

*From Clever Rain Tree to Cosmic Metaphor:
Toru Takemitsu's Musical Interpretation of Nature and Emotion*

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Abstract

Toru Takemitsu's Rain Tree Sketch series, inspired by Kenzaburō Ōe's short story "Clever Rain Tree", exemplifies the composer's deep connection to nature and his masterful use of music to express emotion and metaphor. This paper explores Takemitsu's musical journey from the clever rain tree to the cosmic metaphor, investigating how he interprets and transforms natural elements into profound emotional and philosophical statements. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines musical analysis with literary and philosophical inquiries, this study examines Takemitsu's use of the montage technique to create a non-linear musical narrative that evokes the mystical and eternal qualities of the rain tree. It also analyzes the influence of Japanese aesthetics, particularly the concepts of "Ma", on his compositions and how these principles shape his musical interpretation of the rain tree image. Furthermore, this paper delves into Takemitsu's use of water imagery and the metaphor of the sea as the ultimate destination of his musical journey, highlighting his philosophical reflections on the relationship between humans and nature. By tracing Takemitsu's path from the clever rain tree to the cosmic metaphor, this study offers a fresh perspective on his compositional techniques and his profound engagement with nature and emotion, contributing to a deeper understanding of his musical legacy.

Keywords: Rain Tree, Cosmic Tree, Metaphor, Takemitsu

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Introduction

The Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996) is renowned for his unique and poetic musical language, which reflects a profound understanding of nature and a multidimensional interpretation of human emotions. His creative inspiration derives not only from his acute sensitivity to the natural world but is also deeply rooted in the wisdom of Eastern philosophy. Takemitsu's compositions aim to bridge the cultural divide between East and West and to integrate tradition with modernity, offering a compelling contemporary perspective on the relationship between humanity and nature, as well as between emotion and reason.

This study focuses on Takemitsu's seminal work *Rain Tree Sketch*, exploring the journey from the imagery found in Japanese writer Kenzaburō Ōe's short story *The Clever Rain Tree* to a cosmic metaphor within the piece. Composed for solo piano in 1982, *Rain Tree Sketch* is widely believed to have been inspired by Ōe's story of the same title. Although differing significantly in genre, both works share commonalities in imagery and philosophical depth, exemplifying an ideal of interdisciplinary dialogue. By systematically examining Takemitsu's compositional trajectory, this study analyzes how he distilled the image of the "rain tree" from a natural landscape into a cosmic metaphor and employed the element of "water" as a central motif across his musical journey. This paper aims to uncover the core creative philosophy and aesthetic aspirations of this distinguished Eastern master.

In addition, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, supplementing musical analysis with insights from philosophy, aesthetics, and literature. As previously noted, Takemitsu's musical vocabulary is influenced by Western modernism while being deeply grounded in the philosophical wisdom and aesthetic traditions of the East. Therefore, traditional musical analysis alone cannot fully capture the profound layers of meaning within his works. To address this limitation, this study will consider the development and symbolic lineage of the "rain" tree and "water" motifs in traditional Japanese culture, seeking to contextualize Takemitsu's creative practice within a broader framework.

Such a cross-disciplinary approach not only aids in reconstructing the socio-cultural context of Takemitsu's work but also reveals the transformation and continuity of traditional wisdom within modern society. In other words, through his unique artistic expression, Takemitsu vividly interprets the contemporary relevance of Confucian and Daoist concepts and Zen aesthetics of ethereal transcendence. His work thus provides a valuable entry point for re-examining the enduring relevance of Eastern wisdom in the modern world.

Ōe Kenzaburō's "Rain Tree" Motif and Takemitsu's Creative Inspiration

The intellectual exchange between Takemitsu and Ōe Kenzaburō provides critical insight into the composer's creative inspiration. The two artists cultivated a deep friendship from the 1960s onward, frequently discussing each other's work and sharing mutual advice. Through this cross-disciplinary dialogue, Ōe's motif of the "rain tree" gradually permeated Takemitsu's musical imagination, eventually igniting the creative spark that would become *Rain Tree Sketch*.

In his short story *The Clever Rain Tree* (1980), Ōe vividly depicts the unique form and symbolic resonance of the rain tree. Ōe describes its roots as "black, fence-like structures emanating a hazy bluish-gray glow, occupying a commanding presence within the darkness"

(Ōe, 1982, p. 2). Through the nuanced use of color and spatial relationships, the author evokes the rain tree's mysterious allure, crafting a scene of profound poetic atmosphere.

Notably, Ōe's rain tree embodies deep symbolic meanings, tapping into the ultimate philosophical insight beneath the natural world. Scholars have noted that in Japanese mythology and folklore, the rain tree is often viewed as a metaphor for the "cosmic tree," representing the interconnectedness of the heavens, earth, and the structure of the universe (Enomoto, 1995). With roots reaching into the underworld, a trunk linking the human realm, and branches extending into the heavens, the tree forms a tripartite image connecting divine and mortal realms. In his work, Ōe reinterprets this rain tree with a modern sensibility, preserving its humble, natural form while imbuing it with profound cosmic connotations. This dual artistic approach, blending physical reality and metaphysical symbolism, had an undeniable influence on Takemitsu.

Although Takemitsu admitted he had not thoroughly read *The Clever Rain Tree*, he acknowledged the symbolic potency of the "rain tree" motif and its impact on his composition process (Finne, 1994). Through his dialogue with Ōe, Takemitsu gradually incorporated the rain tree into his creative repertoire. From the percussion trio *Rain Tree* (1981) to the piano solo *Rain Tree Sketch* (1982), and the orchestral piece *Rain Tree* (1981), the rain tree motif remained a constant source of inspiration for him.

To Takemitsu, the rain tree was not simply a natural object; it was a bridge into the realm of the spirit. He once expressed, "Music is like a garden, and I am its gardener. Listening to my music is like walking through this garden, experiencing the changes in light, patterns, and textures" (Takemitsu, 1993, p. 150-155). In this interplay between physical landscape and spiritual experience, Takemitsu achieved an artistic elevation of the rain tree motif. On one hand, he captured its subtle forms through multiple sensory lenses, such as vision and touch; on the other, he contemplated its natural rhythms and the profound mysteries of life from a philosophical perspective.

In this way, the seemingly ordinary image of the rain tree was endowed with a unique poetic significance, becoming a vessel for expressing human emotion and unveiling universal truths. As scholar Noriko Ohtake observes, Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketch* reflects an artistic realization of Ōe's cosmic tree, grounded in their shared philosophical resonance (Ohtake, 1990). Inspired by Ōe, Takemitsu transcended natural imagery to humanistic meaning, and immediate experience to ultimate reflection. This fusion of external landscape with inner sensibility epitomizes the singular expressive power of Takemitsu's musical language.

From "Ma" to "Montage": Takemitsu's Unique Musical Narrative

In his series of works inspired by the "rain tree", Takemitsu developed a distinctive musical vocabulary, characterized especially by his unique handling of temporal flow and structural organization. Through a masterful application of the concept of "ma" and the innovative integration of montage techniques, he broke away from traditional linear narrative structures, creating a poetic and contemplative musical space that invites reflection.

Takemitsu's emphasis on "ma" reflects his profound understanding and internalization of traditional Japanese aesthetics. In Eastern art, "ma" refers to the aesthetic treatment of empty or silent spaces, designed to inspire the viewer's imagination and introspection (Hara, 2000). This concept is particularly prominent in Zen aesthetics, where, for example, haiku poetry

often values “the unspoken that lingers beyond words,” and ink painting cultivates an evocative space between abstraction and realism. Inspired by this philosophy, Takemitsu employed pauses, sustained notes, harmonics, and other techniques to create a sense of timeless resonance within limited tonal material.

In *Rain Tree Sketch*, for instance, elongated notes and irregular rhythms form an interconnected web of phrases. Throughout the piece, Takemitsu repeatedly employs dynamics like *p*, *pp*, and *ppp*, creating a delicate, ethereal atmosphere. Though seemingly simple, these musical gestures contain profound aesthetic depth, transporting listeners into a world where reality and imagination intertwine, allowing their thoughts to roam freely in the spaces between the notes. Through this “less is more” approach, Takemitsu transforms singular, seemingly unstructured notes into vessels of boundless meaning.

Complementing the aesthetics of “*ma*” is Takemitsu’s adaptation and expansion of montage techniques. Originally a cinematic concept, montage refers to the juxtaposition of images or scenes to evoke new emotional or symbolic interpretations (Eisenstein, 1949). Although montage originates in Western artistic contexts, Takemitsu saw a deep connection between this technique and Eastern aesthetics, both of which seek to transcend conventional causality, expanding interpretive depth and scope.

Takemitsu’s works often exhibit a montage-like structure, and *Rain Tree Sketch* is a prime example. The piece lacks a formal structure, yet its opening tempo markings—Tempo I and Tempo II—immediately fragment the composition. Tempo II, in contrast to Tempo I, offers a richer tonal texture, with not only a tempo shift but also added pedal markings and erratic note leaps, which make the fragmented sections of Tempo II more captivating. Through such structural choices, Takemitsu abandons the rigid logic of traditional composition, favoring instead a design that emphasizes visual and symbolic resonance. Listeners are drawn into the minute variations in sound, while simultaneously stepping back to appreciate the broader formal beauty of the composition. Each fragmented segment or phrase exists both in harmony and independence, echoing the rain tree’s natural structure—dense and interconnected, with deep roots and abundant leaves. In this way, Takemitsu achieved an expressive synthesis of nature’s form and spirit.

Overall, Takemitsu’s creative use of “*ma*” and montage constitutes a defining feature of his musical language. By embracing the essence of Eastern aesthetics while integrating Western modernist techniques, he forged a singular artistic style that is both culturally resonant and innovatively universal.

From Droplets to the Ocean: The Philosophical Elevation of Life as Metaphor

In Takemitsu’s musical universe, water occupies a core position. From *Water Music* in the 1960s to *Rain Spell* and *I Hear the Water Dreaming* in the 1980s, the motif of water persists throughout his career, laden with rich symbolic and philosophical meaning. For Takemitsu, water is not merely a natural object; it serves as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual, between nature and humanity, encapsulating the principles of cosmic cycles and the mysteries of life’s continuity (Takemitsu, 1995).

Takemitsu’s fascination with water reflects his relentless exploration of universal origins. He once remarked, “I often ponder the relationship between music and nature. For me, music is not merely a depiction of natural scenery; it is a means to awaken an awareness of life’s

ultimate truth” (ibid., p. 3). Consequently, his artistic representation of water serves as a philosophical reflection on the human condition. Takemitsu saw water as the source of all things, embodying the ceaseless, cyclic laws of the cosmos. Its fluidity and periodicity mirror the transience of time and foretell the eternal nature of life—a creative philosophy evident in many of his works.

In *Rain Tree Sketch*, for instance, the title alone evokes an image that intertwines “rain” and “tree.” The rain—a specific manifestation of water—is the prevailing symbol throughout the piece. Repetitive raindrop-like motifs, at times fragmented and at others more continuous, create a rhythm both persistent and varied. This delicate, nuanced soundscape reflects not only the natural rhythms of rain striking leaves but also hints at life’s cyclical renewal within the river of time (Ohtake, 1993).

Beyond its concrete imagery, water in Takemitsu’s music carries profound symbolic resonance. He frequently described water as a reflection of the spirit, emphasizing that only by moving beyond its physical properties can one grasp the mystery underlying water’s essence. “In my music, the shifting states of water are metaphors: water resembles sound (indivisible), and the ocean, like music, produces waves through rhythmic tides” (Takemitsu, 1995, p. 129). With these metaphors, Takemitsu constructs a network of connections between nature and spirit, viewing the ocean as the ultimate destination of his musical creation.

In fact, he consistently used the notes E^b, E, and A as a central motif, symbolizing the concept of “sea” and infusing it as a core element within his melodies. This preference for specific pitches is no mere coincidence but reflects a deeply humanistic sentiment. For Takemitsu, the vastness and depth of the sea represent the ideal sanctuary for the human soul.

Through his multifaceted exploration of water as a theme, Takemitsu achieved a philosophical leap from simple emotion to profound contemplation. In his hands, the trickling flow of a stream and the delicate droplets of rain become reflections of life’s ultimate questions. The image of droplets merging into the ocean serves as a metaphor for the unity of individual existence with the cosmic whole. As Takemitsu himself stated, “Music should merge like droplets joining the sea, seeking endless integration” (Takemitsu, 2000, p. 456).

Interdisciplinary Interpretations of Eastern Wisdom

Takemitsu’s body of work reveals that his musical expression—embodied through imagery such as the “rain tree” and “water”—is fundamentally a modern interpretation of Eastern wisdom. As an artist deeply influenced by Zen aesthetics, Takemitsu excelled at discerning philosophical insights within everyday sights and extracting enduring themes from complex surface phenomena. As discussed, his rain tree transcends its natural image, symbolizing a tree of life intricately connected to the universe, while his favored water motif extends beyond perceptible form, reflecting an essential spirit of existence. In doing so, Takemitsu reinterpreted traditional wisdom through a modern musical language, offering a new path to celebrate Eastern cultural spirit.

Ultimately, Takemitsu’s success in creatively transforming traditional resources is inseparable from his interdisciplinary perspective. Although he never received formal academic training, he was extensively versed in philosophy, aesthetics, and literature. As he expressed in *Confronting Silence*, “Through constant reflection on the relationship between music and nature, it has become increasingly difficult for me to separate musical creation

from philosophical thought. Although I do not intentionally pursue philosophy, I often find myself naturally drawn to the essential questions of life in my creative process” (Takemitsu, 1971, p. 142). Takemitsu’s broad engagement with the humanities significantly deepened the expressive scope of his art.

His philosophical articulation of the “rain tree” motif, for example, was undeniably influenced by his thorough understanding of Ōe Kenzaburō’s work. Through repeated study of Ōe’s writing, Takemitsu grasped the metaphorical significance of the rain tree within the cosmic structure and expressed it anew through musical language. Furthermore, when Takemitsu broadened his perspective to include Zen philosophy, he drew profound inspiration from concepts like emptiness, for, and suchness. In his view, the rain tree exemplifies the Zen dialectics of “between likeness and unlikeness” and “the interdependence of being and non-being”—direct reflections of Zen wisdom within artistic creation. Thus, Takemitsu elevated his philosophical vision, distilling his interpretation of the rain tree into reflections on life, time, and truth.

In this light, Takemitsu’s modern interpretation of traditional culture reveals both an expansion of singular artistic forms and the potential for a harmonious fusion of diverse intellectual traditions. Building upon his rich intellectual foundation, he integrated various theoretical frameworks and discourses into his musical practice, constructing a multidimensional, open aesthetic landscape. With his “universalist” cultural vision and Zen-like artistic imagination, Takemitsu offers a fresh lens for understanding the contemporary relevance of traditional wisdom.

Conclusion

From the clever rain tree to the profound ocean, from the rhythmic beauty of raindrops to the philosophical origin of all things, Takemitsu has used the language of modern music to give eloquent voice to Eastern wisdom. He transformed minute natural observations into timeless artistic themes and, from a height of grand philosophical insight, reflected on humanity’s existential plight, embodying a spirit that transcends time and space. In Takemitsu’s musical world, the “tree” is no longer merely a natural scene but a spiritual bridge that connects the flows of life, and “water” transcends physical perception to reveal the essential nature of cosmic truth. In this way, nature is endowed with a vibrant consciousness, becoming a sanctuary for human emotions and spirit.

Through his universal cultural perspective and Zen-like artistic imagination, Takemitsu has opened expansive possibilities for the contemporary transformation of traditional wisdom. Skillfully integrating elements of Eastern aesthetics like “ma” and “yūgen” with Western modernist techniques such as montage, he forged a unique musical language that bridges East and West, past and present. Most remarkably, Takemitsu did not merely adopt these creative techniques; instead, he continuously innovated within them, imprinting his own distinctive style. In this dialectical interplay between tradition and innovation, Takemitsu revitalized traditional resources for a modern context, showcasing the enduring allure of Eastern culture.

Surveying Takemitsu’s creative journey, one sees that his philosophical expression—embodied through motifs like the “rain tree” and the “ocean”—provides an insightful lens for re-evaluating the relationship between humanity and nature.

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