On communicating with nature through your art

Composer and pianist Masakatsu Takagi on how moving to the mountains helped him reconnect to his creative work, evolving from a visual practice into a musical practice, and the value of devouring all of the influences around you.

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As told to Ruth Saxelby, 2268 words.

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When did you first know you were going to be an artist?

I'm not sure, but maybe around 20 years old. Before, in childhood, I [took] piano lessons from age 12 to 18. So it's kind of a little bit late. Usually, if you want to be a pianist, you have to learn [at a younger] age. Like six years old. I really loved to play the piano, but I couldn't go to a music school because I lived in Kyoto—it's very far from Tokyo or the city. So I just started getting interested in design or photos. More visual things. Then I started to use a video camera, shooting, shooting, shooting around the world. Making some kind of music video for my musician friends. Or sometimes doing a video projection in a club or gallery.

As a visual artist, you've collaborated with some esteemed musicians, including Cornelius, David Sylvian, and former Yellow Magic Orchestra members Haruomi Hosono and Yukihiro Takahashi in their duo Sketch Show. What did you learn from how they approached their own musical creativity?

I really didn't care about anybody else's music at that time. Now if I can collaborate with David Sylvian or Cornelius, I want do many things with them. I want to learn many, many things. But that's the time when I [was] really young and just beginning my career. So I was very busy. To make visuals, it would take time. So much time—a five-minute video takes three months for creation. Using a computer, but one frame by one frame.

For example, with David Sylvian, I visited his house for three weeks or one month to make some collaborations together. But I changed my sleeping time and waking time, opposite to the musicians. Because at the studio they were making sounds and music, but I really have to be alone to concentrate on the video things. So learning something musically from them took time—two years, three years, five years, and then slowly it's getting inside me. Before I couldn't understand what they were doing, actually [*laughs*].

What made you transition from a visual practice into a musical practice?

It was timed with 2011. At that time, there was a big earthquake in Japan. In Miyako. A nuclear plant was broken, and it was a very big turning point. Before we believed in something like more progress or money. More like a Western lifestyle. Working hard, working hard. But at that point, many [people]—especially young people—changed their life to look a more traditional way. More down to the earth.

Even me, I wanted to change something. So I moved to the mountainside [in Hyōgo] and started to do some kinds of

agriculture, and live with many old people. Like 80, 90 years old. I kinda stopped making visual things because I thought it looked—not only my work, but many works in [the] art world—not connected to reality.

One of the changes for me is many people [started to] ask me to create music. Before I was only making video and music together by myself. But at that time, many people were changing their lives and connecting to the other direction. So for me, many opportunities were coming at the same time. Like a TV commercial wanted me to make music for them. The director Mamoru Hosoda asked me to do the soundtrack for his movie, [the first being Wolf Children in 2012]. That was the biggest change of my life because at that time [I had] only a few thousand people for my audience, but Hosoda-san's movie audience is very different, like three million people watching.

So after that movie, many, many, many people asked me to make music. Like a soundtrack. I'm slowly getting from video artist to musician.

What prompted your return to the piano, and making it part of your daily creative practice?

For me, the most interesting music is kind of a pure demo tape. Very, very fast time creation. Like, suddenly a melody or harmony is coming to my mind, and I compose and play at the same time.

But after the demo tape, usually we musicians are getting more familiar with that melody or harmony. Getting sophisticated, a little bit. The practice and the recording at the studio, and playing at the concert. The music, for me, can get somehow very static. It's getting narrow. But at the beginning, the demo tape is more fragile and flexible and very, very wide. I like that original power of the demo tape. So I always wanted to keep that demo for my work. But it's very difficult, actually, to record very pure demo because we can't know when it's coming [*laughs*].

It's been 20 years that I've been thinking about this: I want to record a demo in a very good quality. So these past ten years I've been working hard with TV commercials and earning money to buy a microphone with speakers. Then I can make my own studio—just pressing one button I can record with 20 microphones.

I'm not an engineer, so sometimes mistakes happen. Or I'm not sure which mic is good, or how I can record a good sound with only two or three microphones. But with 20 microphones around the piano I can choose later the good quality.

If I use only two or four microphones, I have to learn some kind of technique like a professional. But when using 20 microphones together, it's like… For example, if we bring up some very big stone, we need muscle, very strong muscle. But when 20 people come together and bring up the stone, it's not necessary [to be so strong]. So I use each microphone in that way. Each microphone, it [records] just a small detail—sometimes only strings, or only for the outside of the building, or near the windows.

What made you decide to leave the windows open and let nature into your recordings?

Because I'm living in the mountainside, many people want to come to my studio and see what it's like. For example, some musicians come to my house and they always record the sound of birds from the mountain using a portable recorder. But I never do that because it's always here. I can listen, every day.

So I just ask them, musicians, why do you record the birds singing? They answer because they want to bring it back to their studio and use it in a computer, mixing it together with something. But for me, it's strange—if they want to collaborate with nature they can do it here in real time. That was a big hint for me. So I open up the windows and I play the piano, and maybe the birds are listening.

When I'm playing piano very loudly or very strangely, they sing very hard. If I'm getting quiet, quiet, quiet, they sing quiet, quiet, quiet. It sometimes happens. So I want to record everything, record the relationship between nature and my music.

When do you do your recordings? First thing in the morning or in the evening?

When I'm recording, I also record the time and the date, and I check later. I noticed nine o'clock in the morning and four or five o'clock in the afternoon. Because at that time birds and things are singing. Other times it is very quiet, actually. Or airplanes makes sounds in between.

So I don't know. I've not decided which time I should play, but naturally the time schedule is almost always the same.

If you wake up in a bad mood, do you skip doing anything creative that day, or do you try and get in the right frame of mind?

I want to compose every day if possible. But you know, it [doesn't] happen every day. So I prepare two options. One is when the creativity's coming, I use every minute for that creation. But if nothing's coming to me, I'm doing my busy things, like editing, like making video.

With your *Marginalia* recordings, you're working in an unedited way, but your visual work involves lots of editing. Have your feelings towards editing changed since you've adopted the demo approach to your music?

Actually, little by little, I prefer not to edit anything. Before, when I was making visual things, I preferred to edit and make something different from the reality. Now I prefer to do no editing, no overdubbing. As much as possible I want to be very realistic. Because nowadays, we can do many, many things with a computer. Editing reality, the past and the future and the present. Everything is mixing up with computers.

But here I noticed, with the mountain, once I open up the window there is a reality. Birds are singing, and the water is in the river, and the wind is coming. Everything is just moving, directing each other. But close the window, it's like a human world. The computer is… inside, it's very wide. Like, now we are connecting with each other from very far away. But it's kind of a closed world. Like, an inside brain.

So it's very different from opening the window. Nowadays I want to make more exposure to that, to outside of myself. I'm kind of getting bored with myself [*laughs*].

What's the most important thing you've learned about yourself with regards to your creativity over the years?

I'm not sure, but I think the most important thing is [exploring a] relationship with something or somebody. For example, nowadays people are using the iPhone or a smartphone to take pictures. Many, many pictures are always around us. But I noticed most of the photos are just like a commercial photo. How can I say? It's like… no relationship appears. But when a mother is taking a daughter's photo, when we see that photo, we can feel the relationship between the mother and the daughter without words. Like, maybe in the daughter's eyes or smiling face or something.

Now with computers, we use many, many lies. But I think I prefer the original creation. From the very ancient time of the human being, [life involved] collaboration with something, or communicating with something. For example, we can talk with birds or with the water. We can communicate with them if we make sounds or if we sing or if we dance.

So for me, we should call art [a kind of] relationship. It's about communicating with something else. Maybe it's okay with a human being, with each other. But sometimes we can communicate with a non-human being. So I'm very interested in that point. I really love many, many traditional things. Traditional people trying to make communication with many, many natures. I want to learn more about living that way.

With *Marginalia*, first I opened the window. So sound was coming in, for example, insects singing. Like, "Chi, chi, chi. Chi-chi-chi." It's like a metronome but the timing was very, very flexible. It's not exact time, like "Chi, chi. Chi-chi, chi. Chi, chi-chi." It's very complex. So I listen very carefully with their singing and sing

back together with their rhythm.

My brain is very connected to the insects or birds. If I only care about myself and play as I like, *Oh, today I want to play very joyful rhythmic things*, and play really loudly, [the] birds or insects stop their singing because they feel their song is not reaching me. They can feel that. But if I listen very carefully to their singing and play that singing back, they become happier.

What does success mean to you?

Every time I compose some music I learn something new. I notice some new things from my composition, after I compose it. Sometimes I notice my creation or my profession is not important so much for my life. But very important to my life is learning something. It's like, you know, when you eat something and—I don't know in English—but if we cannot put out the food from the stomach, we feel very bad, like very heavy. So creation for me, it's like that.

I'm always eating. Eating, eating, eating, from watching mountains or walking around or doing agriculture. I'm kind of like, eating, eating, eating experience. But I'm getting a full stomach. I want to get [those experiences] out.

Masakatsu Takagi recommends:

Painting - Paul Klee's angel drawings. Such simple lines, full of spirit. And Japanese painter Morikazu Kumagai. I admire his style for staying all day in his garden and spend[ing his] life with insects and plants.

Movie - *L'Odeur de la papaye verte* (*The Scent of Green Papaya*). Beautiful music, atmosphere, and garden in Vietnam. Italian film director Alice Rohrwacher's movie *The Wonders*. Japanese movie *Kaze no naka no kodomo* (*Children in the Wind*) by Hiroshi Shimizu.

Music - Toru Takemitsu. Full of colors, magic of harmony. I like his soundtrack for *Dodes'ka-den*, directed by Akira Kurosawa.

Book - *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda. I learned about wholeness from his writings. *Ayatori no ki* by Michiko Ishimure. I admire all her works.

Game - In childhood, I loved to play Nintendo games, especially *Mother* (aka *EarthBound*) by Shigesato Itoi. Texts, graphic, music—everything was perfect for me. This game was inspired lots from American culture, like the comic *Peanuts*, which is my favorite comic too.

Name
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Vocation
Composer, Pianist, Visual Artist