

The image is a full-page photograph used as a CD cover. It depicts a landscape scene reflected in a body of water. The reflection is sharp and clear, showing a bright, cloudy sky. The foreground is dominated by dark, silhouetted grass and foliage, which frames the central reflection. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with the bright reflection providing a focal point.

ECM NEW SERIES

Toshio Hosokawa Landscapes

Münchener Kammerorchester Alexander Liebreich

Toshio Hosokawa



Landscapes

Toshio Hosokawa (*1955)

Landscape V (1993)

15:36

for shô and string orchestra
originally written for shô and string quartet

Ceremonial Dance (2000)

12:02

for string orchestra

Sakura für Otto Tomek (2008)

6:49

for shô solo

Cloud and Light (2008)

21:24

for shô and orchestra

Mayumi Miyata, shô
Münchener Kammerorchester
Alexander Liebreich, conductor



Paul Griffiths Cloud Song

The shô, an instrument imported into Japan from China in the eighth century, has a set of vibrating reeds that activate pipes stacked vertically in ranks, as in an organ, but all so small that they can be fitted to a mouthpiece and blown with the player's breath. According to tradition its sound resembles the call of the phoenix, and physically it has something of the shape of a bird, with wings upraised. Perhaps it could be thought to fly easily between the real and the magical, between earth and heaven, by virtue of its high register and its glisten of upper harmonics, suggesting its sound is the faint shadow of a celestial light almost entirely beyond our hearing. It provides the image of an ameliorated elsewhere in Lachenmann's opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, and it enters Hosokawa's music, too, as a miraculous visitant.

In *Landscape V* (1993) it is summoned by a similar sound, that of strings playing one of its characteristic chords in pianissimo harmonics, as if there were, somewhere in this landscape, a still lake mirroring the sky. The piece proceeds as a dialogue of shô and strings (a quartet or, as here, an orchestral body), the latter sometimes microtonally adjusted to the soloist's tuning – a dialogue of heaven and earth, of sky and reflection, a dialogue that proceeds in perfect calm until the strings begin to break away. It might be that ruffles of wind are disturbing the surface, to be delicately chided by a new voice, that of the shô player softly humming in a middle register. Peace between earth and heaven is restored.

Alternatively, one could understand the composition as a meeting of two lone travellers, who exchange not words (perhaps they have no language in common) but the most formal of gestures during this time they have together, before they have to go their separate ways into the whiteness of winter. There each of them is in turn rediscovered: the strings in dance, the shô in song. *Ceremonial Dance* (2000), according to the composer, relates to "the slow deliberate movements of gagaku", the music and dance of the imperial court. "As opposed to western dance," he goes on, "which aims at the heavens by resisting gravity and is based on geometric movements, ancient Japanese dance, instead of opposing gravity, plants the lower half of the body firmly on the earth and has the ability to move in line with the slow movement of the earth and the universe. The movement of the body line eventually unites with the power flowing to the centre of the universe."

This work accordingly begins in robust fashion. Soon, however, there is a shô-style chord and the violins are moving into a higher register, which is where they largely remain, often playing chords or close canons in many parts, while the lower instruments precipitate out towards their deepest bass. Several times the action is broken by a pause in silence or over a drone, when the players are instructed to freeze, as if the caesura in the dance were a caesura also in time.

Sakura (Cherry Blossoms) is a traditional Japanese song about the most traditionally cherished pleasure of Japanese springtime. Hosokawa

kawa made an arrangement in 2008 as one of a pair of choral settings of Japanese folksong commissioned by Westdeutscher Rundfunk, and added a prelude for shô to mark the eightieth birthday of that organization's distinguished former music director, Otto Tomek. The instrument's silvery chords, folding into one another as they had in *Landscape V*, respond to the equivocation in the text as to whether this is mist or cloud, this mass of white flowers hovering in the air.

In the last work – which brings the two journeyers, shô and strings, back together, but with the addition of brass and percussion to the orchestra – the imagery is quite definitely of clouds. Like *Landscape V* and the *Sakura* arrangement, *Cloud and Light* was written for Mayumi Miyata, who has singlehandedly made the shô an international modern instrument, her previous recordings including the Lachenmann opera. She gave the first performance of *Cloud and Light*, in Saarbrücken on 1 June 2008, with the regional radio orchestra under Peter Hirsch.

Once again, as in *Landscape V*, the interplay of shô and strings, and in particular their mutual imitation, is the driving force – or perhaps one should say 'drifting force', given that the music carries itself so lightly. These two central components moving in tandem – separately, together or, most often, in parallel, building harmonies that repeat each other's with slight variation – suggest the confluence of vapour and light of which clouds are made. The brass, comprising four horns with trumpet

and trombone, can do this too, or provide the illusion of weight that may also be found in cloudscares, while the percussion, especially the furin (small Japanese wind bells) add twinklings of brightness. Almost everything, though, is centred in the shô and its world of far-off harmonies, soft yet scintillating – harmonies as impalpable and ever-changing as clouds.

Like clouds, Hosokawa's music is constantly in motion yet constantly the same. As the piece continues, its effect is of observing clouds in a largely peaceful sky, clouds that are mostly white but occasionally show shadows and briefly stir into more turbulent action.

The composer indicates in the score a sequence of events, as follows. "Clouds glide in the sky" is an introduction for shô, strings and percussion. The piece again starts out from a typical shô chord, of a kind that forms most of the entire thin, delicate musical substance. After a short while the texture thins toward the transparency of a fifth, F#–C#, which will recur as an image of light. Gentle horn monotones move the music towards "Premonition of shadow", where the texture gains density, with glissandos and canons as in Ceremonial Dance, now with the shô player participating vocally once more. A full F#–C# gleam becomes clouded over as the shô disappears, and brass chords raise a climax before 'Clouds and light'. This short, very gentle passage gives way to 'Dark clouds and brief storm', with the shô absent throughout and the orchestra as if looking for it. It returns for two further brief sec-

tions, "Premonition of light" and "Wave and light", after which "Transfiguration" brings the light of F#-C# fully forward.

Clouds, we know, exist in their own world, and their movements and changes have nothing to do with us. Gazing at clouds takes us into a region beyond all life, into a state of suspension that is at once still and tense, and perhaps suffused with the melancholy of apartness.



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