The Creation of Cosmic Sound

by Toshio Takahashi

Classical composers had an overall view in which they presented and maintained a balance of the architectural space structure of music. When people are exposed to these classical constructions of music, they often experience a broadening sense of spirituality which extends far beyond time and form. One could say that this is a dimension of the soul equal to the fourth dimensional world. Being moved by music draws one into this outer dimensional world. In it, one is led to experience spirituality in the human heart. This is a perception of “an eternity within a moment.”

When I speak of fourth dimensional musical sound I imagine the tones of Fritz Kreisler on the violin, Pablo Casals on the ‘cello, Alfred Cortot on the piano, Marcel Moyse on the flute—sounds which have “liveliness and warmth” as well as being “gracefully flexible.” With the right interpretation, such sound expresses the composer’s life-force and character. If musical harmony is created using this kind of sound, the composer’s soul is resurrected in the three-dimensional world, and our hearts are cleansed. I call such sound “cosmic sound.”

MODEL FOR COSMIC SOUND—BELLTONE

My beloved teacher Dr. Suzuki says, “Sound breathes life; without form it lives.” We can learn from the tone of bells how to make our instruments resound in the most beautiful way. Analyze and imitate, with your own sentiment, what is at the root of the tone that superior teachers produce. Listen carefully to the sound of a bell. When you recognize the beauty of its attack, tone, and reverberation, try to imitate its sound on your instrument.

I often bring the bell of our family altar for students to hear. In Japan we seldom have the chance to listen to big gongs except at midnight on New Year’s Eve, when each temple strikes its gong to ring out the old year. Many never notice the natural vibrato created by the gong’s beautiful reverberation. Even a small bell produces a beautiful tone if struck with a proper attack, and vibrato results spontaneously. Such a natural vibrato is not something that can be heard clearly in a superficial way. Unless one tries to listen for it, one may fail to hear it. In other words, if one first hears vibrato when listening to a tone, that tone is not natural, nor is its vibrato genuine. On the flute, natural vibrato is born if she gives life with the attack, and tries to place her human soul on the tone that follows.

I always explain good tone as consisting of three elements: 1) proper attack, 2) elegant tone color, and 3) beautiful lingering reverberation. In my view the attack represents the performer’s life force and courage; the tone color, the soul and human nature; and the reverberation, the inspiration.
ATTACK

There are three main kinds of attack: 1) allegro attack, 2) moderato attack, and 3) andante attack. They reflect the difference in speed when striking a bell. If the speed is fast, the attack is sharp; if the speed is slow, it produces a rounded attack. The difference in speed also affects tone color and vibrato. What moves me when I listen to great musicians is their power and control of attack. The attack is filled with life-force, and expresses the emotion of their soul. Performers on wind instruments and string instruments are often not aware of the importance of proper attack. On these instruments one can adjust the tone afterwards when the attack happens to be poor. Therefore a performer does not master the sense of tension that comes with staking one’s life on a good attack. If one thinks of attack as the crucial birth of tone, one then realizes that diminuendo is the life of music.

FADING TONE

The fundamental fact of tone found in nature is that it fades as does the belltone. A continuous tone is more or less artificial. With fading tone, the attack is everything. The strength and the timing of the attack determine the tone’s loudness, its color, and its duration. Once the attack fails, no adjustment is possible. It is therefore all the more crucial to make each attack with perfect timing, while anticipating the cadence and harmony of the melody. The drawback of the fading tone is that it cannot sustain itself at the most climactic point of a phrase. For this reason the piano and the guitar tone have to be sustained by the use of a foot pedal or strengthened by chords. The flute and violin can be seen to have advantages over these instruments in this respect.

The ability of the flute to create crescendo within one note is, so to speak, a treasured sword passed down in the family. If the drawn blade is revealed constantly, it will rust and lose its effect. In the development of most musical phrases the fading tone of the piano and the guitar sounds the most natural. When creating a crescendo, by increasing the amount of the attack at the beginning of each note and retaining the tone at the climax with the use of the treasured family sword, the musical expression will be flawless.

TONE COLOR

I always call the tone of great masters “deep violet tone.” The poetess Sunako Fukao, Marcel Moyse’s first Japanese student, sang of the flute in a poem called “A Woman Piper”:

She played a pipe,
Her pipe was silver;
Season’s first sweetfish, clear in the shallows,
Its tone was violet secret.

Fukao must have written this verse of a twelve-verse poem, thinking of Moyse’s tone. His tone, even through recordings, is marvelous. Kreisler’s violin, Casals’ cello, Cortot’s piano—all have “violet tone.” It is a deep, warm tone which moreover suggests human dignity.

How can we achieve this warm, “violet tone” on the flute? The lips are of great importance. On the flute, our lips correspond to the strings of a stringed instrument. The violin has four strings, each with its own slightly different tonal quality. To play the notes of a scale while maintaining the same quality is quite
difficult. Just as four different thicknesses of strings are used on a violin, lips of different thicknesses must be employed on the flute. Roughly speaking, the lower E is created with comparatively thick lips; the lips become thinner as the higher notes are formed.

The muscles surrounding the lips must be used to maintain a constant “floating” position of the embouchure. Although direct control is obtained via the muscles immediately surrounding the opening in the lips, these muscles are in turn controlled by the “flute dimples” on either side of the nose and chin. Usually dimples form to the side of the lips, but if these dimples are used, the sound does not smile. If the upper dimples a little higher on either side of the nose are used (along with those a little lower towards the chin), the mouth takes on the appearance of a rebellious child, and the sound smiles.

The strings of a violin are made to vibrate with a good bowing technique so that the vibrations amplify in the sound box. The bowing of the violin corresponds to the breathing in flute playing, the sound box to the whole mouth including the oral cavity. If you can produce good tone on the flute, you should congratulate yourself because it means that your body possesses a violin worth millions of dollars.

For optimum control of tone, the flutist must maintain the physical condition of an opera singer. Pull in your chin lightly, stretch your neck, push out your chest slightly and straighten your knees. Inhale deeply through your nose into your chest, add pressure to your abdomen, and gradually exhale through your lips. Rather than tightening your lips and jaw as a means of controlling your sound it is important that instead you are using the appropriate air pressure from your abdomen. This will enable you to create a greater range of dynamics and tone colors.

REVERBERATION

A good ringing, singing tone creates natural vibrato and reverberation. The lingering reverberation expresses the player’s “inspiration” (infusion of life and imagination into the tone).

I don’t teach my students vibrato. I teach them how to play with a singing tone. If they learn how to produce a good tone then the vibrato will develop naturally as a part of the sound. Some have the illusion that vibrato produces tone color. Actually tone color must give birth to vibrato. To create a good sound that has a good vibrato, one must inhale deeply into the lower abdomen so that the body balances between the cosmos and the great earth like the spinning of a top.

Diminuendo is also an important part of the reverberation, as heard in the sound of a bell. Notice that when the reverberation of the bell fades away the pitch will sharpen slightly. At that moment the reverberation will contact the fourth dimension, our spiritual perception of the tone. As Pablo Casals said, “Diminuendo is the life of music.” Master the art of diminuendo and you will be able to make your music full of life.

Without Dr. Suzuki and his words “Sound breathes life; without form it lives,” I would never have pursued “cosmic sound” as I have, for more than thirty years. He touched and changed my entire life because of his rare inspiration. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to him.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TOSHIRO TAKAHASHI is the founder of the Suzuki Flute School and is recognized worldwide as an authority on the flute. He has been a guest clinician at National Flute Association conventions and other flute conferences around the world. Mr. Takahashi is a conductor, serves as the chairman of the International Suzuki Association, and is the principal instructor at the International Academy of the Suzuki Method in Matsumoto, Japan. His teachers included Shinichi Suzuki, Marcel Moyse, and Pablo Casals.