

Reflexive essay

## **Naming Music: Music and Sound Across Cultures**

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## Naming Music: Music and Sound across Cultures

Katherine G.T. Whatley

What do you lose and what do you gain when you name something in a way that is legible across borders? This essay explores naming within the context of music and sound, arguing that to name sounds is to notate and make legible music. This essay's author is a scholar as well as a *koto* (Japanese horizontal harp) musician, and the text examines the ways in which non-Western music, specifically Japanese *koto* traditions, are influenced by the Western notions of notation and cultural prestige, and ultimately standardization. Improvisation is positioned as a counter to this standardization as a performance practice that navigates the 'unbridgeable chasm' between history, the present and future, as well as named and unnamed sounds, and Japanese and Western music. Utilizing Christopher Small's concept of 'musicking' to understand music as an active verb rather than a static noun, the essay advocates for the conceptual expansion of music to incorporate non-human soundscapes and animal acoustic cultures. In examining the disappearing regional dialect used in the folk music of Gujō, in central Japan, the author analyzes how naming is both standardizing and indispensable for preserving and reinvigorating local musics. Ultimately, by weaving together personal narrative, transcultural performance studies and critical theory, this essay calls for strategic incorporation of both legibility and illegibility, named and unnamed music, proposing that a composition can function not as a definitive statement, but as an ongoing question.

**Keywords:** composition, globalization, improvisation, Japanese Music, *koto*, notation, music, music theory, transnational

### Introduction: What does it mean to name music?

What do you lose when you name something in a way that is legible across borders, and what do you gain? Across cultures, we describe and organize sounds—whether it be written down as notation, or transmitted orally, or created spontaneously in improvisation—and this is how we transmit, create, and perform music. This notation (or lack thereof) could also be described as naming music. A name makes legible, grants identity, but it also creates a boundary and sets parameters, and this essay examines how we name—notate—music and to what end.

I am a researcher and musician, always straddling performance, theory, and research. I play the *koto*, a horizontal Japanese harp, which originally came to Japan from the continent more than a thousand years ago and is related to other stringed instruments across Asia. I am traditionally trained, but I also create my own compositions and play improvised music. Scholar, Musician, *Koto* Player, Composer. These are some of the names that

make up who I appear to the world around me and signal my outsider or insider status. I too am named, and that makes me legible, but those names do not represent all the parts that make up who I am.

Previously, in an article published in *Migrating Minds* (Volume 3, Issue 1), I explored the history of my own name, Katherine, and how it connects me to my grandmother, whom I am named after (Whatley, 2005). I examined how Jewish naming rituals serve to reflect multilingual, transnational diasporic history, ultimately arguing for a revival of prewar Jewish cosmopolitanism. In this text, I explore transnational naming of music and sound. I analyze how sonic naming practices are connected to transnational power structures, and explore the ways in which we might utilize names to expand our understanding of music, across borders and even beyond the human.

### Specter of the West

As a player of *koto*, I always have to work in tandem with, and in relation to, Western musical influence. The very concept of Japanese traditional music exists only in reference to the West, to the Other, and what is considered by both scholars and Japanese citizens to be traditional music changed significantly in the Meiji period (1868–1912) (Wade, 2014, 19). Yet so-called traditional Japanese music is often used as merely a signifier of a historic, unchanging premodern world, as opposed to the modern ever-changing historically specific Western music. I have previously explored in detail the concept of ‘traditional’ Japanese music, especially in contrast with contemporary avant-garde and improvised musics from Japan (Whatley, 2024). Building on that framework, I explore how I as a musician playing a historically rooted, specific to Japan, often-thought-of-as ‘traditional’ instrument can fruitfully navigate the complex web of names that make up Japanese music in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly in Japan, Western classical music retains a certain aura of prestige and modernity. Starting in the nineteenth century, Western classical music was also used to support Japan’s entry in the modern world order, and later to support the control of its colonies (Everett & Lau, 2004, xvi; Hosokawa, 1998). Even today, school children learn to read Western five-staff notation and not Japanese notation. The Western classical orchestra is featured heavily on the national television broadcaster (NHK), and there is an outsize prestige of the figures of conductor and composer, bolstered up by the success of a number of Japan-born conductors and composers in the postwar era.

Torū Takemitsu, one such acclaimed post-war composer known for incorporating Japanese instruments and motifs, writes of the unease and fruitfulness of exploring Japanese music in the modern era.

‘I live in today’s society, with the same life-style as Westerners, and daily am in touch with political, economic, social, and artistic events in the world... Shortly after the war, I studied Western music; after ten years I discovered Japanese traditional music, which confused me. At the same time I was charmed

by its beauty. However, I was not able to plunge into it uncritically, perhaps because of my study and knowledge of Western music, but also because I live in modern times. I have been trying not to view Japan as an absolute but as a duality, otherwise the tradition does not come alive but remains a meaningless antique. When I composed for *shakuhachi* and *biwa* it was an unavoidable education for me. I was experiencing a European revolution and a Japanese tradition' (Takemitsu, 1995, 67).

Takemitsu cannot uncritically engage with Japanese music, as he is both modern and influenced by the Western music that makes up his education. Yet he takes this as a starting point, seeking to view Japan itself as part of a duality with the West, not-unchanging or absolute but dynamic and changing.

Likewise, I must consider how to go about naming music in the twenty-first century for the *koto* especially without reinscribing notions of unchanging 'tradition' nor watering down the historical modes of playing so much that they lose specificity and sound merely Western. The goal must be to work in tandem with legibility and lack thereof, expanding the breadth of our listening ability, and the parameters of what we consider music, while hopefully not losing too much along the way by naming everything.

### The politics of notation

To notate is to name. In music, there are a variety of ways to notate music, the most popular by far being Western, five-staff notation.<sup>2</sup> It is a useful tool, because it is a semi-universal notation style, known by people all around the world. It can apply to almost any instrument (with the addition of symbols to describe instrument-specific techniques).

In contrast, in Japanese music, each instrument has its own notation, designed to suit the exact needs of the instrument, bound up in its own history and canon. Musicians typically cannot read the notation of other instruments. In contrast, anyone in an orchestra can read their fellow performers' parts.

*Koto* notation is easy to read, clear, and can at times be very precise. The logic of the notation is different from five-staff notation in the sense that once the scale for a piece determined and the strings are tuned, each note is represented by the string number, and players do not need to remember the notes that make up the scale in order to play the piece. This means that there is one less intellectual step necessary to read and perform the notes on the stage. *Koto* notation also has a variety of tools to describe pitch bending, vibrato and other techniques distinctive to the instrument.

Furthermore, it is only recently that *koto* pieces have started to be completely notated. Much Japanese music was memorized through vocal mnemonics, known as *shōfu* (唱譜) or *shōga* (唱歌), as well as from watching your teacher's performance and learning (Adriaansz, 1973, 41). Traditional repertoire often includes a vocal part sung by the same performer, and even today, most of the vocal part is not notated but taught directly from teacher

to student. The notation for the vocal part typically includes only lyrics and some of the main notes, without any of the embellishments such as vibrato commonly used in accompaniment singing for *koto*. Learning from a *koto* teacher has shown me that there are a lot of nuances that can be taught through copying and oral transmission, which can disappear when everything is written down and scores become standardized.

This means, of course, that someone cannot pick up a piece of *koto* music and just play it, in a way that they could for most scores using Western five-staff notation. In Japanese traditional arts of all kinds, schools (*ryūha* 流派) and heads of schools (*iemoto* 家元) have significant power, and that hierarchy must be navigated in all art forms (Yamada, 2017). It is not easy for people to begin playing *koto* music, and over time this leads to less players and a conservative, ossified atmosphere designed to preserve the canon at the sacrifice of bringing in new students and players. When things are not named clearly and made legible, they remain hidden, and it easier for things to become hierarchical, hidden, private. In addition, the use of a score that only *koto* players can read results in anyone outside of the *koto* tradition being unable to read any *koto* music. *Koto* music, and Japanese traditional music more broadly, might therefore be destined to become less legible over time, both within Japan and abroad.

### The prestige of the Western score

It might seem, therefore, that utilizing Western five-staff notation would be a clear answer to this problem. To name is to make legible, and naming sounds in a manner than is understood by many is a clear solution to a problem of a lack of legibility. One of the problems, however, lies in the loss of specificity. Takemitsu writes about the standardization and convenience of tuning in Western music, and therefore the loss of subtlety and regional sounds (Takemitsu, 1995, 61). Similarly, using five-staff notation might lead to a lack of subtlety and specificity of the sound of *koto* music.

In addition, another problem lies in the historical origins of five-staff notation. Western classical music has long been upheld as a (or even the) peak of cultural production, particularly in Japan. Five-staff notation is also totalizing and flattening in its own way, assuming somehow that the Western model is the best universal approach. This assumes that the Western model can be universalized but other regional approaches cannot. However, it also provides a way to have conversations across the world, making music approachable by a wide range of performers playing different genres and instruments.

I am not against the orchestra, the composer, the conductor. I simply believe that naming music primarily using Western centric notions has limited the possibility of our ears, and of musical production. Why does writing music down, in a specific and certain way, without the possibility of improvisation as it exists across so many different worlds and times, make it

somehow more elevated than the music of the rest of the world? Why is a certain kind of control, with a specific White history, privileged?

Just as the orchestra is elevated, so too should the whole host of all the world's music also be elevated. Furthermore, beautiful sounds that are unnamed, uncomposed, but organized orally should also be elevated. The current notion of naming music is therefore limited. In my work, I seek to take these limitations as a starting point and think expansively about notation and naming beyond tired binaries like improvised versus notated, West versus East.

### **Unnamed: Freedom of improvisation**

While the score represents the pinnacle of artistic control and prestige and legible, named music, improvisation provides one antidote to this focus on control, and genius. Though improvisation exists across musics, especially in non-Western and non-modern musics, the current genre of improvisation (if it can be called a genre) arose primarily out of free jazz. Free jazz arose out of mid-twentieth-century black American vernacular music, primarily jazz, and extends the traditional improvised solos in jazz to primarily or wholly improvised pieces (Lewis, 2008, xii–xiii).<sup>3</sup> Its origins are political, and the genre focused on creating a new black avant-garde music different from the white prestige of the concert hall.

This willingness to embrace a lack of control—a humbleness—is one of the reasons I became interested in improvisation as both a philosophy and within my music. Allow me to quote at length Fred Moten on improvisation:

'Improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing. Improvisation—as the word's linguistic roots indicate—is usually understood as speech without foresight. But improvisation, in whatever possible excess of representation that inheres in whatever probable deviance of form, always also operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description ... Improvisation is already an improvisation of improvisation: through the oppositions implicit in the etymology, through the proscriptive and differential temporality of those oppositions; on the one hand, anarchic and ungrounded, opening a critique of traditions and Tradition, and on the other hand, no simple and naive, unplanned and nonhistorically driven, inscription; on the one hand, the very essence of the visionary, the spirit of the new, an organizational planning of and in free association that transforms the material, and on the other hand, manifest in and as the material' (Moten, 2003, 63–64).

Moten describes improvisation as always in reference to tradition while always working beyond the tradition, thus renegotiating the rules which have already been named. It is not a mere free for all, nor is it reinscribing sounds of the past. It operates between both oppositions. Another way to describe this is that improvisation takes place at the 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between named and unnamed sounds. Improvisation, therefore, is in the space between written down, named music, and the freedom of past, present, and future sounds. It is music that refuses to be fully named.

Using strikingly similar language, the free jazz saxophone player Akira Sakata speaks of the connection between Japanese and Western music: 'There's a big river between Western and Japanese music that can't be crossed. Except, sometimes by Japanese musicians' (BBC, 2019). As a musician, I am interested in exploring the confluence of the seemingly uncrossable river, and the 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between Japanese music, Western music, traditional music, and music that refuses to be fully named.

### **Musicking beyond the human**

It is that refusal which is threatened by current technology. In a world of AI-composed Spotify music that people listen to mindlessly, it is more important than ever to realize that music is not mere organized sound in some endless synthetic loop. AI, in contrast to improvisation, is only ever made up of fully named sounds (metadata).

Music is connection: between people, between animals, between us and the world around. In his now canonical book, *Musicking*, Christopher Small (1998, 9) argues that music is a verb, an action. It is something that takes place in a location, with people doing certain things. It includes the small talk behind the stage, by the audience, the food, the sound. Or, extending Small's conceit, musicking is also the performance of the two birds singing to each other looking for a mate.

It may, therefore, be time to extend our notions of music beyond the human.<sup>4</sup> Bird sounds, frog cries, even the sound of the wind in the trees. Whales have musical culture they transmit across huge distances and teach each other over migrations across the world (Allen et al., 2022). These are sounds that poets of old have written about in a variety of cultures over time. These are organized sounds that are pleasant or sometimes even have meaning. Is their music any less important than ours? If humans are in the business of naming sounds, organizing them into music, we need to change our parameters for naming sound, for composing, organizing, and sharing music, so that it includes the grand sum total musics of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

I am certainly not the first person to hold such a view, and for some readers, the argument that we need to expand our understanding of music and sound might seem obvious. However, it is only recently that hierarchical understandings of sound have begun to be called in question. Previously, nineteenth-century Western ideals of a pure or absolute music, removed from emotionality or everyday life, were held up as the peak of musical production (Bonds, 2014). This philosophical perspective was, often, based around formalism (Young, 2014). Of course, this music was always notated, by the composer who was a genius, almost always male, and played in a concert hall, with a tyrannical conductor. Though many have called into question that ideal, we are still stuck with those historical artifacts, and those male-, human-, and Western-centric perspectives. We therefore need to expand the ways that we name music.

### What's in a dialect?

However, to expand how we name music, to make legible musics both human- and animal-made, also comes with downsides. This double-edged sword became apparent to me when I started to learn traditional folk music of the Gujō region, in Gifu, central Japan. The area has many festivals, and the basis of all the music is a solo singer, with background singers, with or without backing of *shamisen*, flute, and percussion. There are some notated pieces, but many of the performers grew up learning the songs at the festivals themselves and have no need for anything other than some lyric sheets, if that. The lyrics are based around local history, mostly in the local dialect. These days, only those in their eighties or older speak the dialect, with younger people sprinkling a few words within standard (meaning Tokyo) Japanese forced onto people across Japan starting towards the end of the nineteenth century.

What will happen when the last person who speaks the dialect daily dies? It will be within the next fifteen or so years. Of course, I and others can learn to sing the songs, but this is from the perspective of an outsider—someone who comes from afar. Even those who grew up hearing the local songs access the dialect as outsiders themselves, as merely lyrics. By notating and recording, we can name these local songs and make them legible to the broader world, and to later generations. However, this problem is occurring in a world of standardization, where objects, music, ideas are named and made legible across countries, and borders. Ultimately, one of the main objectives of naming is standardization.

### Named/unnamed *koto* music

Improvisation represents one possible path forward between naming (which comes with both legibility and standardization), and the unnamed, the local, the specific, the unknowable. The 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between named and unnamed sounds is not so unbridgeable after all.

My music straddles multiple genres: traditional *koto* music, named in a specific composition style, accessible only to practitioners; compositions influenced by the canon of twentieth-century (Western) new music, named within a specific avant-garde lineage; and improvisation, which may or may not be named but is always in reference to named genres, lineages, and sounds.

By combining Western five staff as well as *koto* notation, improvisation, local Gujō or *koto* repertoire, my work seeks to be both legible and accessible to a wide range of listeners as well as to call into question the very fact that the legibility is necessary or required. I know I cannot access Japanese music as someone could in the past: a local, a native. I always access these pieces as an outsider, listening to them through my Western inflected ears. But I take this as a positive starting point, to use that perspective as

an outsider/insider to try to broaden the horizon of what counts as named music.

Some of my recent work with the pianist Alexander Dubovoy (which can be accessed within this essay), does exactly that. Together, we combined jazz, improvisation, and Gujō folk songs to create music that seeks to name that which has thus far not been named while also allowing space for some music that cannot be named. By leaving space for new interpretations of old sounds (through improvisation as well as by performing the traditional pieces in a new context), our music may, just a little, bridge that ‘unbridgeable chasm’ or the uncrossable river.

### Conclusion: An ending question

Someone recently said to me that a composition can take the position of a question—and not a statement. Meaning: it can be part of a conversation and therefore pose a question, not assume that it can give all the answers, as many compositions have in the past. This essay, then, has been an exploration of the question I started with: what do you lose when you name something in a way that is legible across borders, and what do you gain? One answer to this question is choosing not to name all music, allowing some of it to remain illegible beyond specific contexts. It may also be about a strategic changing of names based on the context, a kind of codeswitching as required for different situations. Of course, ultimately, this is an unanswerable question. A kind of question to which someone can devote their life. And I hope to do so, whether it be in my music or in my writing, or any number of other unnamable things that make up my life.

1. Throughout this article, I therefore use the terms ‘Japanese music’ and ‘traditional Japanese music’ as merely a shorthand to contrast with Western classical or Western-influenced popular vernacular music. However, I use them critically and with awareness of their limits.
2. There are some exceptions, like jazz chordal progression charts.
3. Here, I am choosing to highlight the history of the black avant-garde and improvisation, though the specific histories of the interconnected genres of free jazz, experimental music, improvisation, and avant-garde music are beyond the scope of this article. For more, see Lewis & Piekut, 2016; Monson, 1996; Nyman, 1999.
4. Now that we are in climate collapse, scholars have begun to consider the agency of the non-human actant. See for example, Haraway, 2008; Latour, 2014.
5. See Bernie Krause’s (2013) work on natural soundscapes as an example.



An [improvisation](#) based on ‘Yoitosorya,’ a traditional piece from the Haiden Odori festival, Gifu Prefecture, Japan. Performed by Alexander Dubovoy (piano) and Katherine Whatley (koto and voice) at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, January 2026. @ All rights reserved, used with permission.

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### Author's bio

Katherine G. T. Whatley is in East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford University, USA. Her dissertation analyzes sound, music, and soundscape in medieval Japan. She is also a *koto* (horizontal Japanese harp) musician and performs in both classical and experimental contexts. Her dissertation includes a suite of compositions based on *Ryōjin Hishō*, a twelfth-century collection of popular songs collated by Emperor Gō-Shirakawa. Her research has previously been published in *positions*, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, and *Migrating Minds*. As a journalist, she has worked with the BBC, Dwell, Conde Nast, New York Times, the Japan Times, and others.

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