



Hiroki Sasajima

Interviewed by Angus Carlyle

I think that it was Cheryl Tipp, the Natural Sounds Curator at the British Library, who was the first to suggest that I look into the work of Hiroki Sasajima. In one of those strange happenstances, Cheryl's recommendation was followed quickly by others that arrived from apparently unconnected sources until it seemed that everyone—at least everyone within a certain circle—was talking about his work.

Sasajima is the only interviewee who I neither met nor even Skyped across the time zones. He preferred a process that involved me submitting questions by email, waiting for his written responses, and then presenting supplementary questions that asked for clarification or expansion. Paradoxically, perhaps, I responded to the constraints of the written exchange by immersing myself more thoroughly in Sasajima's work.

These really are treasures. Among them: the close-up pulsing of bio-mechanical energy on 'Track One' of the album 'Colony'; the disorientation of 'Into The Nothings'—released by Impulsive Habitat—where any sense of scale or source become woozy; and 'Melting Snow' where you can hear the weak sunlight on your cheek and hear the cold air as it scratches your lungs.

Why did you start field recording?

I started around five years ago. PCM recorders had come down to a reasonable price and I decided to get myself one. It was manufactured by M-Audio, but I can no longer remember the model number—it is whichever one is no longer on sale! At the time, I was a member of a band—not a very active one—but I had never gone so far as to record the sound of the world outside. And then I just became more and more interested in the idea of capturing sound. At first, the sense I had of it was close to the feelings associated with a photographic snap-shot. I think that my very first deliberate recording was the sound of walking on leaves. I realised a number of things immediately: that the sound through the microphone was different to the sound with my naked ears; that the microphone allowed us to listen to delicate, detailed sound. That attracted me a lot. As I said, the starting point for me into the world of field recording was initially really casual, but then I became more and more interested and wanted to delve deeper and deeper.

Can I ask you about this notion of detail that you have? What is special about detail and how do you record it?

Well, I think that when you focus down at the micro level, the texture of the sound is revealed in greater clarity. That texture is something you don't really get from the macro perspective, it only emerges through a micro-sound approach.

With a contact microphone, depending on the concept and what I intend to record, I sometimes use it with fences or pipes or wires, anything really. For example, to record 'Melting Snow', I attached the contact microphone to a thin metal sheet and used that. With the hydrophone, I was interested in using it to record the changes in the motion of water that were the result of turbulence caused by different submerged geological features. I have also recorded the motion of sand in the water and the sound of bubbles rising to the surface. I have yet to record the sounds created by microscopic insects.

With the equipment I use, I had been using the M-Audio portable recorder for a while when I had started out but then I began to feel that I wanted the flexibility to record in a variety of settings and I also wanted to achieve better sound quality. So I had started to buy other equipment, like the contact mics and hydrophones, for the situations where I wanted to record.

Whose work did you find inspiring? When did you first become aware of other people using field-recording in their work?

of artists who had incorporated field recordings into their work. But I wasn't aware of people like Chris Watson who were doing what you might call pure field recording—I only discovered him subsequently. In terms of who inspires me, I can certainly say that the people I particularly respect are Francisco López and Bernhard Günter.

Do you call what you do music or art?

I think what I am doing is neither of those things. I am not at all interested in categorisation. I don't grasp my activities within those kinds of categorisations nor do I examine it from those perspectives.

OK, does that mean that you are seeking something more representational, more like a documentary approach? For example, with your insect recording, do you ever think that these will become valuable documents in the future? Do you think that people from the future will be able to listen to them and hear through the insect sounds important aspects of our world (its atmosphere, its pollution, its humidity, heat, and such like)?

Hmm. That's interesting. I don't deny that what you describe might be a possibility but I would really want to make clear that my work is absolutely not created as 'document'. It is not based on any research-oriented viewpoint about insects at all. The concept behind that work comes from somewhere totally different. My works are created from something subjective, something personal. The idea that animates those works is more closely connected to the Japanese tradition of listening to insect sounds. But if these recordings have a life in the future, I'd be glad about them making that link. The concept coming from the past passes the baton to the future...

Another track of yours that might be said to connect to Japanese traditions is 'Suikinkutsu'. That is an incredible recording. I have heard several different recordings of suikinkutsu [submerged water-bowls intended to amplify the sound of dripping water in gardens] in Japan but I have never heard anything as beautiful as yours. Do you think that people who didn't know about field-recording would be surprised that the same object could be recorded by many people who all end up with very different sounds?

The suikinkutsu that I recorded is actually inside a limestone cave in Okutama, Japan. Usually, suikinkutsu are in Japanese gardens in homes, inns or temples, so my suikinkutsu tracks come from a rare acoustic situation. Because of the specific situation where I recorded, the track includes the characteristic layers of space and dripping water sounds of the cave. Although the focus point is on suikinkutsu, I had also

Because the sound of that cave suikinkutsu is so affected by the amount of rain, I returned around four times in total. On each occasion, I would record two or three sets of twenty minute recordings. My intention had very much been to record the suikinkutsu in a way that distinguished it from other people; so if you, or any other other people, hear the sound as different, then that is exactly what I wanted.

How do you go about choosing where to record and what to record?

The starting point is always going to be an interest in the place itself that I go to record; and that can include elements that are not related to sound. Once the place has been chosen, I will conduct 'field research' into what kinds of sound expresses the character of that place. Once I have a place in mind, I'll go there on many different occasions—at different times of the day and in different seasons. I tend to keep the microphone in a particular location for each of those return visits but I have to say that sometimes, after repeated recording sessions, I can reconsider the original choice of place!

When you are recording, is there something like a meditation going on? Are you listening while you are recording? Are you comparing the place that you hear through your headphones to the place that your own ears reveals to you?

Sometimes I listen. Sometimes I leave after setting up the recording gear. Remember that in both situations, I've already chosen the sound environment and have spent time listening there. When I am doing field recording, sometimes I get the sense of a kind of unity with sound. To put it differently, I prefer the kinds of place that can offer me that type of feeling; and maybe this is the reason why I find it so hard to concentrate on listening to spaces which are crowded with other people.

I hope from what I have said that you understand my recording style is not like 'hunting'. By 'hunting' I mean pointing a microphone at the source of a sound and then altering the angle of microphone while recording to match the changing situation. Once I decide on the focus point (on the place where I'd like to record), I try to record the 'as-is' condition of the place, I try to capture the natural state of the field.

I think that there are those sounds which it is possible to playback as recordings and there are those sounds where that it is not possible. For example, when you try to open your naked ears in a really quiet place, you can realise the existence of detailed delicate sounds more and more, and your ears start to be able to catch more sound. Conversely, when you put your headphones over your ears you can, depending on

the equipment, hear different types of sound, including ones that your naked ears were not able to identify. I am not saying that one is better than another; it is just that I am mentioning that there are clearly interesting differences between naked ears and extended ears.

To what extent do you feel that you are ever part of your recordings? Do you think you are 'present' in your recordings?

I don't want there to be any trace of myself as a physical sound on the recordings, so I cut out my voice, my clothes, my footsteps and things like that. However, I am very aware that I am nonetheless surely present in the recording. The choice of microphone and the choice of the recording equipment are the listening points of myself: my presence in the recording is created by the recording method, the choice of place, the sense of distance, the angle of microphone and so on.

And how do you use your field recordings?

I use my recordings for CDs, make them available through downloads and in live performance. I am interested in an installation work, but I have yet to find the right situation and the right concrete idea.

With the CD, I choose recordings based on the concept behind the album.

So do you have the CD in mind when you are out there recording?

No, not at all. I don't do any recording for a specific work.

What about your live work, how do you choose in that situation?

The choice of recordings for a live performance tends to be based on the theme or situation of event. For example, with performances as part of the Tokyo Phonographers' Union, I only use un-edited field recordings, so I search for interesting materials which fit the 条件. The circumstances of live performance gives birth to new sounds in a sense of them improvising with the space itself, so this is very different from an act of recording.

What about the Tokyo Phonographers' Union performances? What do you think is special about leaving the recordings unedited?

For me, unedited recordings have that meaning of "as-is" that I talked about before—they capture the time and space. The elements of the "as-is" of the situation are strongly reflected.

But what do you mean by 'unedited'? Do you mean not-processed? Do you mean un-layered?

I mean both. It is true that I will fade-in and fade-out a sound. And, when I feel it is required, I will use a minimal amount of EQ. With the Tokyo Phonographers' Union (TPU) performances, several performers are playing with unedited sound material at once. As a result, the sound becomes a layered one, it becomes like a virtual soundscape.

Do you think that the audience can hear whether something is processed or unprocessed?

Well, in terms of past TPU performances, we have always only used sound which is easy to identify as unprocessed. As to the future, we don't know; it all depends on the specifics of the situation and the concept. I think it is important to mention at this point that TPU is a casual, relaxed encounter, the events are organised for the enjoyment of performance and discussion.

Something that I am really interested in is volume of playback. If you are recording 'micro' sounds are you ever playing them back at a louder level than they have in nature? If you do play them back louder is that different from processing / editing the sound, or is it the same?

Perhaps it might be possible to consider amplification as a kind of processing—in the sense that it 'extends' some particular sound feature. Personally, however, I don't think 'amplifying' is 'processing' precisely because it leaves the sound intact—it doesn't remove any element of the sound. With amplifying, we can listen to all the detail of recorded sound.

What is it that makes one of your recordings 'better' than another?

Well, for me, a 'better' recording contains something characteristic in the sound itself. 'Better' also depends on what feelings I had when I originally made the recordings.

Why field recording? Would you consider combining field recording with another approach?

I also take photographs, so I took the approach of combining field recording and photography some time ago. I believe that capturing sound has a huge potential in the domain of art, music, in workshops and in our daily life. For me, the interpretation of art-works using sound is much wider than that available to works that use a visual or other artistic medium. At the same time, sound has considerable power to connect to an instinctive part of us as human beings. Every time I record sound, I am discovering something new.

Is it important to think about images and text to accompany the recordings?

It depends on the project. If the project is research-based or something like a 'document' of a place, I think putting texts and/or photos with audio recordings can be better and can make the project clearer. On the other hand, if the work has a poetic orientation, I prefer only to use audio recordings since it makes the work more poetic. In general terms, I feel that it is important to keep things in the vague domain, to leave meanings in a grey zone, to use abstractness and to place interpretation into someone else's hands (the listeners).

OK, with that context in mind, can we move to talk about specific works that you have created? What about 'Colony'?

Colony is a collection of raw recordings focused on communication signals of small insects and sounds taken from their natural habitat. Over the course of almost three years, I made recordings at several locations at those specific times of year when the insects become most active. Various insect soundscapes exist, each defined by different characteristics of the small spaces that they inhabit. Insects have an extraordinarily acute sense of hearing, and there is research that suggests they respond to a wide range of sounds and can freely adjust the level of their hearing in accordance with the sounds of their own. Sound is the most important component of their lives, which made it interesting to recreate the sounds of their immediate surroundings and their communication signals.

Colony is entirely free of artificial or man-made sounds, eliminated so that the sounds from the insects' surroundings can be heard as clearly as possible. The actual spaces that we human beings inhabit in everyday life, of course, are always closely connected to theirs. From a bush in our yard, a park at a city street corner, to areas that are rural, a myriad of communities exist in various places. In Japanese culture, appreciating the sounds of insects is a tradition that goes back to olden times, their sounds enjoyed as songs, as a voice or as a message from another creature. Many such sounds exist in the changing of the seasons and in a delicate natural environment, and these are certain to keep stimulating our own sensibility.

I try to add Japanese feeling—like delicateness or the Japanese take on minimalism—to all of my recordings. 'Suikinkutsu' that we talked about before is an obvious example. But, more fundamentally, all my work is recorded in Japan, by myself, a Japanese person, so it is natural that the work is going to have some Japanese feeling.

Going back to *Colony*, Japanese people are familiar with insect voices

as part of their traditions and I am curious to know how people who live in other countries respond to my album. I found some research that showed evidence that Japanese brains have learned to deal with the insect voice as a creature's voice while European and American brains apprehend insect sound as noise. *Colony* is important because it is a release that includes recordings made when I first started out. When I recorded these sounds, I had no intention to create a work as such, there was no plan for an album. It was just that I liked the sound of insect voices and the soundscape animated by insects and so I spent time over the years recording this. Sometimes I use my recordings for my pure listening enjoyment in my daily life.

Your SoundCloud page is very active, isn't it? Some of those tracks have been listened to by large numbers of people. When the listener hears a track like 'Melting Snow', with its jungle crows, what do you think they hear? Do they imagine something? A space? A feeling? What do you think?

I think so many people listened to 'Melting Snow' because the track was selected as a 'SoundCloud Of The Day'. This recording is the sound of melting snow in a bamboo grove just as you can see in the accompanying photograph. At night, when the snow absorbed all the sound, the place was silent, a place of no sound. Then, with sunrise, the temperatures heated up and the snow melted in one breath, and the sound overflowed and that is when I recorded 'Melting Snow'. I think the listeners can feel the fresh air of the winter morning in the recording itself.

Your track 'Into The Nothings' released on Impulsive Habitat is a beautiful spot in which to lose yourself and yet I am never exactly clear what it is that I am listening to. I sometimes hear things like footsteps but find it hard to locate a sense of space. Sometimes it sounds a contact mic buried inside the roots of a tree or some rocks? What do you think the listener feels when they listen to this track? Does it matter to you what the listener experiences?

'Into The Nothings' was recorded in the 'sea of trees' in Fuji. The sea of trees in Fuji is famous as a mystery zone where you cannot use a compass and where once you have lost your way you will never return. I often go to Mt. Fuji for recording, so I became interested in creating a work there.

The concept of the work focuses on the nature of the 'sea of trees'—losing a sense of space and of direction and experiencing the characteristic quietness. I think this work requires more concentration on the part of the listeners. I do care about the listener's experience and when I create work, I think about that a lot. I would say that this

emphasis on the listener's experience is another reason why my works are not 'documents'. It is not that I am critical about whether a recording is presented as a 'document'; it is just that my style is not like that.

Before we finish, can we return to something that you said when you were talking about 'Colony'? I think I have read an interview with you elsewhere where you say something similar about wanting to exclude human beings from the recordings.

I don't care very much either way about the sound of human beings. What I am interested in is what I have said to you: the micro-detailed delicate sound, particularly sound with less information content. When our ears and brains capture the sounds made by humans, very often we derive much more information from those sounds than any other, human-less, environmental sounds. I guess that explains how you came up with that impression of my work.

But could you ever imagine taking the approach you have to recording and applying it to the human world?

It is true that I am interested in the native and traditional cultures of human life. I respect Francois Jouffa's work a lot. If I could only find a creative way to solve the problem of too-much-information in sounds of human origin, I might create a work based on a particular theme. For example, I am interested in the characteristic regional sounds such as rice-planting or potters' wheels. Sound with less-information, something like one footstep every five minutes or so, has possibilities. I am not so good in places where there is a massive chaotic information flow like in Shibuya in Tokyo.