

A look at Japanese film music through the lens of Akira Kurosawa

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Summary

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) was one of Japan's most important film directors of the twentieth century. His work spanned over fifty years and included a broad range of genres from historical epics to gangster dramas. His films not only told interesting stories but also broke new ground. Many of his innovations were technical, such as his use of the long lens, his penchant for shooting with multiple cameras, and his virtuosic editing. Other innovations were tied to his emphasis on details within his films, such as elaborate period costumes and sets, stunning location shots, and detailed miniature sets. Music was among those many details that Kurosawa considered so carefully in his films. He worked closely with several important Japanese film composers throughout his long career. This lesson plan is an introduction to three of those composers: Fumio Hayasaka (1914-1955), Masaru Sato (1928-1999) and Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996). The content uses examples from five Kurosawa films: three scored by Hayasaka, and one each by Sato and Takemitsu, who both served as assistants to Hayasaka in the 1950s. The material is appropriate for units on Japan, music, and film.

Resources

Rashomon (1950), *Ikiru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Ran* (1985)¹

Activity

Background

Before discussing the music in these five Kurosawa films, first some background into the purpose of film music and some context for understanding Japanese film music. Music has always had a presence in filmmaking and film viewing, dating back to the birth of film in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. Even in the silent era, music had both a creative and a practical role. It was used on the sets to help actors conjure the right mood for a scene and to help directors and camera operators set the right pace for shooting a scene. It was also an important part of public screenings in early movie theaters, where local musicians performed live accompaniments. Initially, musicians performed whatever musical and sound effects

¹ *Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, *Seven Samurai*, and *Yojimbo* are available on Hulu.com. *Ran* is available on DVD.

they felt appropriate, but gradually, particularly in Europe and America, film music came to serve the following purposes: 1) it helped establish mood and location; 2) it helped establish continuity among different scenes in a film; 3) it provided sound effects; 4) it masked the sounds of the loud projection equipment for a more enjoyable viewing experience.

In Japan, silent film thrived from ca. 1900 to 1935, and as a young man, Kurosawa watched a lot of it. The films he saw came from different parts of the world, but most were from Japan, Europe and the United States. The films (regardless of their country of origin) were typically shown in Japan with a *benshi*, an actor who spoke before, during and after the film. The Japanese *benshi* usually provided a spirited narration during the film, including varied voices for the characters, translations of the title cards if necessary, and any useful context that could help make the film more understandable and entertaining for the audience. *Benshi* were immensely popular in Japan throughout the silent era—often more popular than the films themselves! Likewise, they drew more attention than the films' live musical accompaniments, which in Japanese movie theaters were provided by a mixture of instruments, some Western and some Japanese. A small theater orchestra might include a violin, a piano, a *shamisen* (a three-stringed, plucked Japanese instrument that resembles a fretless banjo) and a variety of *taiko* (Japanese drums).

In Japan during the silent era, musical accompaniments tended to be sparse. *Benshi* provided the prominent sounds during the screening, and the musicians generally stayed in the background. This notion of sparser music for films in Japan is significant because it differed dramatically from the ways that silent films were being scored in the West (in both the silent and sound era), where films tended toward nearly continuous musical accompaniment. This dichotomy is an important one to understand when thinking about music in Japanese films after 1935 and specifically in Kurosawa's films. On the one hand, Kurosawa was drawn to Western films. For example, he greatly admired the work of American director John Ford, and like many American directors, Ford placed great emphasis on music. Ford's films often used nearly continuous musical accompaniment. This famous [scene](#) from Ford's *The Informer* (1935), which was scored by Max Steiner, provides an illustration. As you watch this scene, note how the music is continuous and carefully synchronized with the action on the screen. Nearly every motion by the actors has an accompanying musical gesture.

Kurosawa rarely used music in the extreme way that the Ford example presents, but his films did tend to have more music than other Japanese directors of his era. But at the same time, Kurosawa also believed that music should do more than align itself with the action on the screen. It also had the potential to add another layer of meaning to a film, and he worked with composers who agreed with that aesthetic.

Sampling of musical techniques in five Kurosawa films

1) *Rashomon* (1950)

Rashomon was Kurosawa's first film to attract international acclaim. It tells the story of a rape and murder from four different perspectives. In the film, those four perspectives are presented as flashbacks, each one narrated by the character who is recalling the incident. The film was revolutionary in its ambiguity—the audience never knows precisely what happened because the memories of the four characters contradict each other. The audience has to make its own decisions about who it thinks is being truthful.

Fumio Hayasaka composed the music for *Rashomon*. Hayasaka had worked with Kurosawa two years earlier, as the composer for *Drunken Angel* (1948), and the two would work together on several more projects before Hayasaka died tragically in 1955 at age 41 from tuberculosis. Largely self-taught, Hayasaka was a highly skilled composer whose music was often an intriguing mixture of distinctly Japanese sounds combined with Western orchestral music. Before he worked in film, he had significant success as a concert composer, and he earned several important prizes for his orchestral compositions in the late 1930s. In 1939 Hayasaka moved to Tokyo, the center of Japan's film industry, so that he could become more involved in professional film scoring. He stayed in Tokyo for sixteen years and wrote music for forty-seven films before his death. Hayasaka's film scores reflect his classical music experience, and they usually call for a full orchestra. At the same time, his musical language often uses scales and sounds of traditional Japanese music, such as the whole tone and pentatonic scales, as well as occasional references to Japanese instruments. Hayasaka's music for *Rashomon*'s opening credits (or what is often called the "main title music") is a good illustration. The music opens with dissonant chords that imitate the *sho*, a mouth organ used in traditional Japanese music. The dissonant chords fade into the background as a haunting melody takes over in the woodwinds and horns.

Kurosawa had specific musical ideas for *Rashomon*. In particular, he suggested that Hayasaka consider something like Ravel's [*Bolero*](#) for certain scenes. *Bolero*, a famous orchestral work from 1928 by French composer Maurice Ravel, is built around a simple rhythm and melody that repeat incessantly. The rhythm and melody begin softly and then gain momentum over the course of the roughly seventeen-minute piece. The momentum is generated by the way Ravel skillfully incorporates an increasingly larger range of instruments and countermelodies into the work. As a result, the piece that begins simply, eventually becomes rather complex. The build-up is so subtle and gradual that the listener does not recognize that a transformation is taking place. Kurosawa thought a similar musical idea would work well for the woodcutter's memory in *Rashomon* (00:07:25 to 00:11:50), and Hayasaka took Kurosawa's advice. Like *Bolero*, the scene begins simply, as the woodcutter recalls his walk through the woods. The viewer sees the woodcutter negotiating the paths, in what appears to be a routine walk through the woods. The repeating rhythms of Hayasaka's music closely match the woodcutter's footsteps. As the walk progresses,

the music builds gradually in volume and complexity, and as Hayasaka adds more instruments to the musical texture. The result is a subtle increase in tension, which is further heightened by four short pauses as the woodcutter stumbles upon a hat, a shoe, a rope, and finally a dead body.

2) *Ikiru* (1952)

Ikiru, which means “to live,” is about an aging bureaucrat, Watanabe, who discovers that he is dying from stomach cancer. As Watanabe struggles to understand this fate, he grapples with what it means to be alive. The film is a powerful commentary on life and human nature. Kurosawa tells Watanabe’s story from multiple perspectives and the audience sees how the people around Watanabe perceive this quiet old man and his struggle.

Hayasaka was also the composer for *Ikiru*, and the film’s main title (00:00:00 to 00:02:25) strikes a much different mood than the main title for *Rashomon*. *Ikiru*’s main title is about contrast. It begins with an angular introduction by a full orchestra, which then gives way to a lyrical, simple melody played on a vibraphone. The simple melody is a 1915 Japanese popular song called “Gondola no Uta” (“Gondola Song”). The song is significant because it has a role in the film’s narrative. In the second act of the film, Watanabe will meet a writer, who urges Watanabe to explore the city’s underworld in his pursuit to find meaning in his life. The two men go to many clubs and bars, and in one dance club a piano player is taking requests. Watanabe, who is very drunk, requests “Gondola no Uta.” The piano player obliges, and as young people file onto the dance floor, Watanabe suddenly begins to sing along. His voice is strained and wobbly, but he persists through two verses, remembering all the lyrics. It is an awkward moment for everyone else in the bar, who all stop dancing and back away from Watanabe. The lyrics of this old song are about life’s fleeting nature, but Watanabe’s tearful impromptu performance (00:48:35 to 00:51:50) is far from inspiring for the young people in the club. His singing presents a frightening glimpse into their future.

In the main title, Kurosawa and Hayasaka foreshadow this powerful moment through the stark juxtapositions. The song’s melody is scored in a delicate way, with bells, vibraphone, soft strings, and harp, much different from the angular music that both introduces and ultimately interrupts the song. At the end of the main title, however, the two differing ideas align briefly, as the vibraphone returns. The music then ends abruptly, vanishing like a dream that once we awaken becomes difficult to remember.

3) *Seven Samurai* (1954)

Seven Samurai is often considered Kurosawa’s best film, and it earned him international renown. This magnificent epic, which Kurosawa directed, edited, and co-wrote, is about seven *samurai* who come to the defense of a small village. Hayasaka was again Kurosawa’s choice to score *Seven Samurai*. It was the

composer's last film before his death. A monumental project, Hayasaka composed over three hundred musical pieces for *Seven Samurai* in a two-month period. In recognition of his enormous contribution to the film, he received his own title card in the film's opening credits. He was the first Japanese film composer to be given that honor.²

Seven Samurai is nearly three and a half hours long, and the music plays an integral role in the film's pacing, character development, and overall meaning. Kurosawa and Hayasaka placed the music judiciously and avoided using it in an overly emotional manner. Hayasaka's main title music, which is sparsely scored, provides a good illustration. It consists primarily of a repeating drum rhythm that rumbles quietly as the credits are shown. At seemingly random moments, however, Hayasaka interjects sharp interruptions from the lower strings. The interruptions conflict with the repeating rhythm—and foreshadow the danger and uncertainty that the villagers and *samurai* will confront in the course of the story. (00:00:00 to 00:03:23)

The other distinctive feature of Hayasaka's score for *Seven Samurai* is the use of recurring themes for specific characters and situations. Recurring themes is a concept drawn from late nineteenth-century opera and what Richard Wagner called *leitmotifs* (recurring musical ideas that can represent characters, objects, emotions, etc.). Hollywood composers, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s were enamored with this technique. Hayasaka also used it in several films. The technique is useful because it works in tandem with the script, and therefore the composer has the opportunity to use music to help guide the audience in the narrative. In *Seven Samurai*, Hayasaka used recurring themes for many different concepts: the suffering of the villagers, the wisdom of the village elder, the threat of the bandits, and even one young man's discovery of the opposite sex.

By far the most important recurring theme in the film is the *samurai* theme. It first appears after Kambei, a wandering *samurai*, heroically rescues a young villager child from a hostage situation. As Kambei is walking away after freeing the child and killing its abductor, the music enters. The music begins with a marching bass and a heroic, but not overpowering, melody. The melody begins with the same musical interval (a rising perfect 4th) used in many heroic trumpet calls. But the melody soon takes a downward turn and reveals that it is in a minor key, which seems to capture Kambei's humility. As you watch this clip, note the *samurai* theme, as well as the humorous theme for bassoon, piccolo, and bongos that Hayasaka interjects for Kikuchiyo (played by Toshiro Mifune). Kikuchiyo is not a *samurai* by birth, although he aspires to be one. He recognizes the villagers' plight, but at the same time his methods and attitude are much more emotional and unpredictable than the stoic *samurai*. Hayasaka's music reflects that contrast. (00:21:40 to 00:28:40).

² Gene Tyranny, "Biography of Fumio Hayasaka," Allmusic by Rovi (<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/fumio-hayasaka-mn0002184188>). Visited August 2012).

The *samurai* theme returns many times in the film. In some cases, it is a way to signal that the *samurai* are persevering, and in those scenes, the theme is unchanged. In other instances, the *samurai* theme is modified. For example, following the scene in which Rikichi (one of the villagers) witnesses his wife's death, one of the *samurai*, Hayashida, tries to comfort him. As Hayashida consoles the distraught Rikichi, the *samurai* theme is heard softly under the dialogue, played by a solo horn. It has been slightly modified (slower and more lyrical) to reflect the compassion of the caring *samurai*. (01:55:40 to 01:56:48)

A different transformation of the *samurai* theme occurs when another of the *samurai*, Kyuzo, volunteers to capture a gun from the bandits who are closing in on the village. As the other *samurai* anxiously await Kyuzo's return from this dangerous mission, the music is ambiguous and reflects their uncertainty. When Kyuzo returns from the darkness, the *samurai* theme too emerges from within that musical tension. The theme, played by a solo oboe, is more reflective in its mood. It supports the heroic and selfless act that Kyuzo has just performed. (02:40:30 to 02:43:43)

4) *Yojimbo* (1961)

Yojimbo is a much different kind of *samurai* movie. In this film, Kurosawa depicts a *samurai* (Sanjuro) who is a warrior for hire. Sanjuro, played by Toshiro Mifune, offers a combination of wit, brute strength, and moral indifference. The film's mixture of graphic violence and humor was cutting edge for the time and influenced countless directors from Arthur Penn to Quentin Tarantino.³

The music for *Yojimbo* is by Masaru Sato, one of Japan's most prolific twentieth-century composers. Over the course of his 44-year career at Toho Studios, Sato scored over 300 films! He was trained at the National Music Academy, where he studied composition with Hayasaka. In fact, Hayasaka gave Sato his first breaks in the film business in the mid 1950s. Sato worked with Hayasaka on several projects, including *Seven Samurai*, for which Sato served as an orchestrator. Sato began scoring films himself in 1955, and by 1961 he had nearly fifty scores to his credit.

Sato's strength as a composer was his versatility. He could write music in virtually any style, ranging from thick orchestral pieces to jazz combos to traditional Japanese forms. His strong interest in traditional Japanese music, such as the theater music of *kabuki* and *noh*, as well as *gagaku* (music of the imperial orchestra), often gave his scores a more distinctly Japanese sound than Hayasaka's scores. For example, his music for Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) prominently featured the *shakuhachi*, a type of Japanese bamboo flute that dates back to the sixth century.

³ The film was more than a model for director Sergio Leone, who copied *Yojimbo* nearly shot for shot to create *A Fistful of Dollars*, the hip 1964 Western starring Clint Eastwood. Kurosawa sued for copyright infringement and won.

Yojimbo, however, called for a modern sound, largely because Sanjuro was a different kind of *samurai*. Unlike the humble heroes in *Seven Samurai*, Sanjuro was a mercenary warrior who had no hesitation using violence to settle a dispute. Furthermore, the graphic violence in *Yojimbo*, along with the script's clever dialogue and cinematography, gave the film a modern edge. Sato turned to contemporary music—specifically jazz—to match that spirit in this film. Listen to *Yojimbo*'s main title and its catchy syncopated groove. It is scored for an orchestra, but it also prominently features tenor and baritone saxophones, a tight jazz horn section, and jazz rhythms. (00:00:00 to 00:02:50) This musical idea is a recurring theme in *Yojimbo*. It returns to punctuate the Sanjuro's acts, good or bad. The music gives *Yojimbo*'s main character a modern feel and helps the audience accept the violence he wages against the thugs that surround him in the film.

Ran (1985)

Ran was Kurosawa's last epic film. It tells the story of a warlord (Hidetora), who is destroyed by his own sons. Hidetora is a ruthless leader, who built his empire on the blood and backs of others. When he abdicates his power due to his advanced age, a battle develops among his three sons for control of the empire. Two of the sons plot against their father, while the third son remains loyal, despite being banished by Hidetora from the kingdom. The story ultimately ends in total destruction for all involved. There are parallels between *Ran* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, although Kurosawa noted that those connections did not become apparent to him until after he had conceived of much of the script. In many ways, *Ran* was Kurosawa's last great film. It was a project he envisioned for many years, and he even made detailed paintings of the sets he hoped to construct for the film.

Kurosawa selected Toru Takemitsu to compose the music for *Ran*. In 1985, Takemitsu was Japan's most well known composer and a pioneer in contemporary concert music in Japan since the late 1950s. The two had worked together before in 1970, when Takemitsu scored Kurosawa's film *Dodes'kaden*, and Takemitsu was an experienced film composer. By the mid 1980s he had over 90 film scores to his credit.⁴ But film scores were just one part of Takemitsu's musical output. He devoted much more of his time to concert music. He wrote over 130 concert works over the course of his career and received many international awards.

Takemitsu found inspiration in a wide range of music as he developed his own musical voice. He was particularly drawn to the music of Debussy, Messiaen, and Cage, as well as popular music, electronic music, and jazz. Takemitsu is perhaps best known for his nuanced understanding of timbre (the distinct musical color that every sound has), and his ability to compose works that enabled listeners to experience timbres in new ways. He also eventually developed a strong interest in

⁴ Kyoko Hirano, "Toru Takemitsu," Film Reference (<http://www.filmreference.com/Writers-and-Production-Artists-Ta-Vi/Takemitsu-Toru.html#b>). Visited August 2012.

traditional Japanese music. The main title for *Ran* demonstrates this latter interest. It features a high-pitched, repeating musical figure in the strings that resembles the kinds of musical gestures a *shinobue* (a Japanese transverse flute used in *Noh* theater) player uses. The figure repeats several times, cycling in circular manner, while the lower orchestral instruments rumble darkly underneath. (*Ran*, DVD, Chapter 1: “Opening Credits”)

The most famous musical cue from *Ran*, however, has much different style. It is the music that accompanies the ambush of Hidetora’s castle. The musical model Kurosawa suggested Takemitsu consider for this scene was the late nineteenth-century composer Gustav Mahler, whose slow—often tragic—orchestral works seemed an appropriate match to the horror that Kurosawa envisioned depicting in this brutal battle scene. Takemitsu initially resisted Kurosawa’s suggestions, but ultimately acquiesced and wrote one of the most heart-wrenching musical cues in the history of film music. The cue incorporates the musical gestures from the main title, but they are now part of a larger musical fabric. The music’s slow tempo, solo oboe lines, and thick string texture are powerful counterpoints to the frenetic (and deadly) battle unfolding on the screen. The music’s effectiveness is heightened by Kurosawa’s decision to mute all ambient sound in the scene. As a result, the viewer is forced to step back from the specifics of the battle and watch the horror unfold from a distance, with no hope that it will be averted. (*Ran*, DVD, Chapter 14: “Hell on Earth”)

Conclusion

This activity has been a brief introduction into the rich topic of music in Japanese film through the lens of Kurosawa. The examples are a small sampling from Kurosawa’s films, and the reader is encouraged to study further Japanese film, Kurosawa, film music, and this trio of composers (Hayasaka, Sato, and Takemitsu). Kurosawa clearly considered music to be an essential part of his films, and he worked with some of the best Japanese composers of his era.

Further reading

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