



The Concept of *Ma* in Western Art Music

From Religious Architecture to the Interpretation of Time

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Ma (間) as a Religio-Aesthetic Concept

At its core, the concept of *Ma* is deeply rooted in the Japanese indigenous religion of Shinto. It is closely connected to nature, and grounded in a unified, non-dualistic understanding of time and space. This concept is often expressed in Shinto architecture, i.e. in the *Himorogi* or the *Torii*, a traditional gate marking the entrance to a transcendental space. Japanese arts such as *Noh* theatre, reflect these aesthetics, thereby revealing the deep interconnection between religion, architecture and the performing arts.



Torii Gate (Pixabay, Public Domain)

Aims and Methods

The aim of my research is to deepen our understanding of the aesthetic foundations of compositions by Japanese composers since 1945, particularly with regard to the interpretation of time through the concept of *Ma*. Therefore, I will employ methods of ethnomusicological and performance practice research, including interviews with Japanese artists, analyses of musical scores and discourse analysis.

The Discourse of Timing in Post-1945 Compositions

A defining characteristic of Western contemporary art music since 1945 has been the emphasis on precise temporal control, which drastically limits the performers' interpretive flexibility. This aesthetic, largely shaped by the *Darmstadt School*, had emerged in response to the horrors of World War II. Its intention was to sever aesthetic ties to the past and to music resistant to ideological appropriation such as nationalist propaganda.



Marty, Luca. *Jo-Ha-Kyu* Original musical score, © Luca Marty, 2017.

In contrast to this West-European discourse, *Ma* offers a radically different understanding of musical time, by offering silence, space and temporal openness as tools for expression and improvisation. Japanese composers such as Tōru Takemitsu (1930–1996), were among the first to introduce these new aesthetic perspectives into Western art music.



