

José Maceda  
May 4 — Jul 27, 2024



# Echoes Beyond the Archipelago

Western Front is pleased to present *Echoes Beyond the Archipelago*, a multi-part project about the pioneering work of composer and ethnomusicologist, José Maceda (1917–2004).

Emerging from The Philippines, José Maceda posed a question of what classical music has to do with “coconuts and rice.” He created many one-of-a-kind works combining fieldwork on Filipino musicality and his knowledge of the European avant-garde. In particular, Maceda’s own musical compositions uniquely fused cutting-edge compositional techniques such as spatialization, attention to timbre, and musique concrète with traditional Asian instruments, rhythms, and structures.

Curated by the long-term Maceda expert Aki Onda, *Echoes Beyond the Archipelago* provides insights into Maceda’s six-decade career and his major compositions *Pagsamba* (1968), *Ugnayan* (1974), *Udlot-Udlot* (1975), and *Music for Five Pianos* (1993). With reproductions of photographs, print ephemera, scores, and memorabilia, this exhibition is conceived as a recreation of his archive to offer insight into Maceda’s significant legacy and achievement.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a community performance of *Udlot-Udlot* at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre, Vancouver on May 4, 2024; and a month-long installation of *Ugnayan* in Western Front’s Grand Luxe Hall from May 4 to June 1, 2024.

# JOSÉ MACEDA'S MUSIC-MAKING

by Aki Onda

The Filipino ethnomusicologist and composer José Montserrat Maceda had a gigantic, balloon-like imagination, and the scale of his art was marvelous and unprecedented. His compositions include music composed for one hundred cassettes, twenty radio stations, and hundreds or thousands of performers as an open-air ritual. He emerged from the context of twentieth-century avant-garde music and made a body of work unlike anyone else in the field. He brushed shoulders with the greats: he visited Edgard Varèse at his SoHo apartment, learned *musique concrète* with Pierre Schaeffer at the Groupe de Recherches Musicales, and befriended the French-Greek composer Iannis Xenakis. His exposure to these influential figures immersed him in the golden age of the Western avant-garde. At the same time, Maceda became passionately drawn to the Filipino indigenous music, so-called village music, that has been performed in people's lives as a ceremony or ritual for thousands of years. As an ethnomusicologist, Maceda rigorously documented Southeast and East Asian musical practices and folkways. After conducting fieldwork for a decade, he composed his first piece *Ugma-ugma* in 1963, when he was forty-six years old. For the remainder of his life, Maceda worked steadily and produced twenty-three compositions before passing away in 2004.

In his 1986 essay "A Concept of Time in a Music of Southeast Asia," Maceda discusses his concept "drone and melody," which explains a basic musical structure of Asian indigenous music: "Drone may be understood to be not only a sustained sound, a continuation of the long vibration of gongs, but also a constantly repeating phrase of one or more pitches played by one or several instruments for the duration of the music."<sup>1</sup> And melody, which is a musical counterpart of drone, is described as, "a succession or permutation of pitches, events in time ..."<sup>2</sup> Maceda continues: "A bilateral relationship between drone and melody describes not only the music but also the thinking behind the music, for different combinations of drone and melody represent an expression of a group of people, perhaps a reflection of a social organization, a representation of values, and a view of time."<sup>3</sup> Here, his thoughts encompass the social philosophy of how music functions in Asian societies.

Maceda had a deep knowledge of both Western avant-garde and Asian indigenous music and did not define himself as coming from one tradition or the other. He once said in an interview with Japanese pianist Haruna Miyake, "I'm a Filipino composer, but I don't confine myself to national borders. I consider my composition to be more universal. I don't want to pigeonhole myself as specifically Filipino. Whatever I need, I can borrow from anywhere."<sup>4</sup> His intellectual curiosities often bridged polar opposites, as the Vancouver-based scholar and Maceda's friend Michael Tenzer described: "One might question whether these dualities and oppositions between the modern and the mythical, between new music and old, between the urban Westernized world and rural Asia, between composition and ethnomusicology, the avant-garde and tradition, centers and peripheries, sound and culture are in need of reconciliation."<sup>5</sup>

A non-conformist and polymath, Maceda was also an educator who influenced the next generation of composers in the Philippines. However, until recently, his legacy and achievement had been nearly forgotten internationally. Even today, his compositions are rarely performed, and his writings are hard to find. As his life and work are underknown, here's a primer: Maceda was born in Pila, southeast of Manila, in 1917. As a piano prodigy who could play classical repertoire with natural ease, he was sent to the Academy of Music of Manila, then to the Conservatory of Music of the University of the Philippines, before embarking on his studies abroad. You may wonder, why classical piano in the Philippines? Due to more than three centuries of Spanish colonization from 1521 to 1898, Western music was fairly rooted in Filipino culture, and it was not unusual to receive a Western-style education. Maceda then studied in Paris from 1937 to 1941 with Alfred Cortot at École Normale de Musique de Paris. After he returned to Manila, Maceda had a recital at the Manila Metropolitan Theatre. The program included Bach, Chopin, Albeniz, Ravel, and his favorite composer, Debussy.

After World War II, Maceda intended to continue his piano studies, which brought him to the United States. Maceda first studied piano privately with E. Robert Schmitz in San Francisco. Then, in New York, he studied musicology at Queen's College and Columbia University from 1950 to 1952, which helped Maceda find a new interest in ethnomusicology and Filipino indigenous music.

During his stay in New York, Maceda visited Edgard Varèse, the French-born composer who conceived the idea of "sound masses" or "mass structure" and

also incorporated electronically generated sounds and non-musical noises such as sirens. These revolutionary ideas shocked Maceda and started to change his aesthetic trajectory from modern European piano music to post-war avant-garde from this new continent.

As soon as he returned to the Philippines in 1952, Maceda began exploring the world of pre-colonial indigenous music as an ethnomusicologist. He formed a team of researchers and devoted himself to a decade of fieldwork, carrying heavy tape recorders across mountains and seas in the countryside of the Philippines to study ethnic music traditions. Soon, he extended to geographical regions throughout Southeast and East Asia, as he found many similarities in the indigenous musics he researched. He received several major grants, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, to research in other countries, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan, and Korea.

*Ugma-ugma* (1963) was based on his research in the 1950s. It was composed for various instruments from the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, and China as an attempt to present Maceda's idea of pan-Asian music. The pitch and timbre of each instrument vary, though he found a way to combine them, resulting in unconventional notation and an unusual colour palette for sonic details. It was the beginning of his newly invented style with various traditional instruments, which he explored throughout the 1960s, based on his drone and melody concept. Maceda considered the music of the Philippines and Southeast Asia as fundamentally different from Western music. In that sense, drone and melody was a bold rejection of Western values. However contradictory, *Ugma-ugma* was also his answer to the Western avant-garde. He adopted mass structure from Varèse, especially for the highly complex percussion rhythms, and his unconventional time structure and organization of sounds have a touch of influence from musique concrète. In other words, Maceda didn't mimic indigenous music as is. Although it sounds "Asian," the whole structure and concept belongs to the Western context. One could also discuss this as hybrid music, which doesn't belong to either side or to both sides, depending on how you see it.

In 1968, Maceda premiered the composition *Pagsamba*, specifically designed for a round-shaped church—the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice in the University of the Philippines, Quezon City. The composition was for one hundred voices, various Filipino bamboo instruments, and gongs. A total of 241 singers

and musicians were scattered among the audience, all facing the centre of the circle where Maceda led the ceremony as the conductor. Due to this arrangement, each performer or audience member heard the sound differently depending on where they were situated in the church. Maceda aimed to erase the line between performers and audience as if it were a ritual held in a rural village. As *Pagsamba* was intended both as a concert and a Christian mass, it also called for a specific social engagement—that of spiritual worship. Eventually, Maceda intended to replace the musicians and singers with an array of 241 loudspeakers, each playing back pre-recorded sounds. This idea never materialized, but its conception shows his interest in sound spatialization and diffusion with the use of modern technology, which Maceda later explored with his compositions *Cassette 100* and *Ugnayan (Music for 20 Radio Stations)* in the 1970s.

*Cassettes 100* (1971) involved one hundred participants carrying cassette players in the spacious lobby and balconies of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila. Maceda intended to create a shifting cluster of sounds by giving a simple instruction to performers for their movements to ascend or descend the atrium's interconnecting staircases. All recorded sounds for one hundred parts were meticulously noted on his score, and each track was played by musicians with various bamboo instruments and gongs. They pressed play at the same time to sync the one hundred recordings, running them for the thirty-minute duration as a looming, three-dimensional cacophony. It was Maceda's first attempt to use an electronic device for sound diffusion.

*Udlot-Udlot* (1975) is written for hundreds or thousands of performers as an open-air ritual, and it was premiered with 800 high school students at the University of the Philippines' administration building, then repeated at the Cultural Center of the Philippines' parking lot in the same year. With this work, Maceda evoked the sounds of nature and people's lives in rural villages, and the extended musical performance has an animistic and spiritual approach. *Udlot-Udlot* (1975) shows a romantic and optimistic side of Maceda, and this is the most participant-friendly composition in his repertoire. The score is a simple instruction, and anyone can play whether they have musical education or not. In the video documentation of *Udlot-Udlot* at Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco in 2003, the composer declared, "You see how easy it is to make music. A very serious music with very simple music. It's simple ritualistic music and easy to play. You don't have to study piano for 100 years, nor the violin, nor singing, just play, isn't it fun?"<sup>6</sup>

In the 1980s, Maceda started adopting Western instruments mixed with Filipino indigenous instruments, although he avoided easy fusion of them. For instance, in his composition *Strata* (1988), he used bamboo buzzers, pairs of sticks, Chinese gongs, six-stringed guitars, flutes, and cellos. One of his instructions in the score was that the “tuning of each differ by a few cents” for all Western instruments to match the pitch and timbre with the other Eastern instruments not made for the standard Western tuning. In addition to the pitches, time pulses are also intentionally not unified. Each instrument generates unmelodic sequences of phrases independently, which creates a complex polyrhythmic structure, as if they were sounds in a tropical rainforest. The Western and Eastern musical elements are treated equally, though the characteristics of the instruments themselves differ, and the clashes create strong tensions.

Through the 1990s, Maceda shifted his focus to experimenting with symbols of Western classical music such as symphony orchestra and piano. Composer and Maceda’s close friend Ramón Pagayon Santos described Maceda as, “practically invading the exclusive domain of Western musical thoughts and supplanting his own transformed and metamorphosed sensibilities on the very tools and mediums of Western musical expression.”<sup>7</sup> *Dissemination* (1990) and *Distemperament* (1992), both for a symphony orchestra, followed this principle as he brutally deconstructed the usual functions of the orchestra. Three years later, Maceda returned to his original instrument and composed *Music for Five Pianos* (1993), at the request of the Japanese pianist Aki Takahashi. Maceda first refused saying, “I’ve got no reason to write a piece for such an old-fashioned instrument!” But he immediately conceived the idea and suggested composing for not one but five pianos. Santos wrote that, “*Music for Five Pianos* treated each instrument as an independent entity, behaving as a separate musical instrument with its own functional identity, [like] those in a gagaku ensemble,” suggesting Maceda applied Eastern musical structure, although free from the typical exoticism of mimicking any specific culture.<sup>8</sup> The opening and ending sections of the composition are full of octaves, and the middle section is filled with clusters of single tones. The structure is rigid but full of playfulness, unexpected movements of notes, and even a hint of Debussy’s approach to piano, which Maceda once loved. There is no sense of confrontation in his two orchestra pieces indicated here. Neither Western or Eastern wins or dominates. Utilizing techniques and aesthetics that Maceda developed over five decades, this work was a culmination of Maceda’s career.

Maceda changed his compositional style, use of instruments, and form of presentation regularly—almost every decade—but stubbornly kept his fundamental idea of drone and melody. Maceda’s musical adventures were unique and outstanding in their originality and unconventional relationships with audiences. They were meticulous in concept and keen on the fusion of ancient and modern. Significantly, they also demonstrated a commitment to questioning the idioms of Western musical composition and seeking an alternative for liberating them. All of this emerged from studying the collective music-making of ancient village rituals and ceremonies.

## Notes

1. José Maceda, “A Concept of Time in a Music of Southeast Asia,” *Ethnomusicology* 30, no. 1 (Winter, 1986).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Haruna Miyake, “Conversation with José Maceda,” trans. Colin Smith, *Music Plaza Magazine* (1994): 97.
5. Michael Tenzer, “José Maceda and the Paradoxes of Modern Composition in Southeast Asia,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (Winter, 2003): 115.
6. José Maceda, *Udlot-Udlot* (1975), video documentation, Apr 2003. 8 min. 57 sec. Camera by Edgar Navarro, Rica Concepcion, Howie Severino.
7. Ramón Pagayon Santos, “José Montserrat Maceda: Rebellion, Non-conformity, and Alternatives,” in *Tunugan: Four Essays on Filipino Music* (Manila: UP Press, 2005), 152.
8. Santos, 164.

# Biographies

José Maceda (1917–2004) was a Filipino composer, pianist, and musicologist recognized for bridging his fieldwork on traditional Filipino music with techniques of European avant-garde music. His work uniquely fuses cutting-edge compositional techniques such as spatialization, attention to timbre, and musique concrète with traditional Asian instruments, rhythms, and structures.

Aki Onda is an artist, composer, performer, curator, and is currently Curator-at-Large at Western Front, Vancouver. Their works are often catalyzed by and structured around memories—personal, collective, and historical. Crossing genres and disciplines, they have been active internationally in art, film, music and performance.

## Project Team

Curator: Aki Onda  
Exhibition Design: Ben Evans James  
Photo Printing: Satomi Shirai  
Graphic Design: Line-Gry Hørup  
Copy Editing: Max Levin, Trey Le, Kiel Torres  
Technicians: Bobbi Kozinuk, Daniel Pickering,  
Marco Silver, Cody Swinkels, Ben Wilson,  
Christian Vistan

With thanks to the UP Center for Ethnomusicology.

Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada, the BC Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
du Canada

Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA  
ARTS COUNCIL



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA



CITY OF  
VANCOUVER

Supported by the Province of British Columbia