

CONTINUUM Op.18 (1982)

by Hiroaki Zakoji

Throughout history there have been creative artists who have been, if not denigrated, totally overlooked by the contemporary establishment. Hiroaki Zakoji is one of these. He was an incredibly fine composer, far ahead of his time, with a magnificence of expression and experience to portray, yet barely recognised in his own land at the time of his greatest work although he did attain some recognition abroad.

Music is a difficult art form to talk about. If one simply analyses the academic processes then we are liable to overlook the emotional and humanistic elements it contains. As I have said many times, music is music is music (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein). Basically, it is a dialectic based on the development of sound, that is musical elements, and any other reaction is purely subjective or related to onomatopoeic elements (e.g. raindrops), stylistic comparisons (e.g. marches), texts or titular directives (e.g., *in memoriam*). Yet it is subjective reactions that one reckons on in response to a musical work, the general public being untutored in the academic processes of the construction of musical material, but a large number having a very perceptive subjective reaction to a musical work. One counts on that for correspondence between artist and listener.

This certainly applies to so much of Zakoji's work. He was an exceptionally fine composer who demonstrated the Japanese concept of the *Tatemae* and *Honne* (outside and inside) of human personality to an exceptional degree. At the same time he was capable of delightfully witty and immediately acceptable work, such as his tribute to Mozart in *Piano Piece 3*. Zakoji, outwardly, was an 'ebullient, friendly, enthusiastic, totally loveable person. Yet, as this work shows, he had his overwhelming doubts and reservations about life on this planet, torrent of emotion that he could not express in his attitude to the outside world.

This work is beyond criticism as a creative masterpiece. It is incredible to come from one so young, a guy in his mid-twenties. It has an essentially avant-garde perspective and yet adheres to all the principles of traditional, and therefore essential, music composition. That is the development of the material, melody, harmony, rhythm, thus to explore all the implications of the basic material. In this case he starts off with a sustained single note, but whereas a "minimalist" would hold on to the note for an entire work ("minimalism" had hardly been invented at the time), Zakoji looks at this single component, initially suggesting the concept of *Continuum*, and then finds properties within it that absorb the listener. Throughout the work he continually comes back to this one note, yet each time finds further implications that make for continual creative development. It would be pointless to criticise the work from an academic point of view, because, academically it is beyond criticism. It is superbly constructed according to time-honoured principles (unlike so many contemporary, so-called, compositions) and at the same time has tremendous emotional impact. There are moments of despair, moments of frustration and fury, moments of light and hope that are undeniable, sunshine.

Throughout the work one is constantly wrapped up in his emotional and intellectual conflicts, the sort of conflicts suffered by so many humanists over the centuries - why is the human race in such a destructive state, what is there ahead but disaster? Then, there are the optimistic contradictions – what can I do to put it right, is there any answer to this problem? This is a heart-rending work coming from such an effusive and out-going young man which, as I say, it is pointless to analyse from a purely academic point of view because the compositional processes are meticulously observed in a way that so many, lesser, contemporary composers ignore.

It is even more remarkable that this should have come from such a young man. His death at the age of twenty-nine and a few days is a tragedy that can never be accepted. His going has robbed the world of an exceptional human being who was also a magnificent composer and we can only hope for some sort of compensation by the recognition and performance of his work.

"Continuum" is a masterpiece of the twentieth century.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Stevens".

[James Stevens](#)
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