

## Shodo Canada Awards Ceremony Speech

November 4th, 2018, Matt Borland

When Maeda-san asked me if I would give this speech, she first asked a slightly different question. She asked me if I was good at giving speeches. My response was an immediate “No!”, so you have all been warned in advance ; )

Thank you to all of you for coming, to the JCCC, and of course to Maeda-san.

My name is Matt Borland and I am a student from Maeda-san’s Waterloo Tuesday evening class. The thing I would say that I am least bad at is likely music, and I’ve been lucky enough to make a career exploring the way we make music in this modern age of electronics, synthesizers, and computers.

The computer is both an incredible and terrible musical tool, or interface, in the language of an engineer. With its the introduction into the music making process, we have seen a dramatic transformation of musical practice. As with any new technology, the engineers first want to see what all of the possibilities are that this new thing has to offer. Often this ends up being pursued mostly from a technical perspective, out of balance with the expressive aspects inherent in the art form. For computer music this means that we have created new ways to make sounds, new ways to notate music, new ways to control timbre, new ways to share music, new ways to add in expression, new ways to edit and compose, new ways to record...really a whole new set of endless possibilities enabled by the underlying capability to edit and expand the software which runs these computer music systems. Seventy years into this new musical journey, and with a small amount of hindsight, we are seeing that the digital world of the computer is not a new messiah, but is instead just another tool for expression. As such, musicians are currently rejecting the endless possibilities of the computer, and instead are intentionally applying limits to their musical practice when working with this computer-instrument-interface. Limits like these require creativity to work within, and force musicians to find complexity and beauty in new and innovative, but constrained, ways.

These creative limits need to be self-imposed in the computer music world, but they come naturally in the world of physical instruments like the guitar. At the most basic level, the acoustic guitar is a wooden box with some strings attached. A very simple instrument.

Software updates can't be applied, and new programs can't be downloaded. The expressive colours a musician has to work with are physically limited, but these built-in limits once again serve to focus the act of creation. There is tremendous value in that.

The brush we are all familiar with as shodo students is also an interface in the language of an engineer. It's the tool we use to translate ideas, emotions, history, experiences, language, neuron firings, muscle activations, and so much more, into the strokes, and empty spaces around the strokes, which we are surrounded by on the walls here today. Without the brush, there would be no shodo. This stick, with hairs of various lengths and stiffness, although at first seemingly simple, reveals its complexities slowly to us after years of practice. The subtle twist of a wrist, the pause halfway through a stroke, the unexpected chaos of a splatter or splash, the pressure and contact with the page, the amount of ink held in those hairs; all of these things are what we are striving to understand each time we practice our strokes and characters. Working with just three colours; black, white, and red; a brush; ink; and our seals; we can see how these limits are actually empowering and can reveal the beauty and expression we see here today.

Thanks, which I would like to extend for most of us here today, first go to our teacher, Maeda-san. The community she has created here speaks to her generosity, humility, and devotion to sharing the beauty of shodo with all of us. She also has the best jokes and stories, and shares not only shodo with us, but also herself.

Thank you again to the JCCC for providing this space and opportunity for us to gather today and experience each other's efforts to learn about, and improve our relationship with, shodo and Japanese culture.

Finally, thank you to all of our nameless brush makers, who put that humble, complex, incredible tool into our hands, and have provided us with the expressive possibilities we find in shodo. If I can leave you with one thought today, it is to look for these opportunities where imperfection and complexity emerge from humble objects and tools, and reconnect with those experiences in all aspects of your lives.