Interview with Christophe Charles, Part 2

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by

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EKC: And then you came to Japan, I guess in 1988 or around there?

In the first part of the interview we were talking about the European Tour of 1992. I told you I had met Kosugi Takehisa in France in 1978, and went often to see him playing in Paris, solo, in groups or with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The first concert I did in Japan was with him, when I got a grant to study at Nagoya University in 1987-1988. In Nagoya I met artist and lawyer Mizukami Jun, who introduced me to a strange gallery called Garan-ya. The floor of the gallery was directly on the ground and covered with gravel. I did once or twice performances there. Mizukami took me to other galleries in Nagoya, and we've had several occasions to perform. I also had been in contact with Gallery Naitô, where I did several duo and solo exhibitions with concerts, from 1988 to 1992. I invited Mukai Chie and Okazaki Toyohiro on one of these occasions. Okazaki had a group called "Dislocation" and was running a label called "Steeple and Globe". He was kind to release a cassette tape of my music ("Sampler", 1990).

When I was living in Nagoya I used to go to Tokyo every month to see films and video screenings, and meet people. I was in contact with a group of performance artists, Takei Yoshimichi, Shimoda Seiji, Takeda Kenichi, Hazuki Masato, and others. Chino Shûichi had been in the 1980s a member of Takeda's group "A Musik", and they had political content in their songs. There was a connection with anti-establishment, anti-government activities. Shimoda, a

performer and poet, told me that he had been arrested because he had published magazines criticizing right-wing movements.

To thank all these people who had helped me during the years 1988-1992, and because their music and art was almost unknown in Europe, I decided to organize a tour with them in Europe in autumn 1992. “Freunde Guter Musik” in Berlin and “Apollohuis” in Eindhoven, “Logos” in Ghent responded quite rapidly to my proposal, and we organized a series of concerts, each time three to five days of concerts in each city. “Japanoise”, at the time, was largely unknown. Most of the musicians, including Haino [Keiji], had almost never performed in Europe or America. Now, there is more interest, because there is a kind of Japanese cultural boom, especially around the so-called “sub-culture” of manga, fashion and pop music. However in the 1980s and beginning in the 1990s there was almost no information.

In France my main contact was Michel Redolfi. At the time he was (from 1986 to 1998) the director of the CIRM (Centre International de Recherche Musicale) in Nice. The CIRM still has an electronic music studio and organizes the yearly festival MANCA (Musiques Actuelles Nice Côte d’Azur). Redolfi had lived in California in the 1970s, and composed there music for swimming pools, which he called “Subaquatic Music” or “Underwater Music”. He was more open to the rest of the world than the other French composers, and he was not only into “academic” electronic music, but also friends with Terry Riley, Jon Hassell, Brian Eno, and other eclectic music composers. He is still working on underwater music, and recently made concerts to be heard in the sea, near the beaches of Nice and Monaco.

In 1992 when I contacted him about the European Tour, Redolfi invited us immediately to his MANCA of November 1992, and I had the opportunity to go there with Kazakura Shô, Merzbow, Haino Keiji, Shimoda Seiji, Mukai Chie and others. We did four days of concerts in and around the MAMAC (Musée d’art moderne et d’art contemporain) of Nice.

In the MAMAC auditorium, I played my piece “Next Point”, which I had developed during the “World Symposium of Environmental Art” on Awaji Island in October and during the tour in Berlin and Eindhoven. In Nice, Terry Riley was sitting just next to me at the Auditorium of MAMAC. I think he enjoyed it. The piece was designed for four channels, and I put four speakers around the audience, me being in the center of the audience, as I usually do. I recorded that piece and published it as is on the CD that was released by gallery HAM in Nagoya. It’s a twenty-minute piece, and it still sounds quite good.

EKC: So these younger artists like [Hatakeyama] Chihei, how did they find out who you are? Had they seen your performances before?

In the 1990s I was doing performances every week, so I suppose that people like Hatakeyama Chihei or Hirama Shôta came to see some of those concerts. The world of alternative electronic music is a little world. However there are more and more people whom I don't know.

I had the privilege to be invited by all kinds of artists. Mukai Chie organized a lot of concerts with dancers and noise musicians. Although Chino Shûichi now lives in Berlin, she is now putting again the *Next Point* quartet with herself (er-hu, piano, voice and dance), Chino (keyboards), Shôji Masaharu (saxophone and other instruments) and myself (computer). Furudate Tetsuo invited me often to play or do readings on his CDs and concerts. Through him I got in contact with the band "Kuroyuri Shimai", with whom I did a few gigs during the years 1994-97 (Arima Sumihisa was a member).

I was also in contact with dance and performance artists: Ishii Mitsutaka, Kazakura Shô, Namerikawa Gôro (founding member of Sankai Juku), Takei Yoshimichi, Ishikawa Fukurow, Salvanilla, JOU, and many others. The list is quite long.

From the end of the 1990s, Sasaki Atsushi, a writer who has published many articles and books on new music, organized electronic music concerts series and invited musicians from abroad. The first big concert I participated in was "Experimental Express" in 1998, with Carsten Nicolai, Ikeda Ryoji, Thomas Köner and Oval. From then on I took part in many electronica events. Sasaki is running the CD label "Headz" as well as a magazine called "Faderbyheadz." He has introduced a lot of electronic music and "avant-rock" artists to the Japanese audience.

In the beginning of the 2000s, Hanno Yoshihiro, a musician and movie director, was working with Sakamoto Ryûichi. Sakamoto is well known as the founding member of Yellow Magic Orchestra and the composer of many famous movie soundtracks, but he has also been active as an electronic musician and has made duo projects with Carsten Nicolai, Christian Fennesz, Christian Willits and others. In 2003, Sakamoto published a series of magazines called "unfinished", with texts, drawings and CDs. The first CD was made in collaboration with Hanno under the name "hoon". I participated in a remix project of the music of "hoon" for the second CD.

In 2006, I went to Spain with Hanno and Shibuya Keiichirô. Shibuya has become famous with his opera for "Vocaloid" (voice synthesizer), presented in Paris in 2013. I first met him in 2005 and he introduced me to people at Sony, who were working on experimental audio-visual projects. After Spain, Shibuya invited me to participate in his "Musimissile" concert at YCAM in Yamaguchi in 2006. While he would play classic music pieces on a grand piano (Beethoven, Bach, Cage, Satie, and his own compositions), we (his wife Maria, his collaborator Evala, and myself) would play freely electronic noises together with the piano pieces. It worked quite well,

surprisingly. These are only a few examples of the many rewarding collaborative works I did in Japan.

EKC: You were also doing some collaborations with Microstoria and Oval.

Markus Popp (Oval) came to see our shows in Berlin in 1992, when we toured in Europe with Merzbow, Haino Keiji, Yoshizawa Motoharu, Ishii Mitsutaka, Kazakura Shô, Chino Shûichi, Fujieda Mamoru, Kakiage Nahoko & Sagara Nami, Takeda Ken-ichi, Hamada Gôji, Takei Yoshimichi and others. In 1993, my first solo CD had been published by Gallery Ham in Nagoya, and was sent to Mille Plateaux, a record label from Frankfurt, Germany, specializing in new electronic music, which released music from Alec Empire, Oval, and other German techno-electronica artists. Mille Plateaux invited me to do pieces for several compilations ("In Memoriam Gilles Deleuze", "Modulation & Transformation", etc.) and a solo album ("Undirected 1986-1996"). If I remember well, Achim Szepanski, the director of Mille Plateaux, suggested to release a collaboration between me and Oval / Markus Popp. We exchanged sound files, and Markus Popp released the CD "dok" in 1997, not from Mille Plateaux for some reason, but from Thrill Jockey, a label from Chicago. I provided the sound files and did the graphic work with Endô Ritsuko. My compositions using Oval's sounds were released as "undirected / dok" by Mille Plateaux / Ritornell in 1998. Markus came many times to Japan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and we did then several concerts together, often organized by Headz. I did also a remix of Microstoria's music ("Reprovisers", 1997), and played in Paris one concert together with Oval and Microstoria in 1998—Microstoria was the combination of Markus Popp and Jan St. Werner from "Mouse on Mars".

EKC: Do you still keep in touch with other artists in France or Germany or Europe?

I have a good friend, Mark Fell, who was also on Mille Plateaux in the 1990s with his duo "snd" together with Matt Steel. Mark Fell invited me many times to do radio projects, installations, and concerts. He suggested to Tony Myatt, then a professor at the University of York (UK), to invite me for a composer residency. I went there just after my father died in 2008. I had gathered many sound files from recent concerts and sounds from my father just before he died. Then, during two weeks, I composed a vast forty-minute symphonic piece, as an homage to my father and also to Henning Christiansen, the Danish composer who was my mentor from 1985. Henning died as well in 2008. Afterwards, I called the composition HCDC (which stands for "Henning-Christiansen-Daniel-Charles"). Eero Tarasti, a Finnish musicologist, wrote a beautiful text about it (see my website: http://home.att.ne.jp/grape/charles/dc/hcdc.html).

EKC: I read some of the essays you were writing and I also have one CD of yours, *Undirected 1992-2002*, so I was reading that too. And it seems like a common theme in what you write is this idea of "undirected" music. How do you view your music?

Like in Henning Christiansen's music, there is often a main concept, an idea, a story, a myth, which becomes the base. Sometimes it comes before the conception, sometimes it comes after, once there are some materials together; after that the form appears. For example, Eero Tarasti relates my symphony *HDCD* to a Finnish myth of the creation of the Earth. It is perfectly okay, even if I hadn't thought about it, or even I didn't know about it. We cannot be aware of all the elements, which constitute the music we produce. The music goes far beyond what we can formulate with words. It is related to a common bottom in the unconscious, and we have no control over it. I think it is absolutely normal that people hear things, which were not intended by the composer when he composed the music, because the composer is not able to grasp everything s/he uses. The music goes far beyond anybody's ideas or even ability to listen. The sounds, which are produced during a performance, become independent from the primary idea of the composition. The primary idea is just a trigger.

For me, "undirected" is the idea of not being / not having / not wanting a fixed music, which would be directed by the composer or the musician who performs it. There are many elements, which you can choose yourself, or you can let somebody else, or the computer choose them. In my music, the order of appearance of the sounds can be changed without altering the quality of the music. I have ideas, which influence the way I choose my material, but then I can really put those materials in any order. Sometimes, of course, I recognize I have my own taste and have to make decisions. During the performance or the mix, I decide that this sound should be a little higher in volume, or come a little earlier or be maybe longer. So I can decide, of course, things like that, but it's flexible.

You cannot just decide it has to be like this and not like this, there are always so many possibilities. The "undirected" idea is to say: "I'm not a director, a *chef d'orchestre*", because I don't like this kind of control or domination. Everybody should be free to act as s/he likes; the sounds also should be free, and the time structure too.

We don't have to be dramatic. When it becomes "dramatic", the music becomes ridiculous. I am trying always to keep a distance with what I am doing, and trying not to be dramatic, to keep some humor, or detachment. There are many musical ideas, which we don't need. But many people still use them. We could be much more free. There are many approaches. I'm still fond of *The Velvet Underground* or *Led Zeppelin*, but sometimes I feel there are too many fixed things, which are not interesting to me. These are customs or habits, rules or agreements, which no one

even questions. It's a kind of habit to have this kind of idea in the music. In that sense rock and jazz can be really conservative. So sometimes it's okay, but not all the time. Sometimes we could get rid of that.

And I like not to repeat the same sounds, or the same phrases of sounds, although I often use the same material, which is contradictory in a way, but I believe that the sounds I choose are different every time I use them. The idea of repetition would anyway need to be discussed much more. Sometimes it's interesting and necessary, and fits the situation to be really minimal, and to have sounds, which go on and on. We call them drones, or hums. Eventually you understand something, after a while, which you could not understand during the five first seconds. You might need five minutes, or ten, or more, to understand, with your brain or with your body, what the music is aiming at.

The music of German group Can for example is somehow repetitive, but has also many variations. It fits to a rhythm, sustained by the drummer of genius Jaki Liebezeit, and they keep it for a long time. I like to be inside Can's groove. In terms of combination of timbres, the construction of the rhythms, it's really fantastic, very colorful. That's the kind of things I keep in mind when I'm playing. I've heard Liebezeit mentioning a story: he was playing complex rhythm jazz in the 1960s, and one day, one guy told him: "you have to be monotonous", so he tried to be monotonous, which became somehow the motto of his style: repeating monotonously complex rhythms. But a human is not a computer - event if Liebezeit is sometimes called a "human computer". A human always makes little mistakes, or variations, which are in fact at the heart of his music. If you play Steve Reich music on a computer, it will be insipid. That music needs tiny variations of rhythms, of attacks, of intervals. For me pure metronomic music is just a waste of time.

EKC: Did you also write something about, for you, the music really being more about the live performance than recording?

When composing, which in my case means mixing and recording, I like to be outside or to leave the windows open. It is important for me to get an unknown, unpredictable input from the outside world. In a concert situation the input can also come from the noise of the audience. I welcome little troubles with the sound equipment or with the computer, I believe these are "happy accidents". There are many accidents that one wouldn't think about, and that's really exciting to have things that are coming from the outside, because you have to deal with that, with the situation. It is the occasion to find new things. It's a way of collaborating with the environment. If you have everything planned, well, that's okay, but I prefer to have surprises. For example playing

outside when it rains, I've had the opportunity several times—but then the danger is that you listen too much to the rain. So you have to find a sense of balance.

4'33" [by John Cage] is a wonderful basic piece, from where I always begin. It's the best piece ever, because it is about listening and listening to sound is the absolute basis of all music activities, but sometimes we have to play something. However, we have to think about what we can do, without spoiling what is already here.

EKC: Yes, so, for me growing up in America, my impression of the Japanese underground music scene was that it was all noise music; I think Merzbow was one of the first names that I started hearing a lot about when I was in college in the late '80s, so then it seemed like everything I heard coming from Japan was very much oriented towards noise, like noise music. Some examples are Merzbow and I'm trying to remember others . . . , you mentioned another one, C.C.C.C. But in America, I think my entrance into this kind of music, I'm not sure what to call it still, was a number of British bands, British groups like Zoviet France, then Robin Storey started his solo project, Rapoon. It was ambient industrial music, like Throbbing Gristle, Nocturnal Emissions, and different groups like that. And then, I only had like a slight knowledge of anything coming from Japan. Like I said, Merzbow was the thing that I always heard the most about, but I think somewhere in the back of my mind I always associated this kind of underground Japanese music as noise music.

We already talked about how the Japanese, at least the noise music underground seems to be very collaborative. Are there any other ways that you would characterize the noise music underground, I guess, in terms of a philosophy or, I'm not sure, an ideology?

It's difficult to talk about "noise" in general, we should choose one artist, as they all have different concerns. What I can say is that you can listen to anything as a kind of silence, even the loudest environment. I have played in incredibly loud and noisy environments, for example fifty people screaming all around, or fifteen guys all playing their computer at the same time out of a big PA system with big loudspeakers. You are there, and you try your sound. It comes through, or not, and you try again, and enjoy having the surprise of eventually hearing your sound coming out of the magma. Even in such an environment, I feel there is a lot of respect between people when they are playing together. In everyday life, it's also like this. There are lots of rules in Japan. You don't want to offend anyone; I try not to.

Speaking about the origins, there is in Japan a tradition of listening to the tiny sounds of the

natural environment of the gardens, enhanced with environmental sound devices such as *suikinkutsu* and *shishiodoshi*, but there is also for some reason an interest in extreme loudness. I am not a specialist, but before "noise music", there was jazz, and the jazz "*kissa*," ["*kissaten*" = Japanese coffee shop, the jazz café]. There were a lot of them, not only in Tokyo, and the music was really loud. People who experienced this kind of venue often told me there were enormous speakers and the music was played extremely loud, to the point they couldn't hear each other talking. In Berlin, also, I was told that the music played in the 1980s in bars and clubs was incredibly loud. In Japan, I imagine it might have been like that from the 1960s.

There are records of concerts by Miles Davis's electric band in the 1970s in Japan. When listening to them now, I imagine that some of the textures, which combined electric instruments and heavy percussion, would sound quite noisy. I guess that this kind of electric jazz, together with "free jazz", was quite important in the development of electronic and noise music in Japan.

I heard that jazz guitarist Takayanagi Masayuki, who had many students like Ôtomo Yoshihide, would also play very loud. Ôtomo has done quite a lot of noise music after he studied with Takayanagi. Ôtani Yasuhiro, who was another student of Takayanagi, told me surprisingly that they had to follow strictly a book with scales, exercises and jazz solo transcriptions, practice with a pick and go through the whole book before being allowed to do any live act. Once the students had practiced everything in the book, they would be free to play in gigs and do what they like, but not during the time they were Takayanagi's students. Then we can understand why Ôtomo dropped out. But I have not talked with him about that yet. I will ask him next time I meet him. I believe Ôtomo listened a lot to Derek Bailey, the English guitarist who plays mostly non-melodic music with harmonics. Bailey was quite popular in Japan.

So I can see the link between jazz and "free music", with noise music. But I never discussed with Japanese musicians about the influence of industrial music, that is, Throbbing Gristle and the like—in fact I don't know so much about it. Every musician has his/her own references. In the beginning of the 1990s, Haino Keiji had asked me to bring back from Europe some medieval troubadour music. At home he has dozens of instruments, especially string instruments: lutes, etc. In 1994, when I was involved in the organization of the Tokyo Summer Festival, Haino had asked me for tickets when musicians from Vietnam came to play in Tokyo with Vietnamese one-string lutes. He even took off his sunglasses to see better the instruments!

I also believe that hard rock, heavy metal, and all that came after: thrash metal and so on, have also had some impact on the so-called "noise music". When you go to a concert nowadays, everything is so loud that it is sometimes no longer possible to distinguish between lead and bass guitars, bass drums and vocals: a whole area of sound frequencies becomes mixed up, depending

probably also from where you are in the hall. And it is so loud that you have to get earplugs anyway. But it was probably already like that in the sixties, I remember some interviews by Keith Richards where he says the musicians on stage could not even hear what they were playing because of the crowd of young girls continuously screaming.

EKC: So you said you had heard some of this stuff when you were still in France?

In France, we actually got lots of jazz records from Japan. Many jazz stars like Miles Davis or Jaco Pastorius would do concerts in Japan, which were recorded and sold in Europe as "Japan Imports". I would find sometimes rare and unknown Japanese jazz. I was aware of percussionist Yamashita Tsutomu (known as Stomu Yamashita, I had his "Red Buddha" LP), pianists Yamashita Yôsuke and Kako Takashi, who seemed to hit, more than play, the piano. Maybe through Kosugi I had heard of Abe Kaoru, an extreme and "abrasive" saxophonist, whose music has been obviously influenced by the extremely fast phrases of John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, where individual pitches are no more recognizable; it is more like a screaming voice. At the time I was also listening to a lot of jazz fusion groups, and therefore knew about the Japanese band Casiopea and virtuoso guitarist Watanabe Kazumi—I was told Watanabe was also a student of Takayanagi Masayuki, but this has to be confirmed.

Except for the concerts of Kosugi Takehisa, and traditional music concerts, Gagaku Court Music or Biwa music, I didn't hear much Japanese music in Paris in the 1980s.

However there was quite a variety of music that we could listen to in Paris: apart from rock, jazz and classical music concerts of all calibers (I remember going to big venues to listen to Miles Davis, Pat Metheny, Eberhard Weber, Ornette Coleman with extraordinaire bass player Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and many others), there were also contemporary music concerts, and what was most exciting to me in the 1980s was the Festival d'Automne, where minimal music, "post-modern" music as well as world music and dance were widely represented. I remember Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Gavin Bryars, Jon Gibson, etc. I saw many times the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and other American companies, and also the butô dance group Sankai Juku among others.

I remember there was in the 1980s a very lively live house in Paris, called Le Dunois, where the alternative and free music scene often performed. There I saw Steve Lacy, Phil Minton, Fred Frith, and many masters of improvised music.

However, from the beginning of the 1980s, I became more and more interested in recorded soundscapes and recorded sound mixed together, making collages with a wider field of timbres. With saxophone you can get a lot of sounds, but it's still a saxophone. Guitar is the same; you can

put a lot of effects, but it's still a guitar. Synthesizer was more satisfying because you have a broader palette. But with all the sound of the environment, it's even wider.

EKC: So do you use instruments very much these days?

Before having samplers and computers, I was playing guitar and synthesizers in my teens. After my guitars were stolen in 1984, I switched to electronic music and I almost didn't play any "traditional" instrument until the 2000s. It is also because, as already stated, I was more interested in having more sounds and timbers than those of a single traditional music instrument. However, I decided to buy a decent guitar in the 2000s, and began to play again, but after all these years of inaction, my fingers don't move as fast as before. However I enjoy very much playing everyday at home, sometimes in performances. There is a tactile dimension of sound, which you cannot get from the computer. And of course "analog" is not the same thing as "digital". It is a different approach. Even if many analog sounds are heard through loudspeakers, they stimulate other parts of the body and the brain, other regions of sensibility.

A former student of Musashino Art University, Shibata Satoko, is a singer and a guitarist. She writes her songs and music, and also improvises with words. In 2010 we started "Yamaband", with Kaiwa Yukako, who plays keyboards, and me on the guitar. Until now we have had about ten concerts together. To prepare a concert, we usually play together for several hours, then we listen to the recordings of these improvised sessions, pick up the best parts and make compositions out of these fragments.

I have also been playing with Cal Lyall, a musician from Canada who, like me, has been living in Tokyo for quite a long time. He often organizes concerts and was the director of "test-tone", a series of over a hundred concerts held at SuperDeluxe, a famous live house in Roppongi, Tokyo. During our last session—Cal on the banjo and me on the Les Paul guitar—we were playing drones with e-Bows ("electric bow") through analog or digital devices. I prefer to keep an all-analog set, and develop the music around microtonal intervals, that is, very close frequencies forming all kinds of sound waves.

EKC: Have you ever done anything like a music installation? When I was looking at your web page, I think there was something listed for something in the subway. Did you do a piece for something in either an airport or a subway station?

I did many installations in galleries and museum, and two are permanent ones in public spaces. One was installed in 1999 at the entrance of the Osaka Housing Center, which is also the entrance of a subway station, and of a shopping street, and one in 2000 at Narita Airport Central Atrium.

Sadly it might be removed in the next years because Narita is becoming more commercial, like a big department store. To survive they need money and want to have more shops, and will probably redesign the place where my installation is set up.

EKC: Do you think your teaching at Musashino Art University (MAU) helps your music making or does it take away a lot from your music making?

There is certainly a lot of energy and time involved in being there, teaching and organizing events. In a way it's taking, but in another way, there are always interesting students coming and so it's good to see what they have to say and to try to push them and see what's coming back. Yes, I'm quite happy. Especially this year (2015-2016), I had many musicians in my class: two members of the band "Bombori", Kamiya Shunsuke and Fukushima Ryôsuke. Bombori makes a kind of "progressive" rock music, with two drummers, two guitarists, one bassist and one VJ. They were invited to the last Fuji Rock Festival, which is a big summer event in Japan. Kamiya is also the guitarist of the group "Basque no Sports" with Isobe Sô on bass. Yoda Marie, singer and pianist, was also there, as well as dancers: Sakatô Kana, Shimura Chiharu, Tashiro Chiyuki and Shômura Nobutaka. I should mention Nogami Katsuki, a successful musician and media artist. All these people will certainly go on with their art, dance and music. This is really the good side of being in an art university: being confronted by these young talents.

The university is also a good place for inviting artists and scholars and letting them do lectures and work presentations, and have some feedback from the students. Musicians from Europe and other parts of the world, often contact me for opportunities to do concerts in Tokyo. I had a good friend, Zbigniew Karkowski (1958-2013), who often brought to MAU people from Spain, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, etc. Veteran minimal music composer and film-maker Phill Niblock from New York also came about five times to do sound and video presentations. Carsten Nicolai came several times to do lectures and work presentations. When his group Raster Noton organized in Tokyo a big show for their 10th anniversary, my students were involved in filming and documenting the event.

The university is maybe one of the last places where you can be creative and produce experimental works without being stressed with commercialism.