

“Places for Hearing” in the City of Edo in 19th Century Japan: A Case Study of an Insect Listening Party on Dokan-Hill

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ABSTRACT

In Japan, the introduction of the soundscape concept since the late 1980s has shed new light on various pre-westernized practices in the context of soundscape ecology. For example, in Edo City (present-day Tokyo) in 19th century Japan, there were locations known as "places for Hearing". Hiroshige's ukiyoe, colour print of everyday life in the Edo period, "Insect Listening Party on Dokan-Hill" illustrates the situation at that time. We can use this print as "ear witnesses" to understand that an urban sensibility that interacted with the natural world existed in Edo period, and that there was a particular land-based aesthetics that transcended modern Western art. Through these considerations, I am trying to make a new framework for our future and creative activity that goes beyond conventional musicking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "soundscape" can be understood as the act of actually feeling the world (environment in a broad sense), grasping its contents, and appreciating it in various ways, using the world of sound as a clue. This would allow us to re-discover such practices and customs as parties or gatherings at specific places for insect listening as an aural culture unique to Japan (pre-Schafer notion of soundscape), which until our acquisition of that concept has tended to be forgotten due to the lack of opportunities to discuss it.

Christopher Small identified the concert hall as a “place for hearing” in his *Musicking* (1998) [1]. On the other hand, in the case of an insect-listening party in Edo City in 19th century Japan, the appropriate place of hearing is the land where the insects can live in its ecosystem.

While both the place for insect-listening party and the concert hall have their own social environment, the former is mainly based on its own local ecosystem and the latter functions in isolation from its surrounding ecosystem. This decisive difference in the relation to the land will help us to understand and acquire an expanded concept or form of our future musical activity.

2. SOUNDSCAPE OF INSECT LISTENING

Since ancient times in Japan, there has been a rich relationship between people and insects through the world of sound. For example, there is a poem about the sound of insects in Japan's oldest anthology of poetry, Manyoshu, which includes the following poem:

On a bright moonlight night, a cricket is singing in this garden, where the white dew as if my heart is supple and flexing. Hearing the singing, my heart also becomes still. [2]

In the Heian period (794-1185), there are various records of aristocrats enjoying listening to the sound of insects. [3] Several centuries down the ages, in the Edo period (1603-1867), insect listening came to be practiced by ordinary people, and various forms of insect listening have been preserved along with descriptions of insect cages [fig.1] and insect peddlers. It is important to note here that in the city of Edo, certain places were widely regarded by people specifically as places to enjoy the sound of insects.



Figure 1. A Bamboo Insect Cages (author's collection)

In *Tohto Saijiki* (1838), which introduces annual events in chronological order as the authors themselves walked around the city, in the section of "From the End of Summer and the Beginning of Autumn", such locations as the East bank of Sumida River, Oji, Dokan-Hill, Asukayama, Mikawashima, Ochanomizu, Hiroo-no-hara, Sekiguchi, Negishi, Asakusa paddy field are listed as “Places for

Hearing Insects” together with the comment that “Dokan-Hill has many pine beetles and Asukayama has many bell ringers”. [4]. These major sites are shown in the following map of Edo at that time [fig.2], which shows that all of these places were located on the boundaries between the city of Edo and its surrounding areas. [5]



Figure 2. Major Sites for Insect Listening and the the Scope of the Edo Town (Prepared by the author by adopting the “black inked line” boundary explained in footnote 5.)

3. PICTURES AS EARWITNESS

Of these, the most popular was Dokan-Hill, that is the highest point of the land leading from present-day Nishi-nippori to the rice paddies. It was a popular recreation area for the citizens of Edo with a great view and explained as follows:

There are many medicinal herbs in this area, and people who gather medicines always come here. Especially in autumn, pine insects and bell ringers make exquisite sounds. Therefore, courtesans and persons of elegance and refinement all come here to recite poems in the winds and sing songs under the moon, appreciating the sound of the insects. [6]

Also, the following illustration [fig.3] is listed on the next pages [7]. Here, a spacious landscape is depicted, from the grass and trees in the near distance to the fields stretching to the trees in the distance, but below I will examine the contents of the illustration with a focus on people as its constituent elements. In the lower left, two women and a child are depicted. One of the women is holding a fan and the child is holding an insect cage. They are enjoying the cool of the evening, catching insects and trying to enjoy the remnants of this land even after their returning home. On the other hand, in the upper right corner, there are three men sitting on a small hill covered with autumn grasses on a mat. Judging from their attire, they seem to be townsmen.



Figure 3. Insect Listening Party on Dokan-Hill by Settan Hasegawa in Edo Meisho Zue

One of the men, who looks like a master of haiku or haikai, is running a brush on a strip of paper, while one is lying down with a fan in his hand, and the other is looking into the distance with a sake cup in his hand. The explanatory text lists the names of various chirping insects. Furthermore, "Ariake no Tsuki" written at the end of the explanatory text means the moon that is visible even after dawn. This means they may have spent a slow day until dawn. Other ukiyoes, including the one by Hiroshige [fig.4], were created based on this illustration [8].



Figure 4. Insect Listening Party on Dokan-Hill by Hiroshige Utatagawa (author's collection)

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The term soundscape is defined by Schafer and WSP as follows:

An environment of sound (sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment. [9]

Focusing on the word "relationship" in the definition above, I would like to consider the relationship between the people who gathered there and the sound of insects. Through our discussion so far, we can see that the people

of Edo did not go to Dokan-Hill for doing "environmental educational programs" but for seeking "aesthetic relationships in their daily life". I would say that they visited this place for the act of incorporating themselves into the relationship with the local ecosystem, earth rhythms and the universe.

Relating back to Schafer in the second chapter, "The Sounds of Life" in *The Tuning of the World* (1977) [10], they basically remain "within the scope of scientific or entomological descriptions" with some exceptions. On the other hand, the insect listening party is only possible in a living ecosystem, forming relationship between the observers, that is listeners, and the landscape of Dokan-Hill. No matter how much one likes insects, there is a relationship here that does not allow them to be made into specimens. Just as when a child tries to bring an insect home, it is important to keep it alive. When we say "alive," we are referring to the entire ecosystem, including the living insects, and the entire land, including plants, trees, etc. When we say that the relationship with the place is important, which means that not only the sound but also the atmosphere and presence of the land are important. This leads us to understand that, in the insect listening party that has been discussed in this paper, the technique of playing back recorded insect sounds through speakers does not make sense with this concept and aim.

5. CONCLUSION AND ISSUES

Through all of the above, it is clear that the concept of soundscape leads us to think about how people in different times and regions of the world relate to their environment through the world of sound, and what kind of sounds they hear and what kind of information they obtain from them. My remaining task is to continue these analytical considerations and draw differences between the two cultural activities. While the traditional concept of music listening as an aesthetic activity is based on the act of composition and concert-based consumption, our future task is to examine how the idea of soundscape can release the concept of music from its traditional framework, and lead to the creation of a new format for an old type of musicking, based not on capitalist production but on listening to our lands and planet.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] C. Small, *Musicking*, Wesleyan University Press, 1998, pp.19-29.
- [2] Prince Yuhara, Manyoshu, vol.8, no. 1552 (English translation by Keiko Torigoe)
- [3] See <https://art-tags.net/manyo/animal/kohorogi.html>
- [4] G. Saito, Edition proofread and annotated by Haruhiko Asakura: *Tohto Saijiki* Volume 2 of 3, p.196, Heibonsya, Wide edition Toyo Bunko No.177, 2003 (*Tohto Saijiki* was originally published in 1838 in 5 volumes.)
- [5] For many years, there was no unified view on the boundaries and extent of the city of Edo, as it continued to develop and expand since 1590. The Shogunate was asked to present a unified view, and in 1818 it produced a map which shows the scope of Edo City by two lines, in red and black. Of the two lines used on that map, "the black boundary line" was adopted to draw Figure 3.
- [6] I. Natsuo and S. Kenichi, New and Revised Edition: *Edo Meisho Zue*, (originally published by 20 volumes 1834-1836) Chikuma Gakugei Bunko, vol.5, 1996, p.117.
- [7] Ibid. pp.118-119.
- [8] All illustrations in *Edo Meisho Zue* (Edo Famous Places) were drawn by a late Edo period painter, Settan Hasegawa (1778-1843). Many ukiyoe artists, including Hiroshige Utagawa (1797-1858), created their works based on the illustrations by Settan in *Edo Meisho Zue*.
- [9] B. Truax, ed., *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, A.R.C. Publications, Vancouver, 1978, p.126
- [10] R. M. Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1977, pp.34-36