

Information Changes the World – Technology, Society, and New

Art

Where is the music?

A special forum with Ryuichi Sakamoto and Yasuo Kobayashi

■(Chapter 1)

Kobayashi: (...I think the people who are here wanted to be here.) First of all, welcome to the University of Tokyo. With that, let's give Mr. Sakamoto a round of applause. (applause)

Sakamoto: Thanks, thanks a lot.

Kobayashi: We've laid out a nice carpet of ginkgo leaves for you today.

Sakamoto: I like ginkgo trees.

Kobayashi: Is that right?

Sakamoto: I think there's something admirable about ginkgoes.

Kobayashi: You admire ginkgo trees? How's that?

Sakamoto: You have to admit that they live a long time.

Kobayashi: Oh, I see. And just by coincidence today, the ginkgo trees are at the peak of their autumn colors; they're really beautiful. I usually don't have flowers on the stage like this. Not since the last times with Pina Bausch and Sayoko Yamaguchi have there been flowers adorning the stage. And now again today for you, Mr. Sakamoto. You're a special guest.

Sakamoto: Pina has also been here?

Kobayashi: Yes, but that wasn't here. I laid out a carpet of red roses for Pina Bausch at a different place; she said I did some pretty showy things.

Sakamoto: What, am I going to have to dance? Here, how's this?

Kobayashi: And I end up decorating the stage like this for a man. On that note, I am Yasuo Kobayashi, professor of cultural symbolism here at the University of Tokyo (Komaba Campus). Is Professor Yoshimi here today? He's the one in charge of organizing the whole forum. Isn't Professor Yoshimi here? Professor Yoshimi is head of the department of informatics and also the reason I'm here; he chose me to speak with Mr. Sakamoto today. But now really, this is Mr. Sakamoto's lecture, shall we say, and there's no point in my speaking all the time; let's encourage him to do most of the talking. And along with that, I thought I'd like to direct our discussions to things of a more radical nature. After thinking about what it was that I wanted to ask Mr. Sakamoto first, I realized that I want to know what you're searching for. You seem to be the kind of person who has been continually searching for something. You seem to be more than someone who composes, of course, you do compose, but I just can't help feeling that you're more than just a composer, you want something beyond that, something above that, I don't know exactly what that other thing is, but you seem to be a person who wants something, who continues to search for something. At this point it's terribly impudent of me, but let me suggest that whatever it is you're looking for, it's not likely to be something human. So let me ask you, what is it exactly that you have been searching for?

Sakamoto: You know, I'm not even sure what it is.

Kobayashi: But you are searching for something, aren't you?

Sakamoto: Rather than what I'm searching for, wouldn't you say that none of us knows what it is we're searching for? You often hear the teenagers on TV programs talking about what they want to be, what they want to do, their dreams, things like that. You see all of these dramatic lives where people go after what they want, accomplishing what they want, but I don't think it's anything at all like that. Professor Kobayashi, you never thought about becoming what you are now, did you?

Kobayashi: Never....

Sakamoto: Was it just coincidence?

Kobayashi: Well..

Sakamoto: What about it?

Kobayashi: No, see, I didn't think it was ever your purpose to become what you are now.

Sakamoto: No, it wasn't like that at all.

Kobayashi: So, that thing you want is something other than yourself.

Sakamoto: Right.

Kobayashi: So when people talk about their wants and desires, it's usually just a search for self; I feel like telling them not to be so stupid. Don't you think so, too?

Sakamoto: I agree. Of course.

Kobayashi: It's not anything stupid like that, is it?

Sakamoto: No.

Kobayashi: But what should you do if you're not seeking something other than yourself?

Sakamoto: It seems like lately whenever the question comes up, you usually hear something about dreams or something along that line, but I don't think that's the way it is. Just the fact that we live our lives is an interesting story. I never once thought about becoming a musician, it just happened to turn out this way. In fact, for the longest time I had no idea what I wanted to do. And what you want has a lot to do with it. On a more concrete subject, what I'm more interested in is the relationship between the brain and music, how did the process of human evolution and music come about. I sometimes

read on the subject but it doesn't stop there. If it did, then all I would have to do is become a researcher. There were times when I was a college student that I thought the life of a researcher would be pretty interesting, but after all, I know I'm lazy and anyway, it would be more interesting to be on the producing end. I sort of drifted into doing things in music up to now; that's how I became what I am. That's why it's hard to say.

Kobayashi: So you're saying that you just accidentally drifted into all this? People are not going to like hearing that answer. (laughs)

Sakamoto: Oh, I see. (laughs) Sorry about that.

Kobayashi: No, but at the same time, I haven't followed you throughout every stage of your career, but I think things seem to have worked out well for you by pure chance. Like when you were a movie actor, when you did the theme song for the Olympics, when you were making commercials, you've really done so many different things. Whenever I see you, and please don't take this the wrong way, it seems that the work you are doing, rather than being the driving force in your life, is something you seem to be doing by chance, and that you're just adapting yourself to it. But that chance is not simply by chance, and that any chance will be something that can lead to that search for something. At least that is the way it looks to a third-party like me. If there's some sort of secret to this, I would like to be able to tell it to all the young people who are here.

Sakamoto: This is all fairly nebulous, but music is not food. No matter what kind of music it is, you can't fill your stomach with it. Chimpanzees evolved from monkeys and then on to the Homo species and then Homo sapiens. What I have wanted to know since I was young, and what I'm truly interested in knowing now, is at what evolutionary point did members of the Homo species begin playing the thing called music. I'm also interested in the structure of the brain. The thing that I have been wondering about the longest is why did they start to play music, or let's call it art. Along this same line, this happened quite a while ago, but I was talking to one of the keepers at the Ueno Zoo, they have gorillas, monkeys, chimpanzees, lots of other primates, and I asked him whether they do any musical activities like humans do. He told me they don't. But he did say that what they do – beating and knocking – sounds like music to the human ear. Now I don't know whether he's right or not, but the zoo keeper said they do it for different reasons. It all depends on how it's interpreted. If it has some meaning, then it's

not music. That being said, music and its related activities come to be seen as having no meaning. If only humans play music, why do we do it? Is it only human beings that do it?

Kobayashi: Do you get the feeling it's only human beings who play music?

Sakamoto: That's a good question. Recently, we've come to learn more and more about the fairly complex melodies birds remember and sing. And then there are the famous whale songs. These are also quite complex; the longer songs can last up to 30 minutes. On top of that, they differ from individual to individual. And year by year, some songs become popular and others fall from favor, now, it's not like the year's Top Ten songs, but something kind of like that. There hasn't been anywhere near enough research into this to say with any certainty. But it might mean that humans are not the only ones who make music. And then there's the well-known bee activity, ethologists interpret its significance as part of reproduction. It very well might have a meaning as well. And even if had its beginning in that meaning, they might be continuing it because it looks cool or feels good to do. Of course, we won't know the answer to that until we ask the bees, we can't communicate so we won't ever know. In the end, we interpret this all to fit with our own way of thinking. So, what is musical activity, anyway? What it all comes down to is that the dividing line is not so clear. Our brains recognize this as music; that is not music. Our lives are full of sounds that we recognize are not music. But once they are recognized, they become music. Somehow, there's a dividing line somewhere that tells us this isn't music. But there's also a continual arbitrariness to it, with historical period and cultural background bringing about rapid changes, or there's a stimulation threshold or a dividing line, but I'm not sure about that. That's what holds a lot of interest for me.

Kobayashi: But at those times, you do have a general image of what music is, don't you?

Sakamoto: I know what I think it is.

Kobayashi: Then you do have something. So if you believe those plaintive and mysterious sounds that connect the whales in the ocean might be a song, it might be a kind of communication, not simple communication, but do you want to say it's something with a different element in the construction of its sound?

Sakamoto: The thing we call communication is first and foremost, delivering a message, it's the information contained in the message, but it's like the way the bees fly, it's neither a kind of dance nor art, it just delivers a message, or it might be the meaning we put on it has something to do with reproduction. Well then, if we turn our attention back to human behavior, we can't say that human dances and songs are completely devoid of elements of communication. If that's the case, then the definition becomes blurred, or perhaps it can't be defined, we don't know where to put the dividing line. If that's true, the number of bees flying and their movements might as well be seen as art. If you do that, though, there are going to be many more people who see it differently. Be prepared for people to bring up a lot of things. Just about anything will work, for example, the reproductive cycle of salmon when they return to the place of their birth to spawn. At that time, the male digs out a nest for the female at the urging of the female who trembles and shakes above the nest at the bottom of the river. You might as well think of that as a dance, too. There are numerous examples of things like that. So really, then, what this boils down to is the classic question. What is art? What is music? But that thing that makes music music is not separate from humanity. I think in the end it's the brain that recognizes music as music.

Kobayashi: So then for you the brain is the focal point of this subject?

Sakamoto: That's right. That's what I want to know.

Kobayashi: In the beginning when I was listening to you talk about the question of when music began, my reaction was that I immediately wanted to say that rather than talk about when it started, everything started from it. I'm a metaphysician, so I make these turnabouts. When it comes down to it, I want to say that music, although it might be something other than what we recognize as music, that something like music on a colossal scale may have given birth to life itself. Just as with the phrase, "as old as gravity," both have been around for a long time. I believe the original saying used "war." Many of you might have heard that "War is as old as gravity," is one of the motifs in Mr. Sakamoto's music. I wonder if I can say "Music is as old as gravity."

(music)

Sakamoto: But I wonder if I sound overly literary.

Kobayashi: In fact, it does seem literary.

Sakamoto: I thought so.

Kobayashi: You know, but, how shall I put this...

Sakamoto: It's as if there are all these vibrations first, right?

Kobayashi: Hm... Maybe. But what kind of emotions can music evoke, of course, romantic, personal, and largely human ones such as calls from the depths of despair, but it seems to me when I listen to your music that you're peeling off the layers of emotion, but sometimes those emotions run deep. It seems to me that you could give free rein to your emotions, lead the romantic world with human emotions, let the sadness and joy take flight....

Sakamoto: I'm very careful when it comes to that.

Kobayashi: So you're peeling it off....

Sakamoto: I try not to go there very much.

Kobayashi: Do you avoid going there?

Sakamoto: I moderate it.

Kobayashi: Are you moderating it? Abstaining from it? Looks like abstinence to me.

Sakamoto: I'm moderating it.

Kobayashi: You'd like to let it all out, wouldn't you?

Sakamoto: I wonder. (laughs)

■(Chapter 2)

Kobayashi: Straight from the bottom line, what is singing to Ryuichi Sakamoto? I suspect that your abstinence from singing is a big issue to you.

Sakamoto: A sequel to that topic of the brain has always been a mind-boggling matter. Do you know of a recent book on the “Singing Neanderthal”? I suppose not. This is quite an amusing book. Were Neanderthals singing? In the genius Homo, they are the closest to, and the one before us, Homo sapiens. Physical anthropology teaches that they had a larger brain than us. And thus language must have existed. But it seems that they used the brain in an eminently different way from us. As specimen of natural history, technical and communication wise they may have had a brain far advanced than us. But there might not have been any lateral correlation or a network within the brain. This meant that they couldn’t think in the abstract and most probably could not make analogies. Without correlation, no sound will arouse emotion. In man this ability to relate is the most typical function of man in order to feel abstractly. The root of all art is founded on this. This means that without a transverse connection within the brain, Neanderthals didn’t have the capability to be inspired from the same sound as I would. That reminds me of what Dr. Kobayashi mentioned earlier that “first there was music” in this world, somewhat like the string theory. Fabulous! Whizz away to notice sound as vibrations of the world. That alone stirs amusing inspirations. What was I talking about?

Kobayashi: Well.

Sakamoto: Oh yes singing!

Kobayashi: Yes. Singing! I would like to listen to you sing.

Sakamoto: That’s right. What is music? Let’s proceed without any answer. Singing is music, is it not? Man feels an urge to sing at times. There is memory, grief and rage, all sorts of emotions that are touched by singing. Since my childhood, I’ve felt uneasy with this. Don’t know why. Singing like transparent ringing sounds of a silver bell embarrasses me. From at the age of seven or eight, I’ve been fond of Bach. Though songs are encapsulated in his works, melodies are unlike songs. I’ve composed many songs. But they are on a different level from the singing we are talking about. I can’t explain, but I feel reluctant about laying bare my feelings.

Kobayashi: If one is not a musician like myself, the route to get acquainted with ordinary music is extremely romantic, the part we just referred to. Music is not just a song but a relatively intelligent structure with a blueprint. But before that, what comes first is emotion. Given this opportunity to speak with you, for the last month, I've been checking out several of your CDs. I have spotted an extremely romantic temperament in you. Though you don't sing yourself, through songs sung by other singers, you own a channel for making it a part of you. It is not a matter of being able to view you in person but hear your existence in it. You sing through the voices of others. In you there lies a certain type of power of music which is awesome. It is like; "I don't express it but other people will."

Sakamoto: That's manipulative! (laughs)

Kobayashi: It is sly. (laughs) But if this is correct, it means you are there in the song. I find such a breeze of your presence. Am I wrong?

Sakamoto: That may be right. I envy those who *can* sing. Maybe that is why I craftily use the songs of others in that manner. You'll realize that songs do not have to be sung by a human voice. Guitars and any other thing can sing. I don't prefer singing and am embarrassed to use my voice. But it is "self-expression," an out dated term? The music you just heard includes sound edited from voices of people speaking. I intend that to be singing. Human voices are included as singing voices to a song.

(music)

Sakamoto: So the word is "animals" and naturally the stress is on "ani". Twenty or so people repeat the same word and this is incorporated in the music. Editing is done but existing varied accents from different nations remain, like the Russian or the Welsh. I believe there was one from Japan. It was recorded in New York. Though they are saying the same word, the length it took to say it was different from person to person. Minute differences were found in the intonation as well as the rhythmical sense.

Nevertheless, the downbeat, soft and strong in music was on "a" of "animal" and that coincided. So you heard what I created. It is not singing but it is as if listening to singing. It is captivating. This is not the secret magic in this piece but that is how it is composed. This procedure applies to all. Listen carefully and you'd notice the stressed

part of all the sentences. Then it sounds like a song being sung. Just a concrete example, crafty as it may be. Ha Ha!

Kobayashi: Don't make the mistake of thinking that I am accusing you of being crafty. Rather than that, singing is melody. Real music is structured. Once it is singing, a certain linearity, or string like element is borne. And it is the swing of that thread that will pull the audience to take an enchanting ride with the breeze and string along with the music. You used the term "editing" to cut off that part. If so, it is no longer just a string but space. It is then that one will enter a kind of a three dimensional space. And it is here that you will untangle and reconstruct the role of singing. Classical music exists in a space where it is perfectly dominated by various forms of chords or harmony and you are about to cut off your music from this single dimensional world, away from classic music which is solely ruled by harmonics. Are you trying to re-fabricate this space? That is how it looks to me, or it sounds that way.

Sakamoto: Uh, um.

Kobayashi: So, how has it been having had the feel of this space? I am interested in that.

Sakamoto: I'm still searching, suffering in the dark. Singing is linear. Music is on a time axis. Thus to a beginning there is an end. Also being time constrained, there is no turning back, though in my mind it does go back and forth. Actual time forces it to proceed swiftly. So music is dependent on this line. Its existence, in most instances, is incapable of backtracking. I kind of want to be freed from this curse. My determination to be liberated from this is firm.

Kobayashi: Why?

Sakamoto: I wonder why. (laughs)

Kobayashi: To me, you seem to be in search of two things; One in the world of music and the other not. I suppose they are linked somewhere. Allow me to speculate, but what you strive for is music that does not belong in a space that is regulated by rules of such western music but you are chasing space that is tolerant to freedom. Then that it is no longer a world of self-expression. Music will be created in a space with a vast number of strangers who are unfamiliar and unpredictable to you. Not being a

self-revelation, it does not have a beginning or an end and will not boomerang back to you. It is entry into a fuzzy space with no start line or a finish.

Sakamoto: In the recent European type of music, there is the composer and there is also the audience. Music starts and finishes according to a timetable. Music is well constructed and monogrammed and it is evaluated by its structure. The neatly designed music is the winner. I view that as an incredibly catastrophic curse. There is music that is quite different and liberated from this. The first example I can think of is music of the Island of Bali. European music is based on, and proceeds on a set time axis and is well designed by perspective representation, where the composer exists like the eyes of God to structuralize and design that music. Let me explain by a simplified example where there is a theme to start with. The eye of God is watching in a perspective manner to check where and when the same theme does appear. By theme I see it as one block, segment. This block is played around where it swaps places or blows up to double its size. So it is truly manipulated by the hands of God and thus His perspective. This means that then, most probably, the position of the conductor would be the ideal spot to listen to that orchestra. Here lies the epicenter of the perspective scheme of the music. This in itself is extremely amusing but at the same time it is a source of discomfort. In contrast, in the Kecak of Bali there is no ideal spot to listen to that music. An audience member like me would listen somewhere. I may be in the middle with a group of forty to fifty Kecak players. Then naturally, the sound “cha-cha-cha or cha-tu” of the player closest to me will be the loudest. That means that there is no ideal spot. It is ever decentralized. No one is at the center. Unlike the European music, it exists without any epicenter. I suspect a sense of freedom there. But then to the people of Bali, Kecak may be a stringent and harsh music because it started out as a religious ceremony in the past where if the rhythmic pattern is mistaken, a life would be taken. Maybe to them this was a cause for great discomfort. This may be an issue of cultural anthropology. An alien to a culture can find something seemingly interesting because he is an outsider. Just the fact that I have this impression is proof that I do have in myself a European mind concerning music. And I am much bothered by that. (laughs)

■(Chapter 3)

Kobayashi: Could you look at it this way? That after mastering the world of classical music which has its historical roots in Europe, that liberalization from this has lead to a

creation of a space where various fragments of diversified spaces mutually coexist. In creating this space, there is no perspective rule so it seems unrestrained and that you can do anything. But then to an artist, this freedom to do anything is obviously murderous. If everything is OK, that would be the same as you can't do anything. This would signify that unless one adopts a set of some moderation or aesthetic principle, one can't create anything. The freedom to do anything is not freedom. That is not freedom. One needs a guideline. The easiest way is to depend on classical techniques or modes of expression. In that case, you can just leave it up to that and you wouldn't have to use your mind. Now if Mr. Sakamoto could not find his own answer in doing this, then how have you fought this battle?

Sakamoto: As to whether I've been fighting a battle or not, I can't say. But just around your age (audience) at a university, I could not get it out of my mind and even thought of going to the very opposite end of self-expression. In other words I was determined to not to decide anything. I did this to see how far I could go without making decisions and still call it my composed music, a deadlock dilemma. Let me tell you what I tried. Composers usually arrange notes and determine good or bad music, but I just didn't compose any. I asked five or so people to emit some sound and after a short philosophical thinking on the relationship of the result, I made a chart. I observed correlations such as when one did this and the other did not. To tell you the truth, no one was willing to participate so there was no recital. But this chart was prepared as a musical piece, where all possible correlations were arranged and made sure that none of my aesthetic principles appeared. It is the kind of thing that can be done by anyone that comes up with similar idea. So then where is my signature (Sakamoto authenticity)? There is and yet is not. So this is as close as I got to zero in the scale of self-expression and it all started from this. Not that I am constantly thinking about it.

Kobayashi: Other than selecting relationships, are you saying that you did not use "flat," "note C" and such to compose your music and that such musical notes and signs to express your music? Instead you took a different road of creating sound which was made possible with the introduction of electronic sound and new technology. So observing the variety of sounds emitted by people in varied positions meant a search for a higher level meta key of sound but also attempted the challenge of creating not music but sound itself.

Sakamoto: Yes, that is correct. By the time I entered university I had finished learning

innumerable techniques and styles of Modern European music, what is known as Western music ever since the 20th century. It was expected of me to do something with it at university but what I wanted to do was to throw away all that I had learnt in the past. In fact I wanted to run away from it all. I wanted to do something else. That led me to study folk music (now it is referred to as ethnic music). Though I am by nationality a Japanese and thus an Asian, I have only studied Bach and western music. I was surely a novice with folk music. So I began studying. Then things began to dawn on me. For example, piano is divided into twelve octaves. But the music of our world is not all based on that. There are amazingly different distinctions. There are no rules that necessitate one octave from the other. A division of two octaves into fifteen is acceptable. In this world there are countless types of music. I went on to wish to know what is behind, the baseline in musical scale and the sonic material that Dr. Kobayashi just mentioned. Ordinarily making music accepts a tacit understanding that that you use the notes played on western musical instruments such as the piano or the violin. But there are other trillions of tones that are played by musical instruments around our world. It was in around 1970, when I just entered university that a new brand of musical instrument, the synthesizer (was extremely expensive at that time) appeared and this made it possible for me to freely arrange my own music and create my own tone color that did not exist in the world. Making an analogy with paintings, it is as if I had discovered my own color to paint. In hindsight, this is a subject necessary to split folk music and electronic music from western music.

Kobayashi: What you said right now. Does that mean that you are thinking of reconsidering and re-making your own music in Japan which is restrained by conditions of being in this one page of recent post-modern age?

Sakamoto: Um. Well, to me, the 1970s was just when I entered the university and in my life history, it was time I had supposedly completed the study of western music. The time was for me to now create something of my own, admission to university was the beginning of my graduation. And this is very coincidental but this coincided with a dead-end period for world history of western music that had thrived for hundreds of years since Bach. With 1980 right around the corner, in Japan there was nothing to learn from the west any longer. Roughly speaking, my feelings were that since by that time Japan was producing its own TV and cars, that there was no need to copy the west or there were nothing to learn or catch up on. In fact, eventually Japanese cars and TVs were considered more preferable and were exported to USA and Europe. The working

class over there started bashing Japanese cars and TVs. Such was the beginning of this decade. Art and music tend to walk ahead of the times. So I already had the awareness that I had nothing else to learn from the west. That was when I was eighteen, a self-conceited smart-aleck.