

# Motivic development and transformation in Tōru Takemitsu's *Itinerant* (1989)

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## ABSTRACT

Tōru Takemitsu's 1989 flute solo *Itinerant*, "composed to mourn the death of the composer's friend Isamu Noguchi, a sculptor," illustrates his fascination with the combination of Western and traditional Japanese elements. Many of the gestures of the work are inspired by traditional *shakuhachi* music—for example, pitch bends and variations in tone color, often indicated in the score by specific fingering instructions. The Western elements of the music are most apparent in the pitch organization—particularly the frequent use of octatonic and whole-tone scales (and their characteristic subsets) in a manner comparable to that of Debussy and Messiaen. This chapter explores the development of a handful of octatonic and whole-tone motives, tracing the role of scales and recurring set classes in determining the piece's unusual and idiosyncratic form. The conclusion contextualizes this set-class analysis in relation to other musical parameters and considers the broader ramifications of Takemitsu and Noguchi's intercultural artistic practices.

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Tōru Takemitsu's 1989 composition for solo flute, *Itinerant*, memorializes the Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904–88), a pioneer in modern sculpture and design. The son of Japanese poet Yone Noguchi and American writer Léonie Gilmour, Noguchi was born in Los Angeles and led a wide-ranging career voyaging widely through the United States, Japan, Europe, and Asia. In his essay "Isamu Noguchi—Traveler," Takemitsu describes travel as the defining characteristic of Noguchi's life: "Noguchi is a traveler. My acquaintance with him and the experience of seeing his works ended my comfortable existence and set me on the path to the world of the unknown."<sup>1</sup> For Takemitsu, Noguchi's travels are a metaphor for the artist's personal quest for discovery and meaning. "True travel is endless," Takemitsu writes, and Noguchi's work "does not end with the completion of a single piece but goes on in an unending pursuit of the true nature of an object and of life."<sup>2</sup>

*Itinerant* resists easy formal categorization. The tempo of *Lento Misterioso* (<dotted quarter note> = ca. 30) is maintained throughout, and exact or transposed repetitions of previously heard material are rare, with a few notable exceptions to be discussed below. Rather, the overall impression is of a fluid, dreamlike wandering, sometimes returning to familiar materials, sometimes striking out in a new direction. The rhythmic fluidity of *Itinerant*'s notation contributes to the sense of drifting; while no meter is indicated and bar lines are omitted, the basic unit of a dotted quarter note is maintained throughout, lending the impression of loosely shifting compound meters (<6/8>, <9/8>, <12/8>, etc.). The lack of bar lines and the frequent use of fermatas of varying length tend to obscure any sense of metric regularity. In the absence of bar lines and bar numbers, this essay will refer to specific passages in the score by the system on which they are notated (Systems 1–17 in the Schott edition).

Like many of Takemitsu's best-known works, *Itinerant* combines aspects of Japanese and Western music. Most immediately audible are references to playing techniques of the *shakuhachi* (the Japanese end-blown bamboo flute), including pitch bends and variations in tone color, frequently prescribed in the score with specific fingerings. The Western elements of the music are most apparent in the work's pitch organization—particularly the frequent use of octatonic and whole-tone collections and their

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<sup>1</sup> Takemitsu (1995, 134).

<sup>2</sup> Takemitsu (1995, 135).

subsets in a fashion comparable to that of Debussy and Messiaen, two composers often cited by Takemitsu as primary influences.<sup>3</sup>

This essay focuses on just one aspect of *Itinerant*—the way that certain musical ideas or motives recur and change over the course of the piece, embodying a process of continuous “becoming,” which Tomoko Deguchi argues is deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> To me, this constantly varying recurrence is key to the representation of travel and transformation that Takemitsu associates with Noguchi. Through my analysis of motivic repetition and development, I hope to refine and communicate my impression that the music’s effect of itinerant wandering is based on subtle transformations of a handful of pitch-class motives, often interacting with symmetrical whole-tone and octatonic scales. The theoretical apparatus I’ve chosen to apply is pitch-class set theory, suitable for the identification and labeling of pitch cells at a high level of abstraction. While I make no claim that the relationships detailed below reflect Takemitsu’s compositional process, it is worth noting that his writing about his own music often describes unordered pitch-class sets—see for example the four-, five-, and six-note sets cited in his essay “Dream and Number”<sup>5</sup> and his idea of the “SEA” motive: E<flat>–E–A, or set class (016), in its original eponymous form, but subject to transposition, inversion, and reordering.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most immediately recognizable motives of the work is the set class (026), which along with its inversion (046), recurs frequently throughout the work.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes these are combined to yield larger whole-tone scale subsets such as (0248) or (0268), the latter familiar in tonal contexts as the French augmented sixth chord. One possible reason for the frequent use of (026) and (046) throughout *Itinerant* is that they are the only trichordal set classes found in both the octatonic and whole-tone scales.

Three such (026) motives appear in the first phrase of the piece (**Example 1**), with the rising C<sharp>–B–F (026) followed quickly by a descending E–D–A<flat> (026), then a second descent through G–F–B (026). Note that each of these sets is a T3 (pitch-class transposition by three semitones) of the previous one—and that the melody’s ordering of the pitch classes within each set is identical.<sup>8</sup> This opening phrase fits quite neatly into the OCT<sub>1,2</sub> scale, with the sole exception of the two A<natural>s. One could even argue that the A<natural>s resolve stepwise into the octatonic scale’s A<flat>, adding a certain tension and directionality to the phrase. This hearing would imply that the A<natural>s function

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Koozin (1991, 124); Takemitsu (1995, 203–04 and 242–43).

<sup>4</sup> Deguchi (2012, 45–57).

<sup>5</sup> Takemitsu (1995, 194–206).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burt (2006, 177–78).

<sup>7</sup> In a departure from Straus 2016 (66–68), this analysis distinguishes between inversionally related sets such as (026) and (046). In technical terms, these are T<sub>n</sub>-types or T<sub>n</sub> set classes rather than the more abstract T<sub>n</sub>I set classes, which would apply the same prime form label (026) to both T<sub>n</sub>-types. The rationale for this choice is the considerable advantage of keeping distinct labels for (026) and (046) and other inversionally related sets. Ordered successions of pitch classes are indicated in the text by letter names separated by dashes: C<sharp>–A–A<sharp>–E, and T<sub>n</sub>-types are labeled with their numerical prime form in parentheses—for example, (0147).

<sup>8</sup> One could argue that these two T3 intervals also structure the music on a larger scale, linking together the emphasized final notes of the first three phrases: A<flat>, B, and D.

somewhat like upper chromatic neighbors in a tonal context, relaxing into the A<flat> at the midpoint fermata and then conclusively at the end of the phrase.

**Lento Misterioso**  
 ♩. = ca. 30 flexible  
*legatiss.*

Chord diagrams:  
 [B, C#, F] (0 2 6)  
 [D, E, Ab] (0 2 6)  
 [F, G, B] (0 2 6)

Operations: T3, T3

**Example 1: System 1, three (026) sets related by T3**

The combination of (026) sets separated by the operation T3 recurs later in the piece. **Example 2a** shows how two (026) sets combine into a single melodic rise-fall gesture; in contrast with the first phrase, here the ordering within each set is varied, first E<flat>-A-B then D-F<sharp>-C. **Example 2b** skips ahead to highlight a closely related combination of sets in System 8: here the (026) sets are a reordered transposition (T6) of the sets in Example 2a. The shared tritones E<flat>-A and C-F<sharp> are in identical registers, with only the upper notes of each set changed (B and D in Example 2a become F and A<flat> in Example 2b).

Chord diagrams:  
 [A, B, Eb] (0 2 6)  
 [C, D, F#] (0 2 6)

Operation: T3

**Example 2a: System 5, two (026) sets related by T3**

[Eb, F, A] [F#, Ab, C]  
 (0 2 6) (0 2 6)  
 T3

**Example 2b: System 8, two (026) sets related by T3**

Virtually all of the pitch classes in Example 2a and 2b (with the exception of the A<double-flat> notated in the multiphonic) fit within a single octatonic scale (in this case OCT<sub>2,3</sub>). Timothy Koozin (1991 and 2002) makes a convincing case for the importance of the octatonic scale for Takemitsu, confirming the composer's use of the scale in a 1989 interview. Even without such first-hand testimony, one can easily identify enough instances of the octatonic scale in *Itinerant* to support the notion that it plays a significant role in the work. The second phrase of the piece (**Example 3a**, immediately following the excerpt in Example 1) is written entirely within OCT<sub>2,3</sub>. The (0346) and (0236) sets labeled here expand on the trichords (046) and (026) respectively. The final C–E<flat>–B (014) becomes a characteristic phrase-concluding gesture through varied repetition over the course of the piece.

[B, C, Eb]  
 (0 1 4)  
 Flutt. norm. 3:2  
 mf ff > p al niente  
 [C, D, Eb, F#] [D, F, F#, Ab]  
 (0 2 3 6) (0 3 4 6)  
 I8

**Example 3a: Systems 1–2, OCT<sub>2,3</sub>**

**Example 3b** moves to a different octatonic scale, OCT<sub>0,1</sub>. My annotations draw attention to the complex interplay of (0236) and (0346) sets as well as two (0268)s. All of these tetrachords share a (026) or (046) subset, linking them aurally to the trichords of Examples 1 and 2. The (014) and (034) subsets of the final (0236) and (0346) tetrachords also recall the characteristic concluding trichord highlighted at the end of Example 3a. The excerpt is notable in its repeated use of intervals of a minor sixth (sometimes spelled enharmonically as an augmented fifth): B<flat>–F<sharp>, G–E<flat>, and C<sharp>–A.

T3  
 [B $\flat$ , C, D $\flat$ , E] (0 2 3 6)  
 N.V.  
 [C $\sharp$ , E $\flat$ , E, G] (0 2 3 6) [A, C, C $\sharp$ , E $\flat$ ] (0 3 4 6)  
 [B $\flat$ , C, E, F $\sharp$ ] (0 2 6 8)  
 [C $\sharp$ , E $\flat$ , G, A] (0 2 6 8)  
 T3/T9  
 Dynamics: *p*, *p*, *pp*, *poco mf*, *f*

**Example 3b: System 3, OCT<sub>0,1</sub>**

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to catalogue all of the octatonic passages in *Itinerant*, a few extended octatonic excerpts are worth noting:

- the phrase beginning at the last C of System 4 and continuing through the end of System 5 (OCT<sub>2,3</sub>);
- all of system 8 (OCT<sub>2,3</sub>); and
- the phrase starting with E in system 10 (OCT<sub>1,2</sub>): a transposed version of Systems 1–2, and a rare exact return of melodic/rhythmic material in this “itinerant” through-composed form.

The whole-tone scale is also a characteristic part of Takemitsu’s musical language, but it appears in its complete six-note form less often than the octatonic. One extended passage written entirely in WT<sub>0</sub> (the whole tone scale including C<natural>) begins in the middle of System 9 with the A<flat>-C tremolo; this is followed by a partial appearance of the other whole-tone scale, WT<sub>1</sub> (**Example 4**). Even when it doesn’t appear in its entirety, the whole-tone scale often makes its presence felt through characteristic subsets like (026)/(046) and (0268). The (0248) sets circled here can each be broken down into subsets of (026) and (046), linking this whole-tone passage motivically to the octatonic excerpts discussed above.

WT<sub>0</sub> (complete) [C, D, E, F $\sharp$ , A $\flat$ , B $\flat$ ]  
 WT<sub>1</sub> (incomplete) [C $\sharp$ , (D $\sharp$ ), F, G, A, (B)]  
 Dynamics: *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *p*, *p*, *p*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *p*, *mf*, *pp*  
 Interval: T6  
 Circled sets: [C, D, E, A $\flat$ ] (0 2 4 8) and [F $\sharp$ , A $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , D] (0 2 4 8)

**Example 4: Whole-tone scales in Systems 9–10**

Later in the piece, we find that many other melodic phrases or gestures can be understood as a combination of multiple 026/046 motives. In the excerpts collected below as **Examples 5a–d**, two (046)s are combined at T7. This combination does not yield a whole-tone or octatonic scale as in previous examples featuring (026) or (046) sets—rather, it produces the hexachord (012578), which does not fit into either symmetrical scale. **Example 5a** is the first instance of this construction; to emphasize its similarity to the following excerpts, the final note of each subphrase is omitted from the set class labeling, as is the short C prefix to the second subphrase. The same trichordal set classes appear in Systems 6 and 13 (**Examples 5b** and **5c**), sharing identical rhythms as well as intervals; the only difference is that the latter passage is transposed a perfect fifth (diminished sixth) lower, bringing it to the same pitch level as Example 5a. In **Example 5d**, the expected initial B<flat>, which would fall below the flute’s lower range limit, is omitted, shortening the (046) to the tritone dyad C–F<sharp>.

H.T. Flutt.  
norm. port. norm. port.

*p* < > *p* > *sfpp* < > < > *sfpp* < > *f* > *p* >

[A, C#, D#] (0 4 6) [E, A♭, B♭] (0 4 6)

T7

**Example 5a: System 4, combination of two (046) sets at T7**

expanding wedge motive:  
Calm N.V. E F  
E♭

*pp* < > *p* > *ppp* < > *p* >

[E, A♭, B♭] (0 4 6) [B, E♭, F] (0 4 6)

T7

**Example 5b: System 6, combination of two (046) sets at T7 with expanding wedge motive**

expanding wedge motive:

N.V.

much air pressure

*pp* < *p* > *ppp* < *p* > *ffp*

[A, C#, D#] (0 4 6) [E, A♭, B♭] (0 4 6)

T7

**Example 5c: System 13, exact transposition (down a perfect fifth) of Example 5b**

expanding wedge motive:

*poco*

*p* < > *mf* < > *al niente*

[F#, (B♭), C] (0 4 6) [C#, F, G] (0 4 6)

T7

**Example 5d: System 16, similar to Examples 5b and 5c, but with the initial (046) abbreviated to a single tritone, C-F<sharp>.**

The central pitches in the last three of these excerpts suggest an expanding chromatic “wedge”: E–E<flat>–F in the second example, A–A<flat>–B<flat> in the third, and F<sharp>–F–G in the fourth. The pitches forming this shape are extracted from their trichordal context in System 12 (**Example 6a**) and presented in the high register as “whistle tones,” still recognizable even in isolation. The idea of the wedge is significantly expanded in the final phrase of the piece, with added octave transfers spreading the pitch classes across a wide register (**Example 6b**). In set-class terms, the wedge motive is entirely distinct from the (026) and (046) figures discussed above—but the musical context of the melodic figures in Examples 5a–d provides a clear link between these two musical ideas.

expanding wedge motive:

playing: (*mf* *ppp*)      *mf* <> )  
*ppp* <>

**Example 6a: System 12, expanding wedge motive isolated from its original context (see Example 5) and presented with a “whistle tone” timbre**

extended wedge motive with octave transfers:

*pp*      *poco fpp*      *f*      *fff*

**Example 6b: System 17, ending of *Itinerant*, analyzed as an extension of the wedge motive**

While the pitch-class structures described above are the most significant to my hearing of *Itinerant*, these motives alone cannot account for all the work’s pitch materials. Among other recurring elements, one might note the frequent appearance of (015) and (045), as in the work’s final melodic gesture D<sharp>-B-B<flat>; these set classes fit into neither the whole-tone nor octatonic scales. The piece’s overall form is by no means clear-cut, and is far removed from the familiar binary, ternary, sonata or rondo forms of Western classical music. There are, however, a few significant repetitions that precisely preserve both rhythms and intervallic contour. One such repetition is the transposed recall of System 6 in System 13 (discussed above as Examples 5b and 5c). Similarly, at the middle of System 10, the melody starting on E is an exact transposition (up a major second or T2) of the phrase starting at the end of System 1, suggesting a kind of formal return or recapitulation—though no further large-scale repetition follows. In the absence of extensive formal repeats or section breaks, the motivic links explored here are essential as “lines of force” connecting disparate moments through similarity-based association, offering an impression of objects undergoing constant motion and change.

Numerous aspects of the music have been omitted as beyond the scope of this brief analysis: some possible avenues of further investigation could include the role of register, the repetition of melodic contours independent of exact intervals, and the fluidity of the work’s rhythmic language. Another topic of great interest would be an investigation of Takemitsu’s integration of features of Japanese music into his style, though this would require a considerable knowledge of the *shakuhachi* repertoire and other traditional genres. Such an approach might focus largely on timbre and the intricate dynamic sculpting of each melodic phrase.



The combination of Japanese and Western ideas into an “intercultural” hybrid<sup>9</sup> is a recurrent theme in Takemitsu’s music as well as in Noguchi’s life and work. In his essay on Noguchi, Takemitsu reflects on the artist’s travels through the world—both physical and mental—as an endless process of self-realization, finding a meaningful place for himself in an era both increasingly fragmented and more interconnected than ever before by air travel and communication technology. The historical shifts of globalization imply a breakdown of the hegemonic Western worldview as a unitary reflection of existence, leaving artists to find meaning in a kaleidoscopic intercultural landscape through acts of creativity and determination. Itinerance—for Takemitsu as much as Noguchi—is the path to discovery.

A mirror is being broken and in each shattered piece different faces are reflected. No longer can you view your image in a single mirror. And a shattered mirror cannot be reassembled.

The idea of integration and of the wholeness of human aspiration is not directed at creating an innocuous, neutral state but at finding oneself among those countless conflicting and irregular shapes. Modern Japan has spent a long time trying to discover itself in the huge Western European mirror, but now that some time has passed, it should try to see itself in those countless fragments of mirror. But the ability to unite those numerous scattered, distorted images is called imagination. And the power to do that requires an act of will.

Those wide expanses—geographic and imaginative—they are there, indistinguishably merged in the travels of Noguchi.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Utz (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Takemitsu (1995, 136–37).

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