

Visions of Japan

for shakuhachi and string instruments (2017)
written for and dedicated to Joseph Lee

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PROGRAMME NOTE

I have never been to Japan, but there is a lot about Japanese culture and aesthetics that resonates with me. Poetry, food, architecture, philosophy, music — why is it that these things resonate with me? There is something about this resonance that reminds me of wilderness trips I have taken in northern Lapland in Finland. Something about the bare aesthetics of the landscape, the simple juxtapositions of small, almost unnoticeable contrasts make me want to revisit these places.

In writing this collection of pieces, I explore these sentiments and hunches further, and I look into my own visions of Japan — how have I come to understand Japanese aesthetics through the arts? Like a blind person having paintings described to them, or a disabled person viewing pictures and hearing field recordings from far-away wilderness, I have acquired a set of imagined visions of Japan. While these visions perhaps bear some truth in relation to how Japan actually is, in the end, they are perhaps a reflection of my own personal aesthetics; the elements in my own tastes, experiences, and aesthetic choices, which resonate in my encounters with Japanese culture and aesthetics.

行 (gyō) — *line; row; verse*

Gyō draws on shakuhachi notation which, in turn, is influenced by the Japanese writing system (vertical lines) and alphabets. It is both about visual lines on the score, the tuned strings of the individual instruments, as well as musical “lines” and the multiplicity that arises from a recombination of smaller elements. This piece may be played by shakuhachi and any combination of 2–4 string instruments for which it is scored (i.e. two violins, viola and cello, two cellos, three violas, string quartet, etc). There is no score, only individual parts.

雨後 (ugo) — *after rain*

The Japanese people's relationship to rain and water is a fascinating one that goes deep within their culture. This is evident not only in the ways in which water and rain find their way in Japanese poetry, art, and philosophy but in their rich vocabulary for words related to rain. This solo shakuhachi piece uses notation inspired by traditional shakuhachi notation.

四方 (shihō) — *the four cardinal directions*

This piece for shakuhachi and string quartet is inspired by the four string instruments accompanying the shakuhachi. In terms of material, it draws on four shakuhachi folk pieces that I myself learned on the instrument as a beginner.

I. 行 (gyō)

line; row; verse

II. 雨後 (ugo)

after rain

III. 四方 (shihō)

the four cardinal directions