

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Chashitsu: Auditory Tea Room

Joint Talk by Midori Komachi and Nick Luscombe

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Midori Komachi's Introduction

Hello everyone, and thank you to the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation for hosting this talk today, and of course to everyone for joining us. Today, we would like to talk about our project, *Chashitsu: Auditory Tea Room*, which will launch in October with an album and a live concert at the Royal Albert Hall. To begin, we would like to briefly talk a bit about our backgrounds.

I am a violinist and composer based in London with a particular interest in Japanese and British music. As a composer, my work often explores Japanese traditions in dialogue with Western practices, as well as surround sound design in sound installations and immersive experiences. Some of my recent works include composing sound installations for *Bamboo Ring* by Kengo Kuma (in collaboration with Musicity), and most recently, the sound design for the Japan Pavilion at the London Design Biennale, *Paper Clouds*, designed by Sekisui House Kuma Lab.

My current PhD research at Goldsmiths explores the sonic concept of "spatial timbre," which was first introduced at the Osaka World Expo in 1970. This research has taken me to this year's World Expo in Osaka, where I worked for the UK Pavilion as a music and audio content editor. Some of you may know me more as a classical violinist specializing in performing works by British composers such as Gustav Holst, Frederick Delius, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, as well as through my publications on Delius and Vaughan Williams in Japan. Through all of these strands of work, I am passionate about bridging Japan and the UK through music, discovering unfamiliar sounds, and creating new experiences.

Over to you, Nick.

Nick Luscombe's Introduction

Thank you, Midori. Before I introduce myself, I should probably mention how we met, which was through Daiwa. I came to a performance by Midori quite a few years ago and afterward interviewed her for my radio show. We quickly realised that there were so many crossover interests in both of our worlds: the music of Japan

and the UK, architecture, and World Expos. So, what we are talking about today has been a long time coming, probably about five years of discussions and work.

My background is as a BBC radio presenter and producer making radio shows. On the next slide, you can see some of the BBC programs I've worked on: *Late Junction*, various album compilations, and *Unpopular Music*, which was a fun series featuring sessions from experimental artists. I also worked on ambient soundscapes for Slow Radio on BBC Radio 3. I spent most of my time working in those areas.

The reason I am in Okinawa today is that I am collaborating with OIST (the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology) on a project called "Sonic Lab," funded by the Japanese government. We are looking at sound and well-being, specifically how sound influences our health and state of mind. We are doing this in Okinawa because it is known for having an incredibly long-lived population, some of the oldest people in the world are living here in Okinawa right now. We are curious about how the landscapes and soundscapes of Okinawa contribute to that well-being. Sonic Lab is an ongoing exploration of these relationships.

In my work, I spend a lot of time doing field recordings, as you can see in these photographs. I record in all kinds of weird and wonderful places in Japan, from the Nakagin Capsule Tower (pictured in the middle) to Hokkaido and Okinawa. We'll talk a bit more about how sound surveys and field recordings played an essential role in Midori's album.

Everything comes together through the website musicity.space, which has hosted our various projects over the last 15 years. This brilliant collaboration with Midori is the latest iteration of that work. We are excited to dive deeper into it today. Thank you for the opportunity for this introduction; I'll hand you back to Midori.

Midori Komachi's Presentation

Now we would like to talk more about the project concept and how *Chashitsu* turned into a music project. As an avid tea drinker myself, I was naturally drawn to the chashitsu (Japanese tea room) as an experiential concept. It appeals to me not only for its minimalistic beauty and versatility, but as a space that invites you to escape to another world, offering a sense of reconnection with nature and your inner self. It also beautifully embodies the philosophy of shedding our egos and practicing mutual respect, regardless of status or background.

Typically, the chashitsu is described in terms of its visual and architectural characteristics, while much less is said about its sound. Some might say that is because there is hardly any sound or music in a tea ceremony. For me, however, it is full of sonic events and aesthetics. There is so much in the chashitsu that resonates with music. Drawing on the philosophy of traditional Japanese music, I became fascinated with the idea of attentive listening, which can reveal an entirely new sound world.

This brings us to the paradox of silence and *ma*: the Japanese word representing both silence and space. What seems silent, empty, or void is actually full of meaning. Through what I call "the way of listening," we discover that this void is actually a rich field of sonic events. John Cage's famous statement that "there is no such thing as

silence" is well known and was articulated in the Western avant-garde context in the 20th century. Yet, this exact principle has long been embedded in the foundation of Japanese aesthetics.

At its core, this project treats sound as a kind of sonic architecture. Just as physical architecture shapes the way we move, see, and feel within a space, music also shapes the way we listen, perceive, and experience space. I feel that architecture is inherently sonic because when we make sound in a built environment, that sound is a direct reflection of the physical architecture. Listening itself is architectural because it is about how we experience and engage with space.

We are delighted to present this project in the form of an album, which will be released with Musicity, alongside a live performance. My compositions interweave field recordings captured around different chashitsu by Nick. The album was selected by the PRS Foundation's *Women Make Music* scheme. The album version offers something distilled and intimate, with each track focusing on a specific step in the journey of experiencing and entering a chashitsu, which we will detail shortly.

Our live performance will take place in the Elgar Room at the Royal Albert Hall on the 14th of October. This will be an extension of the album, where we will explore the dynamic movement of space. It will feature a unique stage setting, quite different from what you would expect at a conventional classical concert. I will be using speakers and live technology during the performance to transform the physical space, reflecting the philosophy and aesthetics of the chashitsu. Nick will also be DJing a series of ambient music.

Nick Luscombe: Yes, I'll be playing environmental Japanese music, focusing heavily on 80s ambient and New Age music. Again, architecture will definitely be one of the central reference points for that selection. It should be a highly unusual and interesting evening.

Midori Komachi: Now, we would like to share the very first public preview of the album: a video featuring our opening track, *Roji* (The Tea Garden).

(A video preview of the track "Roji" is played)

This film was shot at the chashitsu at the Kanagawa Kenmin Hall (Karakino Theater) in Yokohama.

What I wanted to create in this project is not just a piece of music, but a carefully designed journey. The *roji*, the tea garden surrounding the chashitsu that you just saw in the film, is not simply a walkway. It is a journey of transition, preparing guests to enter the tea room with a completely different state of mind. In the same way, I see this musical work as guiding the listener through a designed pathway of sound, gesture, and resonance.

While the chashitsu and *chado* (the way of tea) may appear to be fixed, rigid traditions, historically they have continually transformed to reflect the aesthetics of their time. The more informal chashitsu we recognise today began to take shape rapidly in the 16th century, starting with Takeno Joo, who brought tea closer to the everyday world through rustic simplicity. He left materials like bamboo and plain wood unpolished, establishing a sense of informal, natural beauty.

Sen no Rikyu refined this into *Wabicha*, which later tea masters such as Furuta Oribe, Kobori Enshu, and Sen no Sotan each reshaped in their own ways, whether through bold asymmetry, elegant playfulness, or refined restraint. Together, these shifts in aesthetics show that the chashitsu was never a static concept, but rather a mirror of evolving cultural values.

This sense of creative shift continues today. Modern architects have interpreted the chashitsu in many different ways as a reflection of contemporary society. Here we have four striking examples:

1. Kengo Kuma's *Fuan*: A floating, pneumatic structure representing what he calls "chashitsu as virtual reality." Inside, you can produce a reality completely cut off from the physical world.
2. Tokujin Yoshioka's *Kou-An*: A structure made entirely from glass. For Yoshioka, the chashitsu is a device that creates entirely new sensory experiences.
3. Shinichiro Hashiguchi's *Kasumi-an*: A delicate structure made of woven threads, representing the process of refinement and transformation.
4. Terunobu Fujimori's *Takasugi-an*: Literally meaning "a tea house built too high." It looks like a treehouse, and Fujimori describes it as the ultimate personal architecture.

While these four examples are radically different, what connects them is a shared sense of stepping into another world, one that is deeply personal, yet still connected with the world, and perhaps offering something beyond everyday life.

Inspired by these modern interpretations, my goal is to interpret this tradition through the medium of sound. To me, the chashitsu feels like a bubble of thoughts and ideas: fluid and open rather than fixed. That sense of fluidity inspired me to approach the music with imagination and expansiveness. Nick, did you have anything you wanted to add to this?

Nick Luscombe: Actually, a question just came to my mind about this. I know we both commented on Kengo Kuma's *Fuan* when we saw it, and I was wondering if that was something that really inspired you to think about the tea house in a different way? There is obviously so much tradition involved, yet Kuma created this almost jellyfish-like version of a tea house using plastic sheeting. Did it make you think about how you could interpret the tradition just as radically in your music?

Midori Komachi: Yes, definitely. Kengo Kuma's *Fuan* was one of the very first modern chashitsu that really stuck with me and kept me thinking because it is so different. The fact that it is an imaginative world, which Kuma described as a virtual reality, and its sense of freedom inspired me to realise that while we are still referring to tradition, we can create a completely new experience and expand our imagination.

Nick Luscombe: I love that. The four examples here are all about that spirit, aren't they? That is something Japan does incredibly well: it values and understands tradition deeply, but it tries to drill down into the absolute essence of it on a visual level. Your album is doing that exact same work on an audio level. Getting deep into

these areas, referring to tradition while creating something entirely new—is one of the many things I love about Japan.

Midori Komachi: For me, the chashitsu is also a metaphor for a stage. During Sen no Rikyu's time, the chashitsu represented the pursuit of new experiences and was designed for learning, healing, heightened awareness, and nurturing mutual respect. This comes from the principle of *Ichiza konryu*: the idea that the host and the guest together shape the experience, and that your own energy and receptivity create the ambience of the space.

In that sense, I think of the chashitsu as a performance stage. The scholar Tatsusaburo Hayashiya reminded us that long before Rikyu's time, the tea room was essentially a form of entertainment. He wrote that the chashitsu is itself a stage, where the host is both actor and producer, and the guests are the audience.

At the heart of our project is this kind of reciprocity in performance: music is not just moving from performer to listener, but circling back as the performer listens to the audience, the space, and the shifting perspectives. I want this project to embody that.

In the live production, the sounds will be set in motion through the physical space to explore that sense of shifting perspectives. Uniquely, it will be set in a quadraphonic sound system, which means placing four speakers at the corners of the space that I will control live as I perform. I will be controlling various musical motifs that travel around the room through these speakers. This placement of four corners directly echoes the four sides of a traditional tea room.

In modern surround sound settings, formats like 5.1 or 7.1 (which use five to seven or more speakers around a space) are standard. However, I deliberately chose quadraphonic sound with fewer speakers and fewer points of projection. I feel this restraint creates a stronger sense of space and *ma*. It allows the listener to clearly perceive the movement of sound around them and to feel each shift in timbre and direction.

This is also where my broader research into the concept of "spatial timbre" is incorporated into the composition. Instead of treating timbre or tone color as a fixed, unchanging quality of an instrument, I use it as an active compositional parameter. Rather than layering many different instruments, I focus on just one, the violin, and explore its full spectrum of colors. The idea is to create gradations in sound that move through space to build depth. It is similar to the *bokashi* technique in woodblock printing, where gradations of color create a sense of depth.

When I think of the chashitsu as sonic architecture, I think about how space can be shaped by subtraction rather than addition. For me, the quadraphonic setup embodies this kind of subtraction and restraint. It is a paring back that leaves room for sounds to breathe.

This idea aligns with Toru Takemitsu's theory of the "river of sounds." Takemitsu described music as something carved out from the endless current of sounds already flowing all around us. In his 1971 essay, he wrote: "*A river of sound, a river teeming with innumerable concrete sounds, endlessly flowing day and night. Each of the sounds*

that make up this river possesses its own unique life and character. To compose, in my view, is to grasp the sound one should listen to from within this flowing river of sound."

In Japanese aesthetics across different art forms, there is often an emphasis on subtraction rather than accumulation. Takemitsu once contrasted this with Western music, which he described as being constructed like architectural blocks, sound built dialectically, one piece on top of another, to create harmony. By contrast, Japanese music is about carving away from the myriad of sounds that already exist and allowing what remains to resonate.

In that sense, sonic architecture can be defined as the invisible architecture we inhabit: a space carved from our environment through sound, where timbre builds depth and movement. It is an art of subtraction, of revealing what is already alive in the world around us. This concept connects deeply with the philosophy of *chado*. Composing with this philosophy is not an act of building from nothing, but about drawing out what is already there in the environment, listening for what is alive, and allowing that energy of sound itself to define the structure of space and time.

In my own work, I think of each sound as shaping a timbre that has its own radiant energy, movement, and character. To practice sonic architecture is to create a space in which these sounds and silence, with their own radiant energies, can coexist.

Nick Luscombe: If I could just jump in here, when Ryuichi Sakamoto played at the Camden Arts Centre a few years ago I chatted with him afterward. I had recently been in Aomori recording the sounds of insects and nature, and I was talking to Ryuichi about field recordings. I knew that he was also at a stage in his life where he was really interested in stripping everything back and getting into very minimal music.

I asked him, "Do you ever listen to the sounds of nature and think they are beautiful as a composition in themselves? As a musician and composer, do you ever feel, why bother composing when such a beautiful soundscape already exists?"

He agreed and said that as he got older, he realised the sounds of nature were indeed the ultimate composition. Yet, he added that it didn't stop him from trying to be as good as that, which says a lot about how incredibly humble he was. This really connects to your idea of subtraction and the Takemitsu quotes you shared. Field recordings and listening play a huge part in the Japanese compositional tradition.

Midori Komachi: Yes! Ryuichi Sakamoto's music inspired me deeply as well, particularly how he incorporated field recordings to find motifs already present in the environment. That is essentially what our album is about.

Many of these tracks contain field recordings that Nick captured around various chashitsu in Japan, and my composition process started directly from those recordings, finding rhythms or motifs within them, and then allowing those elements to germinate and become more dynamic.

We would like to share a selection of these tracks. The album is structured as a journey, starting from entering the *roji* (the tea garden), going into the chashitsu, experiencing the tea ceremony itself, and finally experiencing darkness with the paper lantern.

Interestingly, the actual tea ceremony, *Chanoyu* (Track 9), is quite far down the tracklist. This shows how significant the process and the journey of transition are. Each track focuses on a specific step of that journey. It is my sonic interpretation of these steps. When focusing on these points, I found so many things happening in nature that I had many different ideas, even from just one small element.

I'd like to share a selection of these tracks. The first track, *Roji*, is the one you heard in the music video. I will play just the opening phrase to show you the first motif. This motif is then deconstructed and reappears in different forms throughout the other tracks of the journey.

(A clip from the track "Roji" is played)

The *roji* is the first step into another world. I imagined these sounds calling from that other world, which reminded me of the sounds of the *sho*, a traditional mouth organ that symbolises the sound of heaven. This first motif appears in many different ways throughout the album.

Once you pass the *chumon* (the middle gate that separates the outer and inner gardens), the environment becomes much stiller, and you begin to hear the natural sounds of birds. The track *Roji-sukashi* is inspired by the design of how leaves filter sunlight, leaving a pattern of shadows and light on the ground, often translated as "the see-through garden." I was interested in how the birds resonate through this space, their songs creating overlapping patterns that evolve subtly over time, much like the patterns of the leaves. This track also includes a field recording by Nick.

(A clip from the track "Roji-sukashi" is played)

Nick, would you like to talk about making that field recording?

Nick Luscombe: All the field recordings were taken around different chashitsu. This one was recorded in late summer or early autumn. Hearing it now is wonderful because you can really feel the atmosphere. Since going through the mastering and listening process, I can no longer disassociate the field recordings from the violin, they have merged in my head, which means the combination works. It is lovely to feel that sense of *komorebi*, the beautiful Japanese word for light filtering through the trees. I can really feel that now when listening to it.

Midori Komachi: After experiencing the step of purification at the *tsukubai* (the water basin) to cleanse the hands, the visitor finally arrives in front of the chashitsu, where they see the small, square entrance called the *nijiriguchi*. The word *nijiriguchi* comes from the verb *nijiru*, which means to kneel and crawl forward slowly. Everyone entering the chashitsu must kneel to enter. This ritual strips away our ego and reminds us that everyone inside is equal.

Personally, when I kneel with my hands on the tatami, I feel grounded and connected to the earth. This physical movement reminded me of the motion of my violin bow on the strings, where energy flows back and forth to awaken the spirit. I was inspired by this physical movement to write a rhythmic motif that carries throughout this section. In contrast to this, I also wrote a melody reminiscent of the *bichiriki* in *gagaku*, an instrument that symbolises voices reverberating through the earth.

(A clip from the track "Nijiriguchi" is played)

Now, we finally come inside the chashitsu. Once inside, you are in a very small space, usually the size of 4.5 tatami mats. Yet, even though it is small, once you sit inside, it somehow feels expansive. Objects are placed asymmetrically, creating a subtle sense of *ma*. I imagined the sounds bouncing off the four sides of the room as silence weaves between them. This movement is about the shift between the tangible physical room and the personal, imagined room.

As the tea ceremony is prepared, we come to the *ro*, the sunken hearth. The sounds come alive here with crackling, sparkling sounds that become part of the experience as the host prepares the fire. This is a very playful track; I wanted to capture the play of the sparkling sounds and the movement of the flame.

(A clip from the track "Ro" is played)

Then, we arrive at the actual tea ceremony, *Chanoyu*. This is a very quiet space where silence itself carries meaning and gestures are highly significant. Nick recorded this entire tea ceremony at the Chazen tea room in Tokyo. Each musical motif echoes a meaningful gesture.

(A clip from the track "Chanoyu" is played)

The field recording is quite quiet here, but as you listen further into the track, you will hear more things going on. Nick, what was your experience like recording the tea ceremony?

Nick Luscombe: As you said, a lot of it was very quiet, but every single element felt important. It is a physical and visual process, but there were hidden sonic moments, like the rustling of a kimono or movement on the tatami mats—that became deeply significant in capturing the material sound of the space. It struck me that the tea ceremony is very much a performance in itself. People often focus on the visual aspects, but the sound is equally important. Was that your experience as well, Midori?

Midori Komachi: Yes, there is definitely a sense of tension and heightened awareness that helps you discover more. It is because of that silence and *ma* that we notice these subtle sounds and gestures, questioning their meaning. I wanted to interpret that same awareness through sound.

Nick Luscombe: Exactly. Going back to the previous track, *Ro*, which features the fire sounds: hearing it through Zoom, I loved how playful it felt. It almost sounded as though your violin was on fire and you were trying to play it before it burned away! I'm sure that wasn't your literal intention, but it was an interesting image

that came to mind. It's fascinating how these visual and audio worlds merge when you listen, telling a different story, much like how Kengo Kuma designed *Fuan* or how others approach visual design.

Midori: Yes, it's always wonderful to hear different interpretations, and I'm really excited to hear how other people experience the music.

The final track in the journey is *Andon* (The Paper Lantern). This track is about the appreciation of shadows. As Sen no Rikyu famously said, "Let the shadows play."

Looking closely at the chashitsu, we see how its design and philosophy mirror the values of attentive listening, mindfulness, peace, and connection with nature. I hope our music strives to achieve the same. We hope this project is only the beginning. This time, we have produced an album and a live performance, but we are excited to see how this concept might live in other formats.

The album will be released on Musicity on the 10th of October. Here is a first look at the album cover, specially illustrated by British designer Toni Giddings. This is her visual interpretation of the chashitsu through my music, a very evocative, imaginative, and modern take on the tea room.

Our live performance at the Royal Albert Hall is on the 14th of October, and tickets have just gone on sale today. If you are interested, please come along!

Thank you so much for listening,