

## Performing Music for the Sake of Music ...

A conversation between Keiko Harada, Yumiko Meguri and Stefan Hussong  
at the occasion of the recording of Keiko Harada's works *F-fragments*, *Book I* and *Nach Bach*

**Meguri:** When I received the first two fragments, “twin leaves” and “speedy”, it was love at first sight and filled with inspiration for me. I did not know what was going to happen exactly, but I had a feeling that it was going to be great. I felt that it was a different world of Harada from the Harada that we knew. The music was greater than I expected, even now I still think the same. It was a difficult piece to perform, and it had driven me mad. However, I felt that the music itself was such a large, beautiful, and wide world.

**Hussong:** What I did not at all expect from Harada is, what we call in German, “Betroffenheitsmusik”. Which refers to pieces that are naive and usually being written after big disasters. Those music aims to touch or change the society and they are naive, childish, and superficial. Then, of course, Harada did not disappoint us with her work. She wrote something totally different. Just like what Ms. Meguri had said, it is a beautiful music that doesn't abuse what happened but gives hope in a very special sense. This trait is very outstanding in all Harada's works. Looking into each fragment in depth, you will find beauty, abyss, homage, the deeper reflection of the inner state of the composer, and there's also future. That is very impressive. Besides that, the possibilities in sonority for these musical instruments' combination are also wonderful. It is not aiming for any special effect or trying to catch attention by tricks or avant-garde techniques. The music is humble and modest.

**Harada:** People from the same profession presented all kinds of new pieces based on the sudden reaction towards the March 11<sup>th</sup> incident. The titles of those pieces often include “Tsunami”, “Prayers”, “Mourning”, and etc. However, I felt that the content of the music is very shallow.

**Hussong:** This is linked to the old discussion, “What is the role of music?”. One of the most impressive works is Schoenberg's “A Survivor from Warsaw for narrator, men's chorus, and orchestra”. The most powerful moment of the piece is when the survivor's words were being heard. This is a very clear and directly link to the incident. It's a piece that tells people not to forget what had happened. However, personally, I think that music does not have any function or role. When it's great music, the existence of the music itself brings a deep sense of hope.

It doesn't matter if the music is from Bach, Harada, Beethoven, Xenakis, Mozart, or others. When one feels the creative power, one gets hope. The reasons are, first of all, it shows the best of humankind. Second, it's like a window to “what could be”. It's a little window that you could see that human race could go very far. This window opened by music, is showing us a glimpse of hope. This is only possible when it's great music. Everything else is just entertainment for the moment being, or for the sake of forgetting something, or any specific function.

**Meguri:** The positive point of Harada's music is that she composes towards the future. Music is often said to become something that is able to comfort, heal when something destructive happened. Some people make music for those reasons. In my opinion, those do not heal. What we can do is to

hand down something to the future. Only things that are in extremely high quality will last into the future. We get to learn and see, what human beings managed to do in the past through those amazing works that were created. Through music scores, we could see the era, and what went through human minds. Only great works could do that, but what are great works? “Guernica” is a masterpiece by Picasso that we get to know about the Guernica incident through it.

**Harada:** I realise that this tragedy is leading to a serious problem that will continue to extend internationally during my lifetime. Also, I found out that the people who had realised and had been addressing this serious problem since decades ago are in Japan. That was the only tiny hope that I felt towards my country.

**Hussong:** You also dedicated these fragments to various people. After the incident, people in your country began to see the problems that were not seen and the problems started to reveal themselves. That actually shocked you very much. I felt that even now, every day, every moment, you are still being influenced by it. Besides that, as an artist, you need to react artistically towards it because of the existence of these people who gave hope to people.

**Harada:** I have not met any of them (those whom I dedicated the fragments to) before when I was composing the piece. Usually, I do not write letter to people that I’ve not met, but with this special disposition, I invited all of them to the world premiere (November, 2012) performance. Until then, I thought that what I’ve been doing, creative activities through music, is highly risky and I put my life into doing it. However, among those people, they are people who have been putting their lives in actual continuous danger for more than 40 years to send out information based on goodwill. I was startled by my own ignorance and stupidity. I’m grateful to the 40 years when I could take things for granted, being ignorant, and devote myself fully in creative work. However, I felt that I could not return to that era anymore.

**Meguri:** But for a composer like yourself, you pluck – like in the fairy tale \* “*crane's return of a favour*” – your own feather when you compose, isn’t it just like eating your own body? In short, you are killing yourself. But the miraculous thing is that, even though you are plucking your own feather when you compose, the feather grows back after that. [laughs]

\* “*Crane’s return of a favour*” is a Japanese fairy tale about a crane whose life was saved by a human. In order to return the favour to her saviour, she disguised herself in human form and plucked her own feather to weave silk brocade for her saviour to sell for income.

**Harada:** If it’s so, that would be great.

**Meguri:** You must have tormented yourself very much. When we received a piece like that, even though we were plucking our own feathers when we practised, it was catharsis for us. We were being saved. It was so difficult that we must practise, and through that, we were saved.

**Hussong:** While talking about practising, especially for this piece, there was a transcendent level of ensemble work. We devoted a lot of time for that. Even though so, there was still something else that required a lot of attention. That is the extreme delicacy of each and every sound, and in all

musical parameters such as dynamic, intonation, tone colour, the balance between two musical instruments, and more. Instead of spending time on technically difficult passages, we spent more time in searching for the right and best environment for each and every note. We had rehearsals once for every two to three days. Mutually, we searched for the right gesture for every single sound.

**Meguri:** I agree. Tackling this piece was like tackling Beethoven's Late Piano Sonatas.

**Harada:** Both of you possess the creative attitude that goes well with each other.

**Meguri:** Above anything, to search for the best is the same attitude we have.

**Hussong:** I have two questions to ask the composer. First, why did you choose this instrumentation? Second, you said that you would like this piece to be performed worldwide, why is that so?

**Harada:** The instrumentation was decided from the beginning. You both asked me for a piece, and by then, we decided that you both would premiere the piece. If we thought about the combination of piano and accordion in common sense, it would be a difficult to realise such a combination due to the completely different sounding body. However, for me personally, any kind of combination is possible. For example, in year 2001, I received a commission for shō and recorder, which was the first original piece for this combination worldwide. Furthermore, in February 2013, I wrote a piece for Asian Art Ensemble which was based in Berlin. The instrumentation included traditional musical instruments from Japan, China, and Korea, plus Western string instruments. My thought was that to know the musical instrument was the most important thing. With that, I did not mean to know only the extended techniques of the musical instruments. Musical instruments were developed and improved along with musical works. Thus, to know about musical instruments, we would have to go against the stream, back to the music created during the most ancient time. Also, the most practical and necessary way is to hear them being played in front of you. Listening through CD or YouTube is definitely not enough. We must observe the breathing and the body that produces the sound. In this case, the existence of great performers is crucial. Before I composed the piece for Asian Art Ensemble, I went to Berlin and stayed for three days and two nights to study the musical instruments along with the performers and other composers. I often made persistent efforts to do so.

The answer to your second question is as follows: Japan is currently having a big open wound. We are in the situation where young children, also poor people are exposing their lives to danger. The weakest people are getting even weaker. The people who voiced up for these weak people, in other words, those people that become the motivation for me to compose *F-fragments*, their existence might not even be remembered in the future. It is a historical fact that people who raised their voice for the truth sometimes disappear in history, and this also includes artists. Even if the words could spread between people for fifty years, two hundred years might be impossible. Moreover, how much facts will actually be written in the future text books also remain unknown. However, this could be recorded through music. As a composer, this time I had to use the ultimate method. Thus, I made solutions to lock the memory into the music. In *F-fragments*, I tried a few concrete methods. The first fragment, "Twin Leaves", implies a land where all desires of human beings came true out of a sudden. Even though so, people still hope to see their own bright futures through the land. In the case of a musician like myself, who travels throughout the year and does not have a hometown,

I use my own method to remember the ultimate meaning of having lived in a certain land. I wrote “Bone +”, a piece for accordion solo, in 1999. According to the pianist Ken’ichi Nakagawa, the ending of the piece sounded like “the wind that blows at the graveyard”. However, the “wind” at the ending of “Twin Leaves” blows beyond the graveyard of human beings. Furthermore, I used different methods in expression for the rest of the ten fragments, and it is not necessary to explain them here. Please listen to them freely.

**Hussong:** Does the impact of each fragment, in a general sense, resemble the Greek Tragedy?

**Harada:** I didn’t have such intention when I was composing the piece.

**Hussong:** The tragedy after the earthquake was that human race showed profound disrespect towards nature. All of a sudden we had the four elements against humankind. First, the earth was shaking (earthquake); second, water (Tsunami); third, fire (explosion); and fourth, Wind (which brought the deadly radioactivity to a large area). Even now, the wind is still blowing continuously. With this essence, one could say that it resembles the Greek Tragedy where the clashes of human and nature occur.

**Meguri:** The great thing about art is that it has some sort of universality and is capable of speaking of things that could last about a thousand years in only one piece.

**Meguri & Hussong:** What state were you in when you were composing the piece?

**Harada:** I was almost in a demented state. I composed everywhere in spite of the fact that it was during the period of heavy traveling. For example, at home in Tokyo, all around Germany, Mallorca Island, Seoul, and other places. I composed the last fragment in Rome. The music in my body just flowed out. As soon as I approached the manuscript or the piano, I felt that the music was almost in its complete form. I was trying to keep myself under control and this conflicted with the slightly improvisational and unstoppable momentum I had. This conflict was maybe the hardest part for me.

**Meguri:** In Harada’s music, *F-fragments* was no exception as well, including the dynamic, the music required an extremely wide range of expressions. Every time when I tried to create and approach the sound of Harada’s music, I often recalled the music from around the period of Haydn to the late Beethoven. If I did not do so, the sonority and sound of Harada could not be produced. Her music makes performers feel at home.

**Harada:** In my music, of course the sonority, and also the timing that is connecting each sound are very crucial. During the first rehearsal with Ms. Meguri, there were some parts that were a little bit different from what I intended, but after I explained briefly to her, she played with perfect timing.

**Meguri:** The method to bring out the sound of the musical instrument, which goes back to the very core of classical music, is required when reading Harada’s score. If one could not do that, the sonority would not be realised. However, the music itself has a very unique expression. It’s extremely difficult but it is different from the technical requirements in competition. It does not sound like Haydn when you listen to it. That is why sometimes I forgot the basic demand in

classical music and to bring out the beautiful sound. With that, I panicked and got worse in playing. The worst situation was when the sound kept getting louder, because I couldn't play it. When I couldn't play it, I didn't want to hear my own sound. Even when I knew very clearly that "This is not the sound!". But I was afraid so I couldn't stop playing. No matter if it was 10 or 20 hours, I just played. Then, it got worse and worse. It was the same with Bach's music, I felt the same fear.

**Hussong:** [Smiles] That I understand very well.

**Meguri:** Then, one day, I found it. One of the most important keys to practice is mental strength. Mental strength without foolish practice. There's a practice method which is more efficient without playing an instrument than with playing an instrument. The worst practice is when you just play the instrument because you are in desperate situation. The road to reach a certain level is really very difficult. Stefan, how do you practice?

**Hussong:** With Harada's music, the most efficient way to practise is to get as soon as possible the "body feeling" for the necessary sound. Of course, when the piece is very complicated and you want to learn it quickly, you end up learning only by fingers or mind. That will not get into your body. By doing this, you avoid to really concentrate on all that you should feel when you play the music. In order to perform Harada's music, besides aiming to produce, let's say, a poetic performance, one must also control his or her own body to produce the sound of the music with the right condition and timing. This requires a very high level of concentration and time. Once you have it in you, you don't have to practise anymore. That's a special kind of music.

**Harada:** Is it like being able to ride a bicycle?

**Hussong:** No, it's not that simple. When practising Harada's music, you must empty your mind. You can't think about other things. Concentration, concentration, and concentration. It's mental training. Is there anything that you would like to say, M. Harada?

**Harada:** My thought is that good music is like a sphere; that is because good music possesses various angles. How does a composer acknowledge the world, and how does he or she feel, are being shown directly in music. Then, the light will reflect through the sphere from different angles, and in the unique breathing of each composer. In the case of a performer, it is more difficult. A composer does not change him- or herself. However, a performer has to accept completely different kinds of music with the whole body based on different composers. The principle of my music requires musicians that are trained from a young age. I can say with confidence that what is necessary for my music is the love and respect towards music, also performers who concentrate on performing music for the sake of music.

Translation: HueyChing Chong