⁷, was also involved in the festival, right?

Yes, I invited artists such as Akio Suzuki, Christian Markley, and Gozo Yoshimasu to exhibit and perform. They have always been great inspirations for me. I tried to exhibit their archives as much as possible. Also, it was important for me to hold the archival exhibition of Numayama Yoshiaki, who has organized avant-garde music concerts for more than 30 years in Sapporo.

Also, Yasunao Tone⁸ participated in it.

For health reasons, he could not make it to the festival, but we hosted his exhibition and his concert. I can say that he is a real pioneer for the kind of music which we have been committed to. This time, we held his super loud concert in a concert hall, using artificial intelligence. He told us that we should not use stage lights because they made the sound musical. During the concert, the audience was free to move around, and the beginning and the end of the concert were unclear. That was a unique experience.

It is an interesting combination. You are doing many kinds of music and Tone is trying to avoid any kind of music.

Compared to him, I keep making music no matter what kind of sound I make. I like music you know. In this sense, Sachiko M does not make music because she has no interest in music. That is why Tone also showed a significant interest in the sound of Sachiko M.

What do you think of the influence of technology on Music?

It has a powerful influence. If there were no recording technology, most of the current music would not have appeared. It changed the way we listen to and make music drastically. I can say that it is tough to think of music before recording technology anymore. In the 70s, composers started to use drum machines, and in 80s, drum players began to play drums like drum machines. Our body changed due to the influence of technology.

5

PROJECTS IN FUKUSHIMA AND FROM NOW ON

How did you start your Fukushima Project?

Right after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, my team went to Fukushima. Fukushima is a big prefecture, and of course, I could not reach the nuclear power plant. The city I could enter was Fukushima city, which is 60 km away from the nuclear power plant. It is the city where I grew up.

The pollution there was not as devastating as in the neighborhood near the power plant. But there were mixed opinions on whether it was possible to keep living there or not. There was no apparent policy from the government nor from the city office. The whole city seemed to be in a kind of depression. In this situation, we started by thinking how to survive. Firstly, we researched the protective measures against radiation and also started online TV programs to broadcast what was not transmitted at that time. We worked together with the citizens as well as artists. With these activities, we came up with an idea to hold a festival in Fukushima city. It is the project called "Project Fukushima!". The reason why we tried to do it was that in order to have a festival, we had to consult with a specialist in radiation to measure radiation levels in the festival locations and many other aspects. We made the whole process of doing it open and transparent so that everyone can access it. We measured radiation levels in foods, which we sold in the festival. Our motto was to start doing things by ourselves if the government or the city office could not do them. Later on, the city office followed our example and started to measure radiation levels in food and also initiated protective measures. That shows that we did what we had to do. Our aim was not to just hold a music festival but to hold a festival

—starting to do what is essential and having information open and accessible.

Above all, the most prominent result the festival was that people's minds changed during the course of organizing this project. Many people were so devastated that they did not have a clue on what to do in the situation. With the participation in the project, they found a way to approach the issue and move forward. That made me discover the fundamental reason why we hold a festival in the first place. "Project Fukushima!" goes on till today. For the first three years, I was a project leader, but now I participate in it as a team member. Apart from this, I go to Fukushima frequently to play with junior high and high school students.

The beginning must have been quite harsh I assume. I mean because of radiation.

First, we prepared 6000 square meters of "Furoshiki"⁹, a Japanese wrapping cloth, and spread it all over the ground. Furoshiki is something that almost every Japanese has in their home, and it is for wrapping things; they are beautiful, too. Since everyone has it, we thought it could be a good idea to collect them and spread them over the ground. Of course, you cannot avoid the radiation contamination by clothes, but you can prevent cesium, which was on the ground. It worked to prevent cesium from flying over and attaching to people. Furoshiki brought something unexpected. People all over Japan sent us Furoshiki. Countless Furoshiki arrived. It was such hard work to sew them together, and many volunteers helped us. That is how we managed to sew 6000 square meters of Furoshiki. I still cannot forget the scene when we covered the ground with Furoshiki on the day of the festival. It was so beautiful that it made the atmosphere so different and festive.

That time, I felt why we hold festivals in a real sense. Two years later, we started "Bon Festival Dace" which was inspired by the traditional Japanese festival and we spread Furoshiki there, too. Most of the locations in Fukushima have fewer radiation levels nowadays. But we still keep using Furoshiki and dancing over it. I dream that if the festival continues for 100 years, then nobody would know why they use Furoshiki. But someone may research and find out that the usage of Furoshiki in the festival is due to Fukushima disaster. That way, the culture transcends the generation.

I am quite curious about how the tradition of festival emerges in general. At that same time of doing projects in Fukushima, I started to go frequently to south Asian countries for The Japan Foundation Asia Center project. It made me discover the various types of festivals in the South East Asian countries.

What do you think of the function of Music in festivals?

After seeing many festivals, I feel music is a component of festivals or religious rituals.

European music is isolated from other activities, namely traditional festivals, but in those Asian countries, actually including Japan in the past, there was a very different stance toward music. I start to believe that music is great not because of being independent of other activities but of co-existing with other activities and functioning in them. This idea influenced me a lot regarding playing music, too.

When I play, I think less about what I want to play. More often, I think about what kind of music I can make with people I play with and what type of community it can create.

It sounds so exciting but when you extend your definition of music or playing music, probably the project becomes really huge, and perhaps it can be troublesome to treat other small aspects other than sound or music.

(Laughter) My bad habit is to try to do things on a large scale. I have been doing many projects after the Fukushima disaster. They started to go beyond my capacity. So that is one of the reasons why I came to Brazil, carrying a guitar by myself. I needed to look at myself calmly and objectively. I am a musician by nature, and probably my current trip is like going back to my origin.

To which aspect you pay attention most, when you improvise.

When I improvise; I do not care about what I can verbalize. I focus on eco in the space and conditions of the amp, probably that is it.

But when I play solo, I focus on rhythm. It expands and contracts just like that of folk music. It is not like the constant rhythm of pop music neither rhythm of hip-hop and Samba. Anyway, I do not think about it while I play, I think about it before and after the performance.

What kind of artists do you think are interesting in Japan now?

Makoto Oshiro¹⁰ and Takahiro Kawaguchi¹¹. Makoto Oshiro has a show in Chile this year (at the time of interview). They are not young artists but quite exciting ones. Additionally, I like Tenniscoasts¹². They are not like what you call improvisers, but they are essentially improvisers.

What would you like to do from now on? What kind of work do you want to realize?

My project with Japan Foundation Asia Center is over. But I want to keep strengthening the network in Asian countries. I can say it is my lifework.

In terms of my work, I have less interest in making an album but more interested in creating an installation. I think making an album is to create the imaginary space with two speakers, but when I make an installation, I can use real space. It gives me more freedom. My interest in space leads me to installations and concerts in a unique format. For example, I played with many children in Sapporo. It was called collective orchestra. It was out of control, and I hardly knew from where the sound came and who made it. That kind of experience gives me excitement.

However, probably I'll say different things tomorrow, take what I say with a grain of salt (Laughter).

WORD REFERENCE

- ¹ **Ensemble Asia:** The project initiated by Otomo together with the Japan Foundation Asia Center in 2014. Otomo was the artistic director of the project. (<http://orchestra.ensembles.asia/>)
- ² **Derek Bailey:** Derek Bailey is one of the most influential free jazz guitarists. He was active in the avant-garde music scene since the 60s. In 1976, he instigated word famous Company, a collective of improvisers, to which many important avant-garde artists were related.
- ³ **Takeo Yamashita:** Born in 1930, he worked for making the soundtrack for TV drama, animation and commercial since the 60s. He composed over 7,000 thousand pieces during his career.
- ⁴ **Amachan:** The TV drama that was broadcasted in 2013 on TV, channel NHK. The drama became very popular and almost national phenomena in Japan.
- ⁵ **Sapporo International Art Festival:** It is the international art festival initiated in 2014 in Sapporo. Sapporo is in Hokkaido, which is the northern island in Japan.
- ⁶ **Bon Festival Dance:** Bon festival is the traditional ceremony for welcoming the spirit of ancestors. Traditional Bon Festival Dance is a dance practiced during the period. It is a wide spread tradition all over Japan.
- ⁷ **Akio Suzuki:** Akio Suzuki is a pioneer sound artist who is active since the 60s. He performed in the leading art exhibitions such as Documenta, and his installation are exhibited all around the world.
- ⁸ **Yasunao Tone:** Yasunao Tone is an avant-garde artist who participated in Fluxus in the 60s. Since 1972, he works in New York. One of his most significant works is the sound piece made by the sound from damaged CD.
- ⁹ **Furoshiki:** Traditional Japanese wrapping clothe. It is widely used since Edo period.
- ¹⁰ **Makoto Oshiro:** Makoto Oshiro is a sound artist. He uses many kinds of self-made instruments in his performance. He has performed and exhibited internationally. He is a member of a sound art collective called Natsu no Di Sankakkei.
- ¹¹ **Takahiro Kawaguchi:** Takahiro Kawaguchi is a sound artist. He uses self-made instruments, and he is a member of Natsu no Dai Sankakkei together with Makoto Oshiro.
- ¹² **Tenniscoats:** Tenniscoats is an indie pop band. It consists of 2 leading members, but it collaborates with many musicians, and the format of the group constantly changes according to the situation.