

*The Music of Tea and Zen*  
by Sheila Fling

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Pianist, Junko Kobayashi  
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Although I'm neither Japanese nor a musician, my deep love for both Japan and music emboldens me today to try to say a few things about the music of Zen and tea. Of course, technically, there is no music accompanying Zen meditation nor the meditative practice of "chado" or The Way of Tea. Both practices are done essentially in silence.

You may recall a 1965 album "Music for Zen Meditation," but the title is misleading because Zen practitioners do not meditate to music. It was instead a Western clarinetist who convinced Japanese shakuhachi and koto musicians to improvise with him, producing some very beautiful, and indeed, meditative, music.

Yet, as a practitioner of both Zen and Chado, I experience a kind of music in them, which is also the quintessence of all that I love most about Japanese culture. Let me elaborate. First, it's not unusual in meditation for an actual melody or maybe a long-forgotten childhood song to bubble up to consciousness. Then there's the rhythm of the breathing, which all major world religions use as a natural, ever-present focus to which one gently returns when the mind wanders. There are fugues and canons of wandering thoughts, waves of emotion, and sensations, sometimes harmonious and sometimes dissonant. Finally and, more often, occasionally, there is silence, space, "nothing-ness."

Our composer Takemitsu wrote beautifully about silence and space in music. He said that only silence is eternal. He spoke of the power of "ma", the dramatic pause in Noh theater. He titled compositions "Uninterrupted Rests." He spoke of the performer's role as not producing sound but striving to discover sound in silence. As composer, he said he sought to confront the silence we fear by carving away excess sound to reach the essential single sound in which God dwells. He could as well be speaking of meditation when he says it would be "ideal if my music could sound, and then when the echoes of those sounds come back I would no longer be there." Like a meditator, he spoke of becoming one with his sounds, of merging with the world. He quoted the shakuhachi musicians' saying "Ichion Joobutsu," "with one sound one becomes the Buddha". Now what about chado, the Way of Tea? It is said that "the taste of tea is the taste of Zen." These two paths are related historically, philosophically, aesthetically, and experientially. In the 12th century, the monks who brought Ch'an Buddhism from China to Japan (where it became Zen Buddhism) also brought green tea. Zen practitioners still serve it to each other in the meditation hall, where, thankfully, the caffeine helps us not doze off!

By the 14th century, however, tea had become the occasion for lavish entertainment by nobility and samurai with elaborate banquets, tea-tasting contests, and display of their elegant imported Chinese art objects. Then, in the 15th and 16th centuries, it was Zen practitioners who led the way to reform this use of tea with simple handmade Japanese utensils and the aesthetics of wabi and sabi. These concepts are difficult to explain, but wabi includes ideas of poverty, rusticity, simplicity, naturalness, imperfection, irregularity, austerity, restraint, and

unpretentiousness. Sabi has feelings of solitude, barest sufficiency, worn elegance, and timelessness. Imagine, if you will, a bamboo hut at the sea's edge at dusk or nestling in your hands a warm, comforting handmade bowl of tea. Not rejecting the elegant utensils, our art became one of tastefully juxtaposing one or two of these refined objects with the more rustic, ordinary objects.

So how does one experience the tea ritual as music? In this slow-moving meditation of a few people in an intimate, uncluttered, quiet space, one hears the sound of the water boiling in the kettle like "wind in the pines," tabi-covered feet sliding across the reed mats, the tap of the bamboo tea scoop on the edge of the bowl, the whisking of the tea, and, outside in the garden, perhaps leaves rustling or raindrops falling or a bird warbling. Besides such actual sounds within the silence, one can experience music in the four principles of tea, which we've sought to follow for over 400 years: wa, kei, sei, and jaku. Wa is the all-important value in Japanese culture, harmony. Composer Takemitsu has written that the arts originate from and eventually return to harmony with nature. Many of his compositions reference nature. Hosting a tea event begins with nature, the season, the garden, a flower, food delicacies, utensils, and guests, all carefully selected, not to match in a Western style but, to harmonize with each other and with the season. The second principle is "kei," respect, a reverence and care accorded each person, each utensil, each material, their creators, the spacing and timing. Takemitsu writes about respect for each musical instrument, each sound.

Third is "sei," purity, which is felt in the graceful ceremonial purification of the utensils but, even more importantly, in the

purity of preparing a bowl of tea or drinking it with all ones heart and mind. In this meditative practice one is focused on each utensil and each movement at that point in time but with a simultaneous awareness of guests, tea hut, and garden, and of the flow of each movement, distinct but not separate, from one moment to the next. Ideally such centered awareness of the dynamically interacting parts in relation to the Whole generalizes to ones daily activities, and one becomes melody, rhythm, harmony, music. This leads to the fourth principle, "jaku," which is sometimes translated enlightenment or, perhaps more modestly, tranquility. We rarely talk about it because it really cannot be captured in words and because one cannot really strive for it as one does for harmony, respect, and purity. Instead it is a result of those three. We touched on it in our earlier description of "meditation as music" and in Takemitsu's meditative concepts of music. Now, as Kobayashi San speaks and plays, if we listen with our whole being to the silence, perhaps we will discover with her the essential single sound in which God dwells.