

A photograph of a modern building and a colorful quilt against a blue sky. The building is on the left, and the quilt is on the right. The quilt is made of many small, colorful pieces of fabric, some with patterns and some with text. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

# アサージュ東京 Ensembles Tokyo

## **Making Music with Everyone**

**Otomo Yoshihide and Yasuhiro Yoshigaki Interview**

English translation by David Novak & dj sniff

## In the Wake of Ensembles Tokyo

In 2020, Ensembles Tokyo concluded its 6-year run as one of the most distinctive music festivals in Japan, focusing on participation-based programs led by cutting-edge artists. For each programmed event, the general public participated in workshops, followed by concert performances as well as Bon Odori dances that took place in front of Tokyo Station or at the foot of Tokyo Tower. One of the festival's most notable achievements was its development of new ways for engaging with music in public spaces, creating possibilities that could not be achieved in conventional venues. After having seen the festival's Artistic Director Otomo Yoshihide run workshops in Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam, I felt that there might be something universal to his methods, which could transcend cultural and linguistic differences.

After the spread of COVID-19, when we had to abandon the notion of holding the festival in person, I thought that this might be a good opportunity to develop teaching materials, something like a textbook, to present Otomo's and percussionist Yasuhiro Yoshigaki's methods of conducting, which utilize various hand signs to direct diverse groups of performers. By analyzing and abstracting this into easily-understood graphical scores, I thought, the legacy of Ensembles Tokyo could be passed on to future practitioners.

However, as I talked to both artists, they emphasized that their workshops fed off of the spontaneity of group dynamics, and that the independent sounds played by each participant at any given moment, rather than the signals of the conductor, was what determined the musical flow. It became clear that these intuitive sensibilities, derived from personal experiences, were the key to their methods. The hand signs were not instructions to achieve the same result every time. Rather, they offered an opportunity to recognize the possibilities of making unique music with the specific group of people that gathered on that occasion. At the very foundation of this music was the desire to "make music together," through interactive relationships that take time to develop. A textbook presentation of the signs or the instructions could not bring us close to the essence of this musical world.

My hope is that the interviews included here, along with the video and audio documentation of the festival events, will help convey this sense of collaboration – a collaborative sensibility rooted not only in music but also in our society and everyday life -- that lies at the heart of the joyful music created at Ensembles Tokyo.

January 2021 dj sniff



## With Confidence, Everything Works Out

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Otomo Yoshihide performing with workshop participants at Tokyo Tower in Ensembles Tokyo 2017

### The Basic Hand Signs

Sniff: To start us off, can you explain the hand signs that you use for conducting?

Otomo: I'll explain the basic signs first, because I change them depending on the group. For “#1”, I wave my index finger down, which tells the performer to make a short sound. In Western art music, you might call this an eighth note or staccato, but I avoid using that terminology and just describe it as a “short, sharp sound.” The sound should be timed precisely at the end of the finger’s downward motion, as if striking a drum. The larger the gesture, the louder the sound.

You don't have to do the same thing every time, and each person can freely decide on what sound to make. For example, this gesture doesn't determine any particular pitch, so players with tonal instruments can change their pitch with each signal, and those with non-tonal instruments can change the nuance or timbre of their sound. We always start with this exercise.

Next is “#5.” Players start making a long sound when I extend all the fingers of my hand, and stop when I close them. Instruments that can produce sustained sounds, like violins or wind instruments, should hold one note steadily. Guitars and percussion instruments can use repeated plucking or rolls to create a continuous sound. If I give this sign repeatedly, I'm asking the players to change the pitch and nuance of the sound each time. Just as in sign #1, the size of the gesture determines the volume. At the beginning of each workshop, we practice #5 just after introducing #1.

What happens next really depends on the situation, and how the members of each particular group work together. Most often I move on to “#3”, which signals a variable pattern of sounds by showing the index, middle, and ring finger on one hand. For children, who sometimes find it difficult to understand the idea of a pattern, I will ask them to “make a rhythm.” #3 creates a lot more sonic variety than signs like #1 and #5, which usually apply to the whole group. In contrast, #3 is assigned individually and the selected player can decide freely on what to do in response to the signal. The only guideline is that the tempo and pattern should not be too complicated, so that it is easy for the others to imitate. Alternatively, the conductor can use #3 to set the tempo for a rhythm played by the whole ensemble.

#3 is a good sign for developing interactions within the ensemble. Let's say the conductor assigns #3 to one player, and they produce a triple beat, like “1, 2, 3/1, 2, 3.” Then, the conductor might point to that player and give the “Copy” sign, also called the “Pickpocket” sign (a bent index finger that looks like a hook), which signals other performers to reproduce that pattern. They can choose to imitate the rhythm exactly or they can decide to reinterpret it, for example, “1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3.” This kind of practice helps to gradually build a sense of an ensemble. When a duet is established between player A and player B, then #3 can be used to signal player C, and a third person joins their rhythm. From there, for example, the conductor can assign #1 to everyone else.

To keep the rhythm going, the conductor can use the “Continue” sign (thumb and index finger shaped as the letter “C” but turned on its back looking like the shape of “U”), which is a technique borrowed from Butch Morris' (\*1) Conduction that he often described as “Loop” or “Go back-and-forth.” For my purposes, it just means “keep doing what you're doing.” So, if I show this sign to the trio playing the triple beat, and then show #1 to the others, it creates a



#1 “Make short sound”



#5 “Make long sound”



#3 “Make a rhythm”

rhythmic structure, like “1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, bang,” which is played together, but not in unison. When I’m first working with a group, I usually spend the first 30 minutes making simple arrangements with these signs.

You can do a lot of things with just #1, #5, #3, Continue, and Copy. The other signs I use regularly are the “Play freely” sign (a beckoning gesture with just the index finger or the whole hand), the “Stop” sign (closing of the hand) and the “Play only when the finger passes in front of you” sign. For this last one, I point my finger and they can play any sound they like when my finger passes in front of them, but must stop after it passes by. If the finger continues to point at them, then they have to keep playing. Speeding up or slowing down as you pass by makes this a kind of a game, and it’s an especially fun way to engage children without making things too boring for them. So those are the core signs that I use most of the time.

On occasion, if there are a lot of harmonic instruments that can play chords, then I might assign #4 to play, for example, a C chord. Or depending on the group, I might use #4 to signal those playing something at that moment to stop, and signal the others who had not been playing to imitate what was just being played.

There is also a sign called “Memory,” which is often used in John Zorn’s (\*2) Cobra and Butch Morris’ Conduction. When the conductor taps a single finger on his head, it means remember what you are doing right now. For example, if a triple beat is being played at that moment, then the players should remember and store that rhythm as “Memory #1.” As the music progresses, the memory signal for #1 tells the players to retrieve that triple beat rhythm from memory and play it. Among really advanced players, this sign can be used to develop some interesting combinations, sometimes increasing the memory signals up to three different “slots”.

Sniff: So after establishing these basic signs, you can freely assign meanings to other signs, depending on how the workshop is going?

Otomo: Right, I come up with some meanings for signs right on the spot. Depending on the participants, I can develop a new meaning for a gesture and assign it to #2, #4, a fist or a thumbs-up, or anything: we avoid the middle finger, though (laughs). Once I was working with elementary school students at a workshop for the Sapporo International Art Festival (SIAF), and when I tried to explain that #3 was used to create a pattern, they asked “what’s a pattern?” Then the first and second graders said, “This is a pattern!” and started to fall on the ground, saying “Patan!” (the onomatopoeic sound in Japanese for something falling over and hitting the ground). It was so funny that I said: “Ok, let’s make #2 signal “Patan!” so that the first and second graders have to fall to the floor!” I try to incorporate any idea that keeps things more interesting for the participants and works musically.

Sniff: So there’s a particular order to the way you introduce the signs in your workshops, right?

Otomo: We always do #1 and #5 first. After that, it varies -- sometimes #3 or the finger pointing one -- but after doing this for the past ten years, it has more or less been presented in this order. At first I used to allocate two days or so for these workshops, in order to incorporate a broader variety of signs, but gradually I realized that this kind of complexity wasn't necessary, so in the past seven or eight years I've settled on this simpler format.

Sniff: What was your process for developing this system of signs?

Otomo: I had experienced Butch Morris' Conduction in the 1990s, so at first I tried out a version of his techniques with my own band Ground Zero. I began adapting this system for workshops in the 2000s, and began thinking of ways to make it even simpler and easier to use with a general public. These workshops started to take shape around 2008-2009, I believe.

Sniff: Your conducted improvisations are widely known for including diverse groups of people with differing skills and abilities. Do you also use these signs when you work with professional musicians, like Morris did?

Otomo: I rarely use these techniques with professionals, except for some improvisations with the Otomo Yoshihide Special Big Band. Open improvisations with only 4 or 5 musicians generally tend to go pretty well without signs, but when the group gets larger than 10 it can become confusing. My main goal in using the signs is to develop a context for creating interesting music with non-musicians in a relatively short amount of time.

Of course there are other ways of making music with non-musicians, but most require a certain amount of practice or involve a laborious process to get to the point where you can play together, and I don't really want to deal with that. If you've never played an instrument before, you just do what you can with the skillsets you have. If you are already good at playing an instrument, you still do what you can. In essence, I settled on these signs by trying to figure out what people can do together on the spot without practicing.

## **The key to making music through Conduction**

Sniff: #1 is perhaps the most dynamic sign, bringing a lot of energy and letting the audience in on how the system works. Which signs do you rely on the most? Which are the ones that make the whole thing work?

Otomo: It really depends on the situation, but sometimes #1 works as a "reset" button at moments where things begin to fall apart. You don't want to give that sense to the participants or their spirits will drop, so instead you can use #1 to reset their energy. So #1 is very important, but because it's so simple it gets boring fast. You've got to think about the pacing. For example,

by changing up the dynamics to contrast loud and quiet sounds, even just short notes can make a big difference and lead to interesting musical results. Another thing that is interesting about #1, and also #5 for that matter, is how it works with a big group. One person making a short sound may not be so impressive, but when 10 or 30 people all make short sounds together, especially at the first meeting, then there is a “wow” factor. It’s a good way to transmit the power of playing in an ensemble without words, and it feels great for everyone. It’s sort of like the feeling of playing guitar in a band with bass, drums, and saxophone: you just feel so much more volume, energy, and sound coming back to you, compared to playing alone. That’s why I do this at the beginning, as a way to engage people, and if it works out then I can move on to the next thing. When you feel good, you start to feel confident, so the key is to create that vibe. What would you call this, musically speaking? Maybe to be in rhythm together, to feel the groove... making one short sound is the core of music making. I use #1 to introduce that sensibility.

Sniff: Would you say that the main goal is to get to that groove and help people feel confident together? Do you try to get to that place first?

Otomo: The goal... well, I really don’t know if there is a particular goal. If there are 20 people in the workshop, I want all 20 of them to share a feeling of making music together. It’s important that they feel like they have formed a group together, and also that they have acted on their own free will. Even though there is a conductor, they are not being driven toward a preset goal: instead they can look back and see that they were able to do something unexpected, all together, in an ensemble that was just formed.

sniff: Which are the signs that require participants to make choices?

Otomo: Well, they have to decide on which sounds to make for all the signs. For example, #1 and #5 are short and long sounds, but the pitch is not defined; for #3, I usually don’t specify the pattern that should be played. I also emphasize the fact that no matter how hard you try, no individual can change anything all by themselves. I think it’s important to recognize that no one person has control, and that we all work together to set the overall direction.

Sniff: After doing this for several years, do you have any anecdotes or tips on how non-musicians can best participate?

Otomo: From my perspective, probably the most important thing is to avoid setting up any expectations beforehand. I try not to have any particular plans, like, “first I’ll set the rhythm with #1, and then layer #5 on top of that.” It won’t work if you are not improvising in the moment; you should be desperately trying to figure out what is possible with your group in response to the sounds that just happened. I feel like I’m failing if I have to keep waving a sign over and over

to create a groove. The groove should come from the players, not from me. The role of the conductor should be to quickly figure out what is the most interesting direction that could emerge from the collection of instruments and skillsets across the members of that particular gathering, on that particular day.

Sniff: Did you start out thinking this way?

Otomo: At first, I thought from the perspective of a player. I thought I would be able to take more initiatives in John Zorn's Cobra than in Butch Morris' Conduction, because I thought I would be controlled by the conductor in Morris' group. Actually, that wasn't true: as you played, you would gradually understand that the conductor was responding to what you do. It's really about the balance between the conductor and the sounds from each player.

I had also assumed that only players with advanced techniques could respond to the conductor, but this was also untrue. Anyone, at any level, can take part in the negotiation. After I discovered what it was like as a player, I wanted to try conducting for myself, and I learned that it was much more fun to respond to the sounds that the players gave back to you and improvise your conducting based on that, rather than try to control the players in order to achieve a certain kind of outcome.

Sniff: For this year's edition of Ensembles Tokyo, we made a call for videos from the workshop participants; at one meeting, you mentioned that you didn't want to use these submission only as "sound material." In light of what you just mentioned regarding the negotiations and influence between the players and the conductor, what are your main concerns in terms of collabo-



Otomo Yoshihide's workshop in Ensembles Tokyo 2019

ration?

Otomo: I try not to reveal too many of my own preferences in terms of how I want things to turn out, to avoid reducing participants to just “sound sources.” If you hear a bass, for example, you might begin to think there should be drums and keyboard, too, and start to bring in reasoning from a composerly kind of perspective. I try not to think that way. My basic rule is that as long as you aren’t bothering anyone else – like playing too loud so that others can’t be heard or something like that -- then anything goes.

It’s important to avoid trying to control the situation, where you might end up exploiting others for the creation of your own work. For about 15 years I have been involved with organizing the “Oto Asobi No Kai” (Sound Play Meeting)(\*3), which works with children with disabilities. When I first started this collaboration, I felt a lot of resistance towards the approaches of previous guest teachers. I felt like they saw the children merely as a kind of sonic material: they would say things like, “Listen to the kids play! Their sounds are also a kind of music!” I asked them: “That might be true, but isn’t that just based on the perspective of the listener?” They replied triumphantly: “Exactly.” I responded: “So you mean the children are not aware that they are playing music. Is that so? Is this supposed to be the same as listening to a florescent light flickering, and announcing that sound, too, is music? Isn’t that just thinking of the children as sound sources?” This caused a lot of debate. But through this conflict it became quite clear to me that the performers should be aware that they are playing music and that they choose to be involved in musical activity, rather than being forced or merely used to produce sound material. When I first witnessed their workshop, the children did not seem to have any agency; instead, the act of “listening” by the adults took center stage. I was totally uninterested in this and felt strongly opposed to this approach. This experience had a strong influence on how I developed my workshops. I should say that when I work with “Oto Asobi No Kai,” I don’t conduct. When I tried, it became a lopsided mode of communication and without a consensus it didn’t feel fair. So conducting is not the only method for me to work with, although I choose to use it with certain groups. After working with “Oto Asobi No Kai” for several months, the children started to create their own forms of conducting, which were more similar to dancing. When I saw this, I felt even more strongly that there is no need for me to try to control anything.

### **“Warming things up”**

Sniff: For this year’s Ensemble Tokyo, there was some interest in making a textbook for conducting with hand signs, but you pointed out that it would be difficult to summarize a system without taking the background and personality of the conductor into consideration, so we decided to take a different path. What are the limitations of the hand signs, in terms of what they can and can’t communicate?

Otomo: When the idea came up, I too thought that it might be enough to just outline the

meanings of the signs. But when I gave it more thought, I realized it's not just about the signs. Of course, what Butch Morris or Santiago Vazquez (\*4) are doing is based on signs and there is a lot in just the meaning of the signs. But for me, the signs are just the start of it: as we go further, we can leave them behind. To put it more precisely, I am aiming for a place where an ensemble can emerge directly from the consensus reached between the participants, and rules don't have to be strictly followed. For example, we may begin by improvising with a few signs, but towards the end of the workshop I let the participants conduct the whole group. I always tell them that they don't have to follow the rules, and what happens is that the participants follow some of the rules but also bring in something new and different. By the end, everyone is having fun improvising around the conductor's signs, so that just the person in front of them moving their body becomes something to bounce off of, to play sounds and make music. During the first half of a workshop, I try to make people feel comfortable making sounds: I call this "warming things up." After things are warmed up, any action that can trigger a response becomes music. If I can do this in about 30 minutes, I feel like I have succeeded and the players are ready to improvise to anything. When I conduct workshops, I'm trying to get to that point as quickly as possible, where the signs can just disappear.

Sniff: That's really interesting. So, after things have warmed up and you pass on the conducting on to someone else, does the atmosphere change depending on who takes over? Does it sometimes cool down?

Otomo: In a brief workshop, it doesn't usually cool down, because everyone is having so much fun playing music that they want to keep going. At that point, they will play sounds to anything, like they could make sounds to the movements of a toddler. Small children move unpredictably, so it becomes closer to matching sounds with an improvised dance. Elementary school kids can be very quick at figuring out how to use the signs to take control of the situation, and all the adults around are thrilled to seeing an ensemble form just from a child waving their hand. So you can really feel each person's individuality come out. It's like in a blues concert, where the opening act warms up the crowd for B.B. King (\*5), right? By that time, the audience is ready to shout and cheer for the main act. I think of my workshops in these same simple terms; ultimately, I don't really care if the music is at a high aesthetic level. If everyone shares in some kind of musical meaning, I feel like that's enough to call it "music."

Sniff: You said that you feel that you've succeeded if you can warm things up in about 30 minutes: does it ever take longer, or can you get there more quickly?

Otomo: Sometimes. If the atmosphere is already good at the start it goes more quickly. It helps if the participants are already friends, or if they are older elementary school kids but if they are teenagers in a brass band or something it can take some time to get going. They will often be

too concerned about approval from their teachers or older students, which makes them hesitant to respond when I give them signs. Nothing can warm up in this situation, so I have to be overly enthusiastic to make them forget about who is watching.

Sniff: How do you sense how long something should last, or how to end it?

Otomo: It's different for each group. I try to look at their expressions, and stop right before they lose their concentration. When they lose their concentration the ending usually becomes too loose, so I think it's best to end while they are still feeling like they want to do more (laughs). That doesn't sound too artistic, does it? But it's really important. Each group differs, in terms of how long they can stay concentrated: most people can last for about an hour, so I try to wrap things up around 45 minutes. It's quite difficult to keep things going on for more than an hour and a half.

### **Trying to minimize the desire to control**

Numata: Warming things up takes some experience, doesn't it? Do you have any advice for those who are just starting to try it out?

Otomo: Like I was saying, the main thing is not to try to control the situation, right? It's best when you can catch on to what the participants are discovering on their own, and encourage them, like, "keep that going!" Without that capacity to be open to what others are doing and reflect on it – to see it and say "that's it!" -- you might miss some great stuff. So I don't bother



Otomo Yoshihide's workshop in Ensembles Tokyo 2019

torturing myself by trying to repeat something that worked in the previous workshop.

Numata: So don't think too hard about warming things up?

Otomo: Right. The participants are there because they want to play music, so it will happen eventually. Even if they can't play an instrument, there are some basic ways to make sounds and have fun, and as a conductor you have to be attentive to those moments. If you can think spontaneously about how to develop this sensibility with a group, then it always warms up, for sure. So yeah, I guess a little experience helps a lot!

Sniff: A normal conductor would tell you what not to do or describe something as "incorrect." You don't do that, do you?

Otomo: Not really.

Sniff: But that doesn't mean that absolutely anything is ok, either.... So how do you convey this balance to people, especially to participants doing this for the first time?

Otomo: If someone played a long sound on #1 when they were supposed to play a short sound, I would let them know that's not right. Otherwise, I don't tell them how it should sound musically. I never judge, for example, whether it's a good groove or not; you really can't do this music with those kinds of standards. If you are playing in a jazz big band, you might have to play a swing beat and if you are off or playing at the wrong tempo, someone's going to tell you. In this case, there is nothing upon which to base such a judgment, so it's totally fine if someone is off tempo. That's the way to think about it – just keep your mindset completely open. Of course, not everyone can think this way while they are playing, so you just try to have fun as much as possible and not be too concerned about anything else.

When you are working with people with disabilities, though, you have to be even more accommodating and minimize your desire to control even further. You have to be prepared to not interfere at all. Everything turns out to be interesting in the end.

Numata: Conduction might seem to be about control, but in fact it seems that letting go might be the trick of organizing a successful ensemble.

Otomo: There are some tricks, of course, when things aren't working, like going back to reset with #1. But even then, you shouldn't look at it as a failure. There are no mistakes. Even the most chaotic moments are completely fine, but too much of that and the players get confused, so sometimes you need to reset. That's my sense of it.

Sniff: It's like an intuition that you use to keep things together. Although it is difficult to capture it in words, I feel like that's an important point to remember.

Otomo: Right, it's difficult to explain. In pop music, you have a producer whose role is just to direct the music, rather than composing or arranging. My method of conducting is a bit like that: the players are composing, and I take on the role of producing or editing.

As I said, though, if you treat the participants just as sound material to be manipulated and edited, they will lose their motivation pretty quickly. The players need to feel that they are the ones making music: simply put, you need to respect the sounds that they make. The other thing is not to judge anything, even if you don't naturally feel that every sound is interesting. You try to find something interesting in it; but when things aren't working, you need to reset without hesitation and move on. I think of it as a kind of a dance that changes at each moment, in which everyone is invited to join in.

### **Butch Morris, John Zorn, Cornelius Cardew**

Sniff: You were saying that your role is closer to a producer, while the players are creating the actual composition. Butch Morris once described his process similarly, as being like an arranger: the sounds are already there and it was his job to think about the next direction they might take. This sounds very similar to what you have been talking about. Can you tell me more about how you arrived at this approach to making music?

Otomo: I would say Butch Morris' method had the most direct influence, but before that Derek Bailey (\*6) had set a tone that was very important for me. He questioned the preconception that music was made from compositional "idioms," arguing that that one can improvise without drawing from musical forms like jazz or reggae. My workshops wouldn't be possible without this way of thinking, in which performers are not working towards a predefined piece of music or with reference to a specific musical idiom. In that sense, the foundation of my approach comes from Bailey and others who were playing free improvisation in Europe during the 1970s.

But while non-idiomatic improvisation might be a high ideal for skilled musicians, most people wouldn't know what to do when they are told to play "freely." So I needed to figure out how to use this idea when I was making music with people who were not professional musicians, or might not know how to play an instrument at all.

So there were quite a few core references; I already mentioned Butch Morris, but I also took a lot of inspiration from John Zorn's *Cobra* and Cornelius Cardew's(\*7) *Scratch Orchestra*. I thought Cardew's pieces were fun to play but you still needed some musical background to enjoy them. Zorn's *Cobra* is one of his "game pieces," which I thought was innovative because it provided a unique kind of platform. By bringing in rules from outside of music, players from different backgrounds could interact using rules drawn from a game like poker or roulette, in-

stead of relying on the mystery of “free improvisation,” which can get a little obscure and even cultish. The fun part about Cobra was that the basis of playing together was understanding the rules of the game, which made it more about the ensemble’s interaction than just watching a conductor’s prompts.

Butch Morris was a little more straightforward in comparison. The rules were very complex, but the roles of conductor and the players were distinct, and the players improvised based on the movement of the conductor. To me, this seemed easiest to understand. I initially tried to adapt rules like those in Cobra for the general public, but they ended up too simplistic, just “let’s relay these sounds back and forth.” So I figured that if I could simplify Morris’s method, it might work with a broader group of people. What I didn’t want was a situation where a specialist, like a conductor, was in control over regular people. After thinking hard about how to avoid this, I came up with the idea of using multiple conductors. When there is only one it might feel like a dictatorship, right? So by adding more, I tried to distribute the power more evenly. Depending on the number of conductors, we called it a “Double Orchestra” or “Triple Orchestra”. But these ensembles were still populated by skilled players, mostly professional musicians, and I was constantly thinking about how to make easier for ordinary people.

### **Can you record this process?**

Sniff: What are your thoughts about making recordings of the public music made with Ensembles Tokyo?

Otomo: We haven’t made any, and I don’t think we should. When you start out to make a CD or sound recording, it becomes the focus of the performance. Like I said before, I wanted to avoid any kind of present goals that might lead to discussions about aesthetics, which makes the whole process susceptible to critique, like conventional musicmaking. Sure, we might discuss how one particular improvisation or another worked out, but what really matters is that the participants share the experience of making their own music. I thought a recording might get in the way, so I never pursued it, and I don’t think I will in the future. For a while now, I’ve moved away from thinking that the only value of music is in the sound alone: what matters is how the music functions in a space and its broader holistic meanings.

So making musical works is only a small part of the activity of music. Of course I record myself because I like recording, but that’s for my own individual projects. If I recorded the general public, I would feel like I am using them as material. Last year, though, I did decide to record the “Oto Asobi No Kai.” I didn’t want to make a recording of me conducting, but instead act as a producer and make their performance into a musical work. Maybe the context felt more deliberately artistic because we have been working with the same group of people for many years, and there was a general sense that it might be necessary to make a record, or maybe I just didn’t want to lose this special moment. I would add that works by people with disabilities are

often perceived through the lens of disability, but I want to make something that can be listened to on its own merits.

I find Art Brut and outsider art exhibitions very interesting, but it's debatable whether or not the artists themselves feel any joy in their work being exhibited. Probably their joy comes in the moment of drawing, and most are not really aware of what comes later. Probably only 1/3 of the members of "Oto Asobi No Kai" would feel happy that a recording of their music would be released, the others wouldn't really care. When I work with non-musicians I try to focus on the joy of playing music and not be concerned about other things.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, I started to realize that music has other purposes beyond recorded works or notated scores, things whose value we took for granted. I could record a Bon Odori festival dance, for example, but it wouldn't mean much. The whole point is to be there and dance: it only becomes a festival through the act of dancing. A recording or concert performance of Bon Odori may be interesting, but it would be a completely different thing.

## Your own music

Sniff: The composer Cornelius Cardew embedded his political beliefs in his works; his amateur Scratch Orchestra represented his hopes for how music could reflect a more utopian society. In your book "Gakko deha oshietekurenai ongaku (Music they don't teach in school)" (\*8) you talk about the relationships between how music is made and how society is constructed, and as you have said, it's important to feel the moment of creating your own music. Do you think there is any projection or embodiment of an ideal society when you bring people together to make



Otomo performing with workshop participants at Tokyo Tower in Ensembles Tokyo 2019

music?

Otomo: Definitely. I became aware of this when I started working in Fukushima, the first time I conducted an orchestra with the citizens of Fukushima City in August of 2011. I felt strongly that this music had to be our own. My thinking about this might have become a little extreme right after the disaster.... Even though I recognized that it might not work in reality, I strongly believed that we needed to make our own music with our own skills, rather than trying to play a song that has already been approved by society in order to feel assured that we are making “good music.” This was obviously in direct response to the earthquake, hoping that such a society would arise. At time and in that situation, I felt that we needed to stand on core values and think for ourselves how we wanted to live our lives. It’s the same with music: instead of aiming to recreate a particular style of music, the music should come from what we can do ourselves, whether it turns out as something wonderful or not. We could start from any style, classical or folk or whatever. Other than making music with the local citizens, I also started to do new things in Fukushima, like Bon Odori.

I don’t necessarily feel like I am doing this to convey any particular ideology, whether I’m working with professionals or the general public. The earthquake made me realize this, but I’ve continued to try and fail since then, so I’m well aware that it’s not easy.

Sniff: So far what you’ve been talking about seems like a kind of unlearning, to undo preconceptions and ways of making music that become ingrained in school. How did working with non-musicians change your perception of musicmaking?

Otomo: For me, the biggest thing was working with children with intellectual disabilities in 2005, through students of Kobe University at “Oto Asobi No Kai”, a gathering which continues to this day. Those children really taught me a lot, especially that there are things that you miss when you hear music through conventional aesthetics and values. Anyway, I’ve talked about this a lot in other contexts, and I hope to describe more about this when the “Oto Asobi No Kai” CD is released.

### **Music not for “athletes” but for everyone**

Sniff: Once, when we were discussing methods of conducted improvisation, you mentioned that your style is not very popular. I recall that you were concerned that conduction might become a kind of a sport, as in the case of Santiago Vazquez’ ensemble.

Otomo: Actually, I’m not really concerned about that. I think Vasquez’ work is very interesting, and really fun to participate in as well. I am always impressed about how far he was able to advance this form of music. It’s fascinating to think that we both took inspiration from Butch

Morris, but the results are so different. I do think that Vazquez' method is based on athleticism, so it has the potential to become a sport. In these situations, you have to be careful not to be too biased towards advancing conventional music aesthetics or to focus too much on making the music impressive or theatrical. That's a completely different direction from what I am doing. But these ideas are not necessarily opposed to each other, and both enrich and expand our conceptions of music. I think that there is room to make music that is "athletic" in this way, and also to develop music for people who have never before touched an instrument. I also believe there should be more local music.

The reason why I insist on making music with the general public is because I think that music is not for just professionals but for anyone. Many people want to make music, but music education in schools raises the bar and it becomes an obstacle. So one reason why this style works is because you can start playing music from just making one sound, and keep thinking about how to develop it further. I want to keep the door open for this kind of music making. When I was younger, I thought this way myself, that I couldn't make music, so it took me a long time to finally pick up an instrument. I think that feeling came from the negative influence of music education in my youth, and I want to change that and say "anyone can do it."

Another question I want to keep raising though my activities is how music exceeds the boundaries of Western aesthetics. I recently started reading Shuhei Hosokawa's fascinating book "Kindai Nihon No Ongaku Hyakunen (One Hundred Years of Music in Modern Japan)" (2020, Iwanami Shoten). Prior to contact with the West, he says, there was no concept of music in Japan, but that didn't mean that there wasn't music. There were all these rich musical cultures such as Gagaku, Noh, Hauta, and Bon Odori, but there just wasn't any word like "music" to bunch it all together. So it's not just about the Westernization of music but about the modernization of Japan within the world, and it made me reconsider why I make music with guitars and turntables and why I want to improvise with non-musicians. It's really interesting to think about this history, especially during a global pandemic!

I got a bit off course there...! I guess what I mean is that the very idea of an "athlete" is a modern concept, and as attractive as that idea may be, I want to explore other possibilities.

Sniff: It has been really nice to learn how you navigate your practice of conducting, incorporating so many diverse techniques, drawing from the influences of Butch Morris and Derek Bailey. Conducting often seems intended to create a structure or build something from a collection of materials, so I have found it fascinating to learn how you use conducting differently, to simplify things and warm up a group to play, after which the act of conducting itself disappears. Thank you very much.

## Footnotes

\*1 Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris (1947~2013) is an American composer, conductor, and cornett player. He is the inventor of Conduction® which is a method of conducting an improvising ensemble using hand signs. “Current Trends in Racism in Modern America” (1985, Sound Aspects Records) is one example of a recording that uses this method.

\*2 John Zorn (1953 ~) is an American saxophonist, composer, and producer. His piece COBRA utilizes a signboard and hand signals to develop an improvising ensemble in the manner of a game. The person in the center is not a conductor but called a “prompter” and relays signs that are then exchanged between players. The recording “Cobra” (1987, Hat Hut Records) includes both a live version and studio recording of performances using this method.

\*3 “Oto Asobi No Kai” is music project started in Kobe Japan between musicians and people with intellectual disabilities. The project has organized numerous workshops and concerts around Japan and in 2013 toured the United Kingdom.

\*4 Santiago Vazquez (1972~) is a percussionist and composer from Argentina. “Rhythm with Signs” is his complex method, using more than 100 signs, to create improvised music with large groups of musicians. He has organized many events around the world and published a handbook of his signs entitled “MANUAL DE RITMO Y PERCUSIÓN CON SEÑAS (RHYTHM AND PERCUSSION WITH SIGNS HANDBOOK)” (2013 ATLANTIDA). Vasquez conducted a workshop and performed a concert in Ensembles Tokyo 2018.

\*5 B.B. King (Riley B. King, 1925~2015) is an American blues guitarist and singer, and the first blues artist to appear on television. His many hit songs helped make blues internationally known.

\*6 Derek Bailey (1930~2005) is a British guitarist. After working in dance halls and recording studios as a guitarist, he started to play free improvised music in the mid-1960s, later establishing the free music label Incus and organizing the improvisation group Company.

\*7 Cornelius Cardew (1936~1981) was a British composer. He participated in the improvising group AMM, and afterwards became one of the founders of the experimental Scratch Orchestra ensemble, which explored new forms of group improvisation with non-musician participants.

\*8 “Gakko Dewa Oshietekurenai Ongaku (Music they don’t teach in school)” Otomo Yoshihide, 2014, Iwanami Shoten.

Documentary film of Otomo’s workshop at Ensembles Tokyo 2020  
<https://www.ensembles.tokyo>







## Opening to New Directions

Interview date: November 7, 2020

Interviewer: dj sniff

Photos: Kiyoshi Arai, Takaaki Komazaki, Kunihiko Satake, Ensembles Tokyo Executive Committee

Editor: Yuki Numata



Yasuhiro Yoshigaki's workshop in Ensembles Tokyo 2018

### **An improvisational ensemble for percussion and homemade instruments**

Sniff: Your workshops mix participants from the general public with members of your ensemble Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! (\*9). How did this project first take shape?

Yoshigaki: We started doing it this way at the first edition of Ensembles Tokyo in 2015. Otomo and Shibusashirazu (\*10) both held workshops with an orchestra assembled from a call to the general public, and they asked me to add a percussion ensemble, so I proposed this formation.

Sniff: Compared to your work with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!, did you develop any different

methods or new signs for this context?

Yoshigaki: Actually, I've had workshops with a mixed ensemble before Ensembles Tokyo, but those were more about building instruments and trying to play them together (\*11). Most of the self-built instruments were percussive, but the group also created a lot of unconventional new instruments, so I realized there needed to be some kind of method to order their performance or else it would just end up as noise. I had to think of a way to make it less confusing and keep things together. Like Otomo, I had had some experience participating in Butch Morris' Conduction and John Zorn's Cobra, and also in improvising ensembles where the performers made teams using the gaming rules of Beziq (12). Reflecting on these experiences, I started developing basic rules that were assigned to signals "#1", "#2", "#3" that I taught to the participants.

Sniff: Did you come up with these signs specifically for the self-built instruments? Or was this something you developed earlier with ordinary instruments?

Yoshigaki: Even with normal instruments I used signs to enable anyone to participate and play together in a large ensemble. Since I had already experienced playing in a variety of conducted improvisation groups, I thought I might try to come up with a simple system that could allow everyone to play at once but still have influence over the group. I also have been a longtime member of Otomo's New Jazz Orchestra (\*13) and his Big Band (\*14), and have participated in many of his workshops, so our approaches are pretty similar.

Sniff: The signs may be similar, but I think the music that comes out is quite different. Other than Morris and Zorn, did anything else inspire your method of improvising rhythms with a large group?

Yoshigaki: I had been trying out some very simple techniques with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! to introduce some possibilities for improvisation. I would point to one person and they would play freely whatever they wanted. From there, other members join in, and the music transforms as we repeat the process. This gives the music a sense of unpredictability but the changes happen gradually over time.

My old friend Santiago Vazquez from Argentina also conducts improvisation for percussion, but his method is in stark contrast to mine. Santiago basically works with groups that are either exclusively percussion-based or by mixing instruments with the percussive ensemble, so he can specify detailed changes to the overall rhythm, so improvised but centered around a groove. His style is rooted in his Argentinian heritage and also the specific context of Buenos Aires, where there were not many club-type spaces to enjoy this kind of music, so he had to create his own. So for the last 16 or 17 years, he has been thinking about how to develop a

conducted improvisation that has groove and that is danceable: I met Santiago when he had just started out, and became very interested in his ideas. So the next time we met, he taught me how his system works in detail, and I began incorporating some distinct features of his system into my ensembles. In his system, each individual makes an improvised rhythm on the spot, but the conductor's intention plays a large role in the outcome, which makes things very dynamic and interesting. I was more interested in reflecting the intentions of the players, in creating moments where something is born more naturally. Zorn's game pieces like *Cobra* seemed more focused on the player's will, so I'm try to develop a method that balances these two approaches.

Sniff: Watching footage of your workshop, I was strongly impressed by your patience, almost as if you were waiting for something to happen. When a rhythmic pattern emerges, you listen carefully before giving the next sign, like :“Copy that person,”The music emerges bit by bit.

Yoshigaki: Another characteristic of my workshops at Ensembles Tokyo and with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! is that people show up with unusual instruments, sometimes just a bunch of empty cans. So the sounds we end up with are really unique, and bring out a vibe completely different from a normal ensemble. If you watch videos of our performances on Facebook or YouTube they are usually not recorded well, so you can't hear all the details, but those special qualities are what I want to bring out in the ensemble.

Sniff: Is there an ideal size for your orchestra that works best to focus on these unconventional sounds and each player's intentions?



Santiago Vazquez' workshop in Ensembles Tokyo 2018

Yoshigaki: It depends on the location of the performance. When you play outside it's hard to project quieter sounds so it makes things more difficult. I can probably handle a group of up to 50-60 players, if I think carefully about the placement.

Numata: Do you make any adjustments when there are a lot of homemade instruments?

Yoshigaki: A lot of people who make their own instruments are not professional musicians. They might not have even played their own instrument before and it can be difficult for them to create a rhythm without direction. But if someone can be their guide, just to keep time and hold down the groove, then they can just start making sounds and enjoy being in the groove together. If you keep this up for a while, people who couldn't play at all at first will eventually start to become better players. I feel like this kind of guidance is very important and it's one of the main reasons why I have members of Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! join in the public workshops.

Sniff: Is that something you learned from your own experience as a percussionist? Have you become a better player through playing with others?

Yoshigaki: Hm. I'm not sure. It feels really different when drummers or percussionists perform solo compared to playing together. So, I don't know if playing with others will always make you a better player, but I would say that the feeling of gathering and making sounds all together is definitely different from playing alone.

### **Understanding the rules, but not being restricted to the signs**

Sniff: It's really interesting to hear about how you make subtle and intuitive adjustments in your workshops, and how your arrangements help new players improve. Perhaps this is part of what distinguishes your style of Conduction from others. With this in mind, can you explain your basic signs and their meanings, starting from the first page from your workshop notes?

Yoshigaki: This first sign, which uses different parts of the face, comes from Zorn's Cobra. With "Mouth 1, 2, 3, 4," for example, you point to the mouth first with different fingers to indicate the number. I also do "Nose 1, 2, 3, 4," "Eye 1, 2," "Ear 1, 2, 3" and so on. For the Mouth signs, #1 means everyone should play freely; #2 assigns someone to play, #3 means people who are playing should stop and the others should start, and #4 is the same as #3 but fading between the two groups.

Sniff: So for "Mouth 2" you show two fingers next to your mouth and then point to someone?

Yoshigaki: Right. Other signs I use a lot are the “Stop” sign which Zorn uses in Cobra., as well as “Copy” and “Attack” (to play a sound sharply), “Play a rhythm”, “Play a groove”, and “Loop whatever is playing.” Sometimes you can hear a good pattern when someone’s soloing, so I try to grab that and signal for the player to loop it. People are working with Santiago’s signs a lot these days, so I try to mix things up; but when I started out I would sometimes just use this “Loop” sign to develop the entire sound of the ensemble.

Sniff: How long does it take for participants to learn the signs? How much time do you allocate in each workshop for teaching the signs?

Yoshigaki: It could be as fast as 30 minutes. It doesn’t really matter if there are mistakes; we’re not trying to make it perfect. If it starts to go south, I’ll just say: “Hey, can we take a break for a second?” It’s usually more interesting if we wait for something unexpected to happen and then I’ll tell others to copy it.

Sniff: Is it important to distinguish between the stage when the group is working hard to learn the signs and the times when everyone is just playing and having fun playing together?

Yoshigaki: I try things out first and then see how it goes. Whether it’s working with the general public or with professional musicians, it’s always good to have everyone learning the signs and playing them as intended, but I try not to make them feel too restricted by them either.

To be honest, it’s probably enough to just set a tempo and then assign someone to play freely. If something interesting happens, you tell everyone else to copy it. You can get a lot out of just having everyone respond to something interesting. My goal is just that the players have fun with each other and don’t just blindly follow the conductor.

So in a way, it’s better not to come up with too many signs. It can get challenging when you want everyone to stay in time, so you need a few signs for that, but I try to use the least amount possible.

Sniff: Is it difficult to convey to participants that you don’t want them just to imitate what you taught them? To get them to start to play freely?

Yoshigaki: That can be hard, not only when working with the general public but also with members of Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! You just have to get used to it. Sometimes you need to do it over and over before you can get comfortable and really do what you want to do. However, even if we get together every month, people forget what they learned last time, so it’s not easy. You just have to keep at it.

Sniff: For Ensembles Tokyo, several workshops are conducted to prepare participants for the



main performance event. I was going to ask you what kind of goals you set for these workshops, but I'm starting to get the sense that you use this time to get people used to the idea that they can play freely and do whatever they want with the music.

Yoshigaki: Yes. That's exactly why I want everyone to learn the rules, so they can understand what's happening in a given situation and make their own decision about how they want to respond.

### **Feedback from composing and performing**

Sniff: Was it a lot of fun to participate in Butch Morris' group and John Zorn's Cobra?

Yoshigaki: It was especially fun when John himself was the prompter (conductor / host) in Cobra. He was so fast at thinking on his feet, and things developed so quickly. It was a revelation for me to learn about that system, I was so impressed by his thought process and the fact that everything was built on improvisation. Not only the game format, but the improvisations I experienced in the group had a huge impact on my own playing. It really showed me that you can approach and think about music in so many different ways.

Even when improvising, some can only accept a kind of compositional approach, where things sound more musical and others find it more interesting when you can't be sure if it's music or not. John, and that whole New York scene, really influenced me, especially during the late 80s and 90s when people started to use samples and non-musical sounds in their music – that made me really think about the meaning of sounds and what it means to make music.



Yoshigaki's workshop in Ensembles Tokyo 2019

Sniff: Is there an overlap between these interesting complexities you discovered as a musician and those you find when you're working with the general public? What do you think makes non-musicians want to keep at it?

Yoshigaki: I don't know what they actually think, but I can sense when they are having fun, even when the expression on their faces says "what should I do?" Maybe my thoughts about music are different from theirs, but probably there is an overlap on how we feel, and this keeps me going.

Sniff: On the videos of the performance, the players look serious but at the same time they are obviously having fun. When you point at someone and tell the others to copy their sound, everyone gets really focused; but once when they figure it out everything blends into a joyful moment. I thought this was very inspiring.

Do you feel differently when playing as percussionist, compared to these moments when you are trying to maneuver others to play in rhythm?

Yoshigaki: To me, it seems like both perspectives feed into one another. When I look at my own playing after the fact, sometimes I think I might have taken a different direction. And from a conductor's perspective, sometimes you are surprised to see how things develop. These discoveries become inspirations for when I am composing for other ensembles and influence my overall process. So there's a kind of feedback between the two experiences.

## **Opening to New Directions**

Sniff: You were saying that you like to create a place for the unique sounds of self-made instruments. Do you accept any kind of instruments when you make the open call?

Yoshigaki: Definitely, people bring homemade guitars or percussion instruments - once we even had a tap dancer join!

Sniff: So you work with anyone who shows up?

Yoshigaki: Right. I don't really have any specific criteria about who should and shouldn't join.

Sniff: What is your ideal ensemble? Are there any particular elements or instruments that make it work better?

Yoshigaki: Although my ensemble is based on rhythm, we usually have pitched instruments in the group. But that means when someone comes in with something like a saxophone, they

might feel obligated to play rhythmically and it's hard for them to depart from that. I try to make a situation where they don't feel like they have to follow any particular way of playing and that any kind of instrument can take part.

Sniff: So then wouldn't it be better to avoid describing it as a "percussion ensemble" at all?

Yoshigaki: I agree. I usually tell the organizers not to phrase it like that, but I suppose it helps distinguish it from the other workshops.

Sniff: I imagine that when someone shows up with a saxophone to something described as a percussion ensemble, it might be kind of hard to change their mindset. Whenever I curate large improvising groups, I find it musically more interesting to not limit the call to free improvisers and try invite musicians from other genres like pop. But they often feel like they are then supposed to play "improvised music," so it can be difficult to get them to relax and just play whatever they feel like. You said it's more about repetition and familiarity with the situation, but do you have any tips for creating that kind of openness among the players?

Yoshigaki: That's something I continue to learn through trial and error. One person said, after two years of playing, "I can really can do whatever I want!" This person has been showing up to my workshops for about two years, playing the guitar while kind of hiding behind the rhythm, feeling that he should stay in the background. One time I asked him to repeat what he just played and had everyone else follow his lead. He was so surprised that everyone grooved to his playing, and things developed from there between the players. People started interacting with each other, saying "that's an interesting rhythm" or "how would you match that?" and exchanging ideas off stage. So yes, they can be hesitant to play freely at the start, but sometimes it only takes something that simple for people to relax.

Sniff: Do you have any go-to signs for when you hit a wall musically?

Yoshigaki: The easiest way is to just leave it up to the players that you think will do something different, or if you have them repeat something interesting that they did earlier, then other people might be able to get there without me directly telling them to do so. When I really don't know how things will go, I will just leave it completely up to one person and see what happens. For example, I would let someone take lead who understands that I want a complete change in tempo and rhythm, or I may go the opposite way and assign it to someone who is just hitting a bunch of cans. When this happens often everyone laughs; these kinds of moments can totally shift the direction and the mood of the group.

Sniff: Do you ever use signs to drastically change things or try to fix something that's off course?

Yoshigaki: I try not to. Change is more interesting when it's initiated by the players, so I try to leave it to them.

Sniff: Otomo mentioned that he would sometimes use a sign to "reset" or hand off the role of the conductor to spread out the authoritative roles in the group. In your case, it's interesting that you leave it up to the players to change the direction, based on their personalities.

Numata: Surprising sounds come out of really confusing situations. Sometimes even a single sound can completely change the vibe, and the shock of it leads to the next transition.

Yoshigaki: Also, it's not like I am trying to be mean or anything, but when I tell someone to do something and they can't figure out what to do, sometimes we will all just return to the beginning and I'll ask them to start again. Sometimes people protest, but most are willing to work with me to find something that works.

Numata: There's a big difference between just having fun and playing along, and having to take on leadership responsibilities. Do you think about the balance between these two experiences of performance during the concerts?

Yoshigaki: Not really. I just move things along in my own sense of time. It's more like a sequence: you start with one rhythm that works for a given tempo, and then move on to a new tempo with a different rhythm. In contrast, Santiago Vazquez is really trying to get the ensemble performance to sound composed, so they usually break up the performance into 10 or 15



Yoshigaki performing with workshop participants on Gyoko Street in front of Tokyo Station in Ensembles Tokyo 2016

minute segments. At Ensembles Tokyo, we have about 40 minutes to play, so if we can find a good ending around that time we end, but if not we just keep playing. I'm ok with that!

I try not to think that it should turn out to a certain way. If you expect something to happen, and then it doesn't work, it never ends. If I have a sudden intuition during the concert to draw out a certain person because I think it will make things more interesting, I'll just do it, right then and there. It might be a surprise for everyone, but since they signed up for this, they just have to deal with it.

Numata: In John Zorn's Cobra, there is always a tension and excitement from not knowing exactly what will happen next. There are unexpected moments like this in your workshops, too, but they are usually mixed in with more structured musical loops and rhythms.

Yoshigaki: Right, there are some prepared rhythms, and sometimes we practice distinctive phrases to insert. Or other times I may decide that we will do a certain phrase at the end, and it becomes a signal to conclude the performance.

Sniff: Knowing that you have played music in freeform and conventional styles - and lots in between -- it is interesting that you also do workshops like these, where the responsibility is distributed among all the players. Of all of your many musical activities, what satisfies you the most about working with the general public?

Yoshigaki: It's just really fun to experience music that is so different from all the other kinds of music you know. Although the signs I use in my Conduction are limited, I really enjoy how it



Yoshigaki and workshop participants in Ensembles Tokyo 2018

simulates me to think about how I can incorporate more signs and have more detailed instructions for ensemble performance.

The most meaningful thing about this workshop is experiencing the joy of playing together. The culmination of this was when the entire workshop was invited to play on the recording for the main theme song of NHK's historical drama "Idaten," at the point in the song where the percussion sounds are all layered on top of each other. When I saw about 50 people coming into the NHK studio with big smiles on their faces, I just felt so happy that I had continued to do this; I still get emails from people saying they want to play together again soon. Especially during these times (this interview was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020), I feel like doing music with the general public is so different from my other projects and I hope I can create more opportunities to present this kind of work.

Numata: Percussion instruments don't usually have as many solo parts as tonal instruments, and it's easy to make a sound even if you are not a professional, so they seem like a perfect choice for these workshops.

Yoshigaki: That is true. It's probably why drum circles are so popular nowadays! I personally don't care so much for drum circles.... Actually, I don't know of too many other workshops where one can experience the different timbres of percussion and along with non-percussion instruments.

Sniff: Anyone can participate in a rhythm ensemble, but they can also be used for discipline and control like in a military march. But when you are constantly shifting the rhythms, it seems to bring things right back to the individual.

Yoshigaki: I agree, that's important.

Sniff: Are there many repeat performers in your workshop over the years at Ensemble Tokyo?

Yoshigaki: I think about 40 people come back every year to participate.

Sniff: It's a lot of fun, huh?

Yoshigaki: Definitely looks like it!

Sniff: Besides just playing together, what makes it fun for the performers?

Yoshigaki: Maybe just the fun of realizing that they can keep a steady rhythm, which maybe they didn't know they could do. One participant told me that they bought a darbuka (a percus-

sive instrument used in Arabic and Turkish music) and started to take lessons after they became confident that they could keep a beat.

Sniff: Do you notice any typical characteristics among the participants?

Yoshigaki: Well, it is usually pretty equally divided between genders -- maybe slightly more female participants. The oldest are two members in their 60s, and the youngest started participating in first grade and now is in sixth grade.

Sniff: How do the new participants join in?

Yoshigaki: Some saw us playing and thought it looked fun. Others joined because their friends were already in the group and invited them along.

Sniff: It's really nice that your workshop combines the collective joy of playing together with the individual satisfaction of becoming a better player. I have one last question. With the signs used in Conduction -- and with written scores for that matter -- musical meanings become encoded in a kind of common language, that might be understood universally. Do you think that your Conduction could be experienced as universal, and understood by an international audience?

Yoshigaki: I think so. I am combining signs used by Zorn, Otomo, and Vazquez, so if musical meanings can be understood in all these contexts, then it's probably universal. If you have experienced their workshops, then you would know which signs are from which conductor.

Sniff: What about things that are not universal? What aspects do you think would be completely different if you did the same thing in another country?

Yoshigaki: Probably it's different for each person playing. The way that people think about making sounds is different for each person.

Sniff: In that sense, it's very different from a Western orchestra, where the individuals playing the instruments are just there to make specific sounds, and their personalities are not foregrounded. Thank you very much for the interesting conversation.

## Footnotes

\*9 Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! is a percussion ensemble form by Yasuhiro Yoshigaki in 2003. Their music is based on a mixture of compositional structures and conducted improvisations.

\*10 Shibusashirazu is a large musical group consisting of musicians and dancers, formed by Daisuke Fuwa in 1989. Their music combines influences from jazz, rock, latin, pop, folk, and enka, working with a team of dancers, stage designers, filmmakers, lighting designers, and sound engineers to produce large scale performances.

\*11 Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! Waste Percussion Workshop was an event that started as a program for Sumida Art Project in 2013. The workshop reused waste produced from the local factories as materials for making percussive instruments, then used the instruments in an ensemble performance.

\*12 Beziq is a game piece from 1989 by John Zorn, taking inspiration from a card game that originated in France and popular in Europe in the mid-1800s.

\*13 Otomo Yoshihide New Jazz Orchestra (ONJO) started in 2005 with about 10 members. It was born out of ONJQ (Otomo New Jazz Quintet) which was active since 1999.

\*14 Otomo Yoshihide Special Big Band was established in 2014 as new project stemming from the group of musicians who played in the sound track for NHK TV drama “Ama-chan” in 2013.

Documentary film of Yoshigaki's workshop at Ensembles Tokyo 2020

<https://www.ensembles.tokyo>



## Biographies

### Otomo Yoshihide

Otomo was born in 1959. While firmly based in noise and improvised music as turntablist and guitarist, he also composes regularly for films and TV. In addition to concerts in Japan and abroad, he has produced many projects and exhibitions that incorporate public participation. After the 2011 earthquake, he expanded his activities to Fukushima, where he spent his childhood.

### Yasuhiro Yoshigaki

Born in 1959, Yoshigaki is a percussionist active in groups such as Altered States, Modern Chokichokiz, Shibusashirazu, Ground Zero, ROVO, DCPRG and has performed with many musicians in both Japan and abroad. He is the leader of various projects such as large-scale jazz group Orquesta Libre and percussion ensemble Orquesta Nudge! Nudge! He is also involved in music production for overseas performances, theater, dance, film, TV dramas, and animations.

### dj sniff

Born in 1978, dj sniff (Takuro Mizuta Lippit) is a turntablist, curator, and translator. He was Artistic Director of STEIM in The Netherlands where he produced numerous projects until 2012, and Visiting Assistant Professor at City University of Hong Kong until 2017. He is currently Co-Director of the Asian Meeting Festival and Special-ly Appointed Associate Professor at Kyoto Seika University.

designed by Satoshi Suzuki









## Ensembles Tokyo Festival Data

August 30, 2015 (Sun.) at Gyoko Street in front of Tokyo Station

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, Shibusashirazu, Yasuhiro Yoshigaki with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!,  
Rully Shabara (Senyawa), Otomo Yoshihide with Tenniscoats

September 4, 2016 (Sun.) at Gyoko Street in front of Tokyo Station

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, Shinji Ishii and Ikuko Harada, Yasuhiro Yoshigaki with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!,  
Shugo Tokumaru, Fred Frith

October 15, 2017 (Sun.) at Tokyo Tower

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, UA with Toshiro Inaba, Otomo Yoshihide Special Big Band, Miu Sakamoto with  
CANTUS, Yasuhiro Yoshigaki with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!

August 26, 2018 (Sun.) at Tokyo Tower

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, Santiago Vazquez, Kan Takagi x DJ Miso Soup & MC Rice, Yasuhiro Yoshigaki  
with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!, Satoko Shibata, Kumiko Takara, Yuji Katsui, Hiroshi Suzuki, Shinobu Kawai, Jin Harada, Jinya  
Kimura  
Guest: Non

August 24, 2019 (Sat.) at Tokyo Tower

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, Kuricorder Quartet, Otomo Yoshihide Special Big Band, Chieko Ito, Yasuhiro  
Yoshigaki with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!  
Guest: Kiyoko Suizenji

December. 2020 - March. 2021 at Online

Otomo Yoshihide, Project FUKUSHIMA!, Manami Kakudo, Saya (Tenniscoats), Hijokaidan (JOJO Hiroshige, T. Mikawa),  
Yasuhiro Yoshigaki with Orquesta Nudge! Nudge!

For more information, please visit the website.

<https://www.ensembles.tokyo>



Art Direction by Otomo Yoshihide

Art and Decoration by Project FUKUSHIMA!

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