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Eclectic Tennō: Japanese Video Game Soundtracks as Agents of Postmodernity

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Japan is one of the major producers of video games, and besides all of the peculiarities that give to such products the unmistakable Japanese traits we all love, as musicologists we can also recognise a feature in many of their soundtracks that can easily strike our attention: a very widespread eclecticism, that happens both at the level of what Philip Tagg (2012:383-416) would call *diataxis* (in which case I talk of *horizontal eclecticism*, which juxtaposes, in subsequent tracks or sections, timbral and stylistic features bound to different genres), and at the level of what he would call *syncrisis* (in which case I talk of *vertical eclecticism*, main focus of this presentation, where the mixture happens in the same moment, but in different layers of the music). Let me start with an example: 'The 13th Dilemma – Saïx' from *Kingdom Hearts 3 (Re:mind DLC)*, composed by Yoko Shimomura. The song begins in a way that may sound very traditional for a boss fight, with imperious string arpeggios playing the '13th Dilemma' theme, but the orchestral section is soon joined a rock band and occasional electronic keyboard sounds. As the orchestral texture becomes more and more dense – with a strong presence of the piano, as typical of much of Shimomura's music – the drums start to get wild, just before an abrupt interruption of the section, which takes to a very idiomatic metal part with a heavy presence of guitars producing an intermitting 'wall of sound' effect that lets electronic tonalities easily cut through the silence. As the orchestra comes back, the main melodic line is reprised by the guitars, in a way that ends up inverting the previous hierarchy between orchestra and band.

Other examples of video game soundtracks with a high level of vertical and/or horizontal eclecticism may come not only from the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, but also from

Final Fantasy, as well as *Silent Hill* (mostly horizontal), *Persona*, *NieR*, *Granblue Fantasy*. The soundtracks for these games feature eclecticism more frequently than not – and surely more than in Western counterparts. Mentioning such examples means mentioning several composers that are linked with specific franchises – like Akira Yamaoka for *Silent Hill*, Tsutomu Narita for *Granblue Fantasy*, Shōji Meguro for *Persona*, Keiichi Okabe and Keigo Hoashi for *NieR* – but also other composers that have worked for only *some* of the entries in the single series – like Nobuo Uematsu, Masashi Hamauzu and Masayoshi Soken for *Final Fantasy* – or even for more than one of the mentioned series – like Yoko Shimomura and Takeharu Ishimoto for both *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts*. It is also interesting to notice that some other well-known Japanese video game series that do not rely so much on musical eclecticism – like *Metal Gear Solid* and *Resident Evil* – are mostly set in the Western world and happen to act as tributes to certain *topoi* of American cinematography – like spy and zombie movies respectively.

I think this phenomenon needs to be taken into account by scholars, and with this seminal study I aim at addressing some ideas that I hope will suggest further developments to an under-studied topic. I will explore four possible factors that might cooperate in bringing this reality to life, and in doing so I will try to answer to the leading questions of this presentation: why are eclectic soundtracks common in Japan and not anywhere else, and why in video games more frequently than in generic popular music and music for other audio-visual products (if that is the case)? Which factors act as main influences – both culturally and technically – on the persistence of such a peculiar approach to soundtrack composition?

Let me start with the most general hypothesis among the four. The easiest explanation one could give to our issue would probably address the role of hybridity in contemporary Japanese culture – and maybe in the cultures of the ‘Global North’ altogether, due to their supposed entrance in the postmodern age. Indeed, contemporary Japanese culture is often defined as «suspended between tradition and innovation», where ‘innovation’ often equals

to 'Western' (e. g. KISHIDA 1988:8, MONTY 2010:123-124, SUMMERS 2018:110). Several scholars have understood the hybridity of Japanese culture in specific ways: for Maria Grajdian, for instance, *domesticating plagiarism* and *hybridising authenticity* is the main dichotomy acting within Japanese culture, as an authentic way of representing a fluid identity in an ever-changing (and very rapidly evolving) society (GRAJDIAN 2017:53-54). The same author also highlights how hybridisation can sometimes be the result of a struggle between tradition and *economic factors*, as in the case of Yoko Kanno's soundtrack for *Cowboy Bebop* (GRAJDIAN 2016:196). More generally speaking, Koichi Iwabuchi even writes about a certain *strategic hybridism* that is in his view collocated at the very core of Japanese contemporary culture (IWABUCHI 2002:53-54). According to Iwabuchi, «many people in Japan now hold the view that the capacity for absorption and indigenization of foreign cultures is uniquely Japanese» (*ibid.*:58), and «Japanese hybridism aims to discursively construct an image of an organic cultural entity, 'Japan', that absorbs foreign cultures without changing its national/cultural core» (*ibid.*:53). Since, according to Grajdian (2017:72), it also seems like there is a connection between 'being cool' and syncretism, it is not difficult to get as far as the picture proposed by Heita Kawakatsu does, conceiving Japan as a «living museum and great laboratory in which world civilizations coexist» (KAWAKATSU 1995:81-82, cited in IWABUCHI 2002:66), an image that resembles that of postmodern art as described by Fredric Jameson (JAMESON 2011:1036). Japanese culture borrows elements from the Western culture and 'remixes' them according to its own sensibility, in line with a postmodern motto that is to some extent valid all around the world, but seems to obtain particularly strong meanings in Japan. One of the results of this is eclecticism in video game soundtracks. I have put an emphasis on the idea of 'remixing cultures' because it is important to understand that here it is not all just about domesticating foreign cultures. The strong postmodern traits of contemporary Japanese culture should just work as a frame justifying the supposed familiarity of Japanese composers with creating hybrids with no bounds with any style or national tradition in particular.

So, does something similar happen with Japanese film music and popular music in general, as well? The mixed answer to this question leads me to my second hypothesis. Once again, there are signs of appropriation and hybridisation in J-pop music – as Aska Monty states, it is basically «Western music ‘made in Japan’» (MONTY 2010:123) – but this does not automatically imply that we can easily witness vertical eclecticism. It is actually difficult to analyse the situation of J-pop music, as it is a genre-label too wide and comprehensive, so I would rather stay cautious here. Elements of eclecticism can be found more easily when we narrow down the field to genres like Visual Kei (see bands like Dir en grey and The Gazette), in which – according to Ken McLeod – the hybrid (also in a musical sense) is associated with identity fluidification, especially when it comes to gender matters (MCLEOD 2013:310, 321-322), since the ambiguity between masculine and feminine plays an important role in the visual aspect of the genre. This specific parallelism does not make much sense in the case of video game music, but Visual Kei’s openness to distant sounds and to original hybridisations might have played a role in the diffusion of a common taste capable of appreciating eclectic soundtracks with no further questioning. However, the contact with instances of Japanese popular music seems not really illuminating, at this stage at least, if not for confirming a general propensity for syncretism and appropriation that is typical of Japanese contemporary culture.

When it comes to movies, it is not impossible to find soundtracks that resemble those of video games. Ryuichi Sakamoto, for instance, has been experimenting with hybrid musical solutions since the 1980s, often blending together classical, new age, traditional, electronic and jazz influences. If we think of what happens in some tracks often written by Joe Hisaishi for Takeshi Kitano’s early films or in the soundtracks composed by Koji Endo for many of Takashi Miike’s films, we can find some eclecticism, but the resemblance with video games music is much more in the quality of the production, meaning that many sounds are synthesised or sampled – blatantly digital. Films and video games are indeed both very

prolific fields in Japan, so relying on at least partially lo-fi musical productions can be a very budget-saving idea. This has sometimes brought together sounds coming from very distant musical realms, and the same is valid for a field that has much more in common with video games: that of anime. Here things start to become more interesting, since the style and sounds found in anime music often resemble very much those of video games – after all, the target audience is often pretty much the same. Only to mention some well-known examples from that world, we can witness vertical eclecticism in the soundtracks for *Attack on Titan*, *Gurren Lagann* (see the theme song ‘Liberate me from Hell’, mixing opera singing and orchestra with rap vocals and beats), *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the *Monogatari Series* and *Clannad*. Let me introduce, as an example, the theme song from the anime *Onimonogatari* (2013), called ‘White Lies’ and composed by Satoru Kōsaki. The one-minute part that can be heard during the opening of every episode starts with an epic choir (that partially hides electronic-like tonalities that are actually playing at the same time), soon to be accompanied by a melody portrayed by the piano. In this first part we can also hear quick strings hits and an increasingly present tribal-sounding rhythmic section. Soon enough the electric bass kicks in, soon to be followed by a larger string section. The last part adds a brass section, some electric guitar and insane drums – almost played in a metal style, one could argue.

Despite anime music being largely under-studied, here and there it is possible to read statements about the hybrid nature of much Japanese music for such products (IWABUCHI 2002:79-80, JURKIEWICZ 2019:40, GRAJDIAN 2016). However, this mainly concerns the appropriation of Western tropes or the integral citation of classic composers like Bach or Beethoven. Such analyses focus more on the juxtaposition of Western and Eastern elements and on horizontal eclecticism – as this happens in, for instance, *Death Note* and *Cowboy Bebop* (JURKIEWICZ 2019, GRAJDIAN 2016), which, again, are not my main object of interest here. Relying on eclecticism to evoke a particular ‘otherness’ – like putting ethnic percussions in an orchestral context to recall an ‘exotic’ reality – is not what eclectic Japanese music for

video games systematically does. There, the extension of the composer's sound palette sounds as something much more natural and integrated in the common sound tissue.

My third hypothesis is actually only a short digression. Could it be that specific Western genres and artists closely related with eclecticism have had an impact on the eclectic development of Japanese video game music? Starting with film music, it has often been a ground for experimenting eclectic solutions in the West as well: for instance, Ennio Morricone used to do this, often willing to employ whatever solution it took to fit the film's mood. Among the most famous contemporary soundtrack composers, Hans Zimmer is often relying on eclectic solutions, incorporating rock and electronic elements in symphonic contexts, yet Japanese composers used to act similarly even before eclecticism became an actual trademark of Zimmer's soundtracks. The interesting advice we can get from Zimmer's case is that nowadays film composers often work in the studio, using VSTs and eventually recording all (or some of) the instruments later. This is something that has been happening for video game music from the very beginning, and we shall bear this in mind for later, when we will discuss the fourth hypothesis. Maybe the role of film music composed by musicians like Vangelis or Goblin could be a more relevant influence factor – for instance, Nobuo Uematsu, main composer for the *Final Fantasy* franchise, has mentioned Goblin as one of his main influences (UEMATSU 2007) together with other important artists from the progressive rock canon, typically associated with eclectic traits (MACAN 1997, STUMP 1997). Curiously, Karen Collins has also noticed a similarity between the progressive rock style and – ironically enough – the music composed for many Sega Genesis games (COLLINS 2008:43-46). Collins also recognises the trait of eclecticism (*ibid.*:45) among the similarities, other examples of which are the structural and timbral resemblances – at least partly to be explained through the capabilities of the console's hardware, since the timbral choices were often made employing the quality of the emulated sounds as a criterion, thus often resulting in combinations of sounds that otherwise would not have been that obvious.

This also leads me to the already infamous fourth hypothesis, which is probably the crucial one: the impact of technical capabilities on the composer's affordances and consequent eclectic choices. Early instances of video game music were limited in many senses, included that of timbre (COLLINS 2008): it was only possible to emulate and synthesise sounds at a very low resolution (later using MIDI; *ibid.*: 61), so it is true that composers had to follow quite strict rules, but also that they had complete control of every single aspect of the music and could use whichever sound they wanted whenever they wished to do so, at no additional expense, thus often getting to very creative solutions (see *ibid.*:7-36 in particular), also fostered by the will of taking full advantage of the ever-evolving technology (as evident in the documentary series *Diggin' in the Carts*). In addition, they often experimented a lot with re-arrangements to fully exploit the economic potential of their popular works (FRITSCH 2016A). My point here is that within a lo-fi context there is much less contrast between sounds resembling instruments from very distant traditions, since they are *all* being re-created by the same engine and their juxtaposition sounds much more natural than it would sound when involving their 'real' counterparts. That is: a synthetic trumpet and a synthetic bass recall very distant sonic worlds and traditions, yet sound much more akin than actual trumpets and basses do. They share the same core and are ultimately made of the same stuff. They are both simulacra, and also blend perfectly with other electronic-generated timbres. Although composers could only work with simulacra, their palette was completely free from restraints, and putting together pseudo-orchestral, pseudo-rock or purely electronic sounds always meant to put side by side synthetic emulations naturally fitting together. An example from the 16-bit era, but it works the same, if not better, with 8-bit tracks: if we imagine how a track like 'Searching Friends' from *Final Fantasy VI* would sound with actual instruments playing, we will easily recognise an intriguing bass line, together with strings, hi-hat and a sort of sequenced synthesiser, accompanying the main flute and choir melodies. Working in such an environment created a *modus operandi* that was often

recreated also when the technical constraints were not a problem anymore – see the case of *Final Fantasy X*, the soundtrack of which was composed by Uematsu using the old MIDI-like sounds, while the tracks composed by Masashi Hamauzu and Junya Nakano for the same game mainly feature actual instruments (or, at least, more credible emulations). With time, this treatment has become ‘second nature’ and may have contributed to widening the perspectives of a very large popular audience. Of course, this could have happened (and partly has) outside of Japan, but here is where the other influence factors I mentioned come into play: it could have happened anywhere, but it happened in Japan because all of the other factors conspired to make this happen, in a net of mutual relationships that looks quite hard to decipher – but I am looking forward to get back to the issue, in a near future.

So, is this a conclusion? Not really. My overview, at this stage at least, only wants to shed a little bit of light on the issue, in order not to give actual answers, yet to suggest possible paths that could be tread in order to better understand such a complex reality. I have suggested some directions towards we could head, but my faith now lies in your feedback, in our interaction – hoping that this topic has managed to prove itself worth of your attention and reflection.

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