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Analysis on the film music of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and *Yojimbo* (1961)

When talking about films, people rarely examine the music of the film in detail, apart from simply commenting it was good or bad. Here, we consider the music of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and *Yojimbo* (1961) via three layers of analysis: how their musical qualities add to each scene, how the musical themes add to the movie as a whole, and how a curious mix of Western-ness and Japanese-ness in the music can be heard in both.

Let us commence by delving into *Rashomon*. Naturally, the opening credits scene is where the music plays a prominent role setting up the mood. In this case, the music starts off with slow, foreboding chords that imitate the sho, the Japanese mouth organ. Nonetheless, the harmony that these chords create is neither traditional Japanese nor Western. Instead, we hear strong dissonance held in the background in the high register, creating an ominous atmosphere as a result. Soon, these slow chords are joined by fast arpeggios by the flute and more importantly the koto-like plucked instrument (might be the Western harp imitating the koto). Due to their speed, these arpeggios do stand out and present fluidity, perhaps reflecting the scene on screen involving heavy rain. Overall, the music fits particularly well with the black-and-white scene displaying the desolate wreckage of the Rashomon gate. Right after the opening credits, the music then dies out and leads into nothing but the ambient sound of rain to an almost haunting extent. Certainly, the cinematography adds to this sense of desolate ambience, as it fully displays the worn down Rashomon gate as a whole for the first time.

The second time we have music is the scene where the woodcutter introduces his version of the story where he treads along the woods for about 3 minutes and 30 seconds in the film,

allowing ample time for the music to develop. Indeed, its development is what is noteworthy (pun intended?) here especially due to its Bolero-like nature, i.e. musical nature based on the concept of theme and variations. In fact, it is known that Kurosawa asked Fumio Hayasaka, the composer of the music, to come up with something like Ravel's Bolero for the film (Richie 79). Because this is the case, we should consider how Hayasaka's version of Bolero is both similar to and different from Ravel's and how it contributes to the film as a whole.

The scene begins with no apparent melody but a constant drumming rhythm in the background as the woodcutter is shown walking through the woods. After about 10 seconds is where the melody, i.e. the theme, is effectively introduced by the solo English horn, which possesses a piercing but soothing tone, not unlike the Japanese bamboo flute. Soon, two aspects become clear. First, the rhythm ostinato (i.e. continually repeated drumming pattern) is in 3, which is also the case in Ravel's Bolero. Upon counting along with the pulse provided by the drum, we can hear that the unit of emphasis spans 3 beats. This is surely reminiscent of the beginning of Ravel's Bolero. The second notable aspect, on the other hand, is that the drum itself is not a snare drum as in Ravel's but a timpani almost imitating a Japanese taiko drum, or perhaps a taiko drum itself. The profound clicking sound of the drum is quite unmistakable. As a result, we can discern from the outset that the music is somehow a Japanese rendition of the French tune, similar in ways and different in others.

Furthermore, the actual melody that Hayasaka's music employs is worth probing. Whereas Ravel's Bolero uses a diatonic C major scale (1-2-3-4-5-6-7) followed by a C Phrygian scale (1-b2-b3-4-5-b6-b7), the music here uses E Phrygian with a raised third, also known as E Phrygian dominant scale (1-b2-3-4-5-b6-b7) -- with raised third here meaning that the third scale degree is unflatted (3) whereas it is flatted (b3) in a regular Phrygian scale. What results from

this alteration involving a raised third is an interval of augmented second between the second note in the scale (b2) and the third note (3). The reason for delving into this type of music theory here is that an augmented second is a remarkable interval in the context of traditional Japanese music, as it appears quite frequently. Interestingly, however, it does not as much in the Western classical tradition. In fact, it is an interval that was considered primitive such that Western composers have historically avoided it in their compositions more so than not, curiously enough. (Even today, students can get points off by using an augmented second in their exercises in a lower-level Western music theory class.) Hence, one would not find the interval of augmented second as much in Bach, Mozart, or Ravel. In Japanese music, the story is different. The interval can abound in a piece, and this discrepancy is the facet that Hayasaka's tune brings to the fore, evidently indicating a clear dose of Japanese musical idea into a Western one.

Of course, the cinematography adds to the music in the scene, and vice versa. The opening of the scene involves an intriguing manifestation of lighting: the Sun, the trees, and the green leaves are greatly emphasized, showing contrast with the rainy opening scene of the film, akin to how Hayasaka's Bolero in the scene contrasts with the dire opening music of the film. As the woodcutter progresses through the woods, the music gradually increases in volume and texture such that more instruments enter to imbue pace with energy. Such music is then accompanied by uses of close-up: the camera puts emphasis on the woodcutter's face as he finds his way through the complex net of tree branches and leaves, probing into the vastness of the forest. This combo of revealing cinematography and portending music is a highly suggestive one. It prefaces what the woodcutter would end up discovering in the middle of the forest and the series of events to follow. Indeed, when the music suddenly comes to a halt is precisely when the woodcutter first discovers the woman's veiled hat. At the very instant when the woodcutter

approaches the hat with alarming curiosity, an unprecedented entrance of high bell-like sounds of the celesta is then what captures the mysterious atmosphere of the scene. The celesta's downward arpeggio surely adds to the mystery. Similar effects are made when the woodcutter progresses to find more miscellaneous items, i.e. the cap of the samurai and the cut-up pieces of rope.

Eventually, the drum ostinato comes to a halt while the woodwinds increasingly play dissonant chords, representing not the initial jolly-sunny-day mood but the psychological dissonance that the woodcutter has to deal with. As the volume and the texture of the music increase more than ever, the scene soon culminates in the woodcutter's ultimate discovery of the corpse, at which point the gong hits. It is in this way that the music is shown to develop as the scene progresses, complementing cinematography and the plot that develops at the same rate.

Not only that, the music in fact develops throughout the movie as we are presented with more versions of the same story. Take Tajomaru's version, for instance. Although the general drum ostinato in 3 stays constant, subtle variations are added to the music. Whereas the English horn has the solo melody line in the woodcutter's initial story, the clarinet has the solo this time around. Also, the piano is introduced in the bass, reinforcing the drum ostinato through its melodic yet percussive nature. As the scene progresses to a point where Tajomaru is about to combat the samurai, furthermore, what becomes notable is the protrusive use of the French horn, which is the instrument that often accompanies war themes or heroic themes. This instrumentation makes sense, because Tajomaru is recounting his version of the story in a way that portrays himself as the masculine, heroic figure. After admitting that he has killed the samurai in an honorable fashion, he even claims that he was impressed the samurai could make exactly 23 crossings of sword with him. As such, new musical ideas are shown to be added to accompany a new version of the story.

The Bolero theme comes back for the final time when the woman is finally delivered to the judges. In the woman's version of the story, the flute, yet another instrument, has the solo melody line. What is intriguing about the Bolero theme this time is that there seems to be no taiko-like drumming. Instead, we have pizzicato (i.e. plucking of strings rather than bowing) by the cello section as well as a faint tint of snare drum for the first time. Incidentally (or deliberately), this is the exact same instrumentation as that in Ravel's Bolero. In other words, Bolero in the woman's story follows Ravel's tune most closely. In yet another words, it deviates the most from its previous versions, revealing how the woman's version of the story itself is arguably the one that deviates the most from others. Hence, it is quite remarkable how these versions of the same music, i.e. the Bolero theme, can correspond thematically to different versions of the film's murder story.

At this point, it is worth noting that there have been critics, like Donald Richie, who have argued against Kurosawa's choice of Ravel's Bolero in the first place. Specifically, Richie writes:

That the music owes even more to another source is so notorious some critics (Western) have admitted that the film was partially spoiled for them. This is not the fault of the composer. The late Fumio Hayasaka was one of Japan's most individual and creative composers and it was Kurosawa himself who said "write something like Ravel's Bolero" -- a work which in Japan had not yet become as clichéd as in the West. The composer complied and the results, as a matter of fact, do detract -- particularly from the opening scenes. (Richie 79)

Given the above analysis of the music of the film, however, Kurosawa's choice can be made sense of, not only because the tune purveys aesthetic pleasure, but more importantly because its concept of theme and variations acutely aligns with the film at the thematic level. In the end, the

film itself is not solely about a story concerning a bandit, a samurai, and a woman in the woods. It is about *narration* of that story and how reliable a narrator can or cannot be. Switching from a narrator to the next, the story evidently possesses multiple versions in a way that the viewer is not presented with the absolute truth of the story but filtered ones through various egos and self-interests of the involved characters. Skewed, exaggerated, varied, and distorted is each version of the story as a result. Likewise, what is notable about the music of the film, i.e. Hayasaka's Bolero, is that it is varied and "distorted" in its iterations, as different instruments add different tint to the music at different points in the film: the English horn has the solo in one version, the clarinet has the solo in another version, and the flute has the solo in yet another version. As a result, the music does not merely serve to provide background tune as in most movies, but it serves to complement the main thematic element that Kurosawa attempts to promote, consummating the film as a total work of art.

Similarly, the music of *Yojimbo*, another Kurosawa film, does much more than merely providing background tune. Again, the opening credits scene is where the music plays a prominent role. Namely, the scene starts off in a slow, easygoing way involving the aforementioned instrumentation of the strings, English horn, clarinet, French horn, and the flute. What is new in *Yojimbo* compared to *Rashomon*, however, is that we have more exotic instruments. Trumpet, for instance, is one of them. What is notable about the trumpet specifically is its fanfare-like playing in the music, abruptly presenting chords in a syncopated rhythm and thus conveying a jazzy sensation. Upon listening to the sound quality, i.e. articulation, of the trumpet, one can in fact notice that the trumpet follows a jazz idiom of playing (more percussive) more so than classical (more pure and clean). Indeed, the music as a whole is definitely jazzy. The overall rhythm is syncopated, i.e. in a 4-beat measure (1-2-3-4), beats 2 and 4 are given

more emphasis whereas beat 1 and 3 would have emphasis in most classical pieces. At the same time, a peculiarity exists in that the percussive instrument in the background does not seem to belong to the jazz tradition at all. In fact, the instrument in question might be the wood block or the *hyoshi*, which is a rudimentary Japanese percussion instrument involving two pieces of bamboo sticks tied by an ornamented rope. Whichever it is, its high-pitched percussive sound in the background accompanying the jazzy chords is quite unmistakable. What results as a whole is an exquisite mix of sounds of the West and the East.

This idea of jazz in a Japanese movie is furthered in the following scene. As Sanjuro enters the village, a dog is seen to be carrying a human hand in its mouth, trotting down the street in a nonchalant manner. The musical theme that is presented at the very instant is surely a jazzy one: its instrumentation consists of xylophone and a *taiko* family, i.e. a family of Japanese percussion instruments. Its harmony and rhythm continue the jazzy sensation from previous. As a result, a striking chemistry between the Western xylophone on top (as in higher in the register) and Japanese percussions on bottom is presented to the viewer from the outset.

In fact, this chemistry is then a motif that persists throughout the film. The same motif, for instance, is repeated when Sanjuro first encounters the gang members, who surround him and taunt him verbally in turn. Because this is the case, one can interpret the motif as a leitmotif, i.e. a recurring motif that is associated with an idea or a person in a work of composition. (The term leitmotif as a concept derives from Wagner's profuse use of it in his operas. Nonetheless, the term can be applied to non-classical music as well. The Darth Vader theme from Star Wars, i.e. the dark musical material that recurs whenever Darth Vader is in the scene, is a famous example of a leitmotif that most people can recognize today.) Here, we can observe that the groovy leitmotif that is associated with Sanjuro is played only when he is involved in the scene. In a way,

the motif is reserved for Sanjuro. This is similar to how Sanjuro's distinctive way of walking (where he would abruptly flex his shoulder in an asymmetrical manner at times) is reserved for Sanjuro and not others. Thus, such motif serves as a filmic device to help depict Sanjuro as the one distinguishable, idiosyncratic figure in the film.

The musical leitmotif then culminates in the final battle scene where we have the two sides -- Sanjuro versus Unosuke and his gang -- finally confront each other in an epic, sand-blowing scene. Of course, what adds to the suspense is the music. Notably, we are introduced the Western hi-hat cymbal for the first time. In fact, there is no music but the sound of the hi-hat cymbal for the first 30 seconds of the confrontation where they slowly stroll towards each other. As if to mimic the slow stroll, the hi-hat cymbal is then played at an unusually slow pace at the instant. As the scene progresses and reaches the climax where Sanjuro charges towards the gang to finish them off, the leitmotif returns momentarily in a way that almost foretells Sanjuro's victory from the initial contact and conversely hints at the gang's doom. Indeed, Sanjuro is shown to be victorious within 30 seconds or so, and the film eventually comes to a close after this point.

All in all, the fact that the leitmotif includes a jazzy groove utilizing Japanese percussion instruments is quite striking, especially given that the setting of the film is not Western but Japanese. Nonetheless, the crux here may be that Sanjuro is not a typical Japanese samurai but a modern one. Incorporating jazz in addition to Japanese musical ideas, the leitmotif consequently serves to highlight this facet of Sanjuro throughout the film and is certainly remarkable in doing so. This simultaneous incorporation of Western and Japanese musical ideas is then what ties *Yojimbo* and *Rashomon* together. As a matter of fact, it is arguably what ties most of Kurosawa's films together. Kurosawa has been notorious for referencing Western musical ideas in his

Japanese films. The following are some examples (Richie 79, Sheer 355-356): Clair de Lune by Debussy in *Drunken Angel* (1948), Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in *Red Beard* (1965), and Schubert's Unfinished Symphony in *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947).

Perhaps, it might be because of this constant referencing of the West that Kurosawa has been at times accused of being not "Japanese enough" (Sheer 356). Interestingly, such accusation then raises a deeper question. What does it mean to be Japanese enough? What has it meant to be Japanese historically? Of course, attempting to answer this question would involve something a lot longer than a 10-page paper, but the key facet that should be brought to the fore is that culture is undoubtedly a dynamic process, and it surely has been in Japan in the last century. Take the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), for example. Sparking such process, the Restoration strived to lead Japan to emerge as a modernized nation. In the music realm, as a result, Western art music became to be highly promoted and emulated, to the extent that leading educators in Japan were even studying the pedagogy of Western music curriculum as a model to implement it in Japan's public school system (Herd 41). Such was the trend at the time.

In post-Meiji and especially the Interwar Years in the 1930s, however, there was a drive towards the opposite. Spurred by nationalism, Japanese musicians in fact began to shift away from merely emulating the West to revisiting traditional Japanese forms of music. A number of well-known musicians joined the drive, one of them being Fumio Hayasaka, who was fascinated not just by Western orchestral music (e.g. of Debussy and Ravel) but also by traditional Japanese music, including the gagaku and taiko. Endeavoring to incorporate the two in his music (which he has done remarkably in *Rashomon*), he was a strong advocate of the idea that "Japan's modern *culture* and *music* should not be broken down into categories of foreign or traditional" but should be recognized for what they are: "a complex mixture of something new, dynamic, and adaptable

for the modern age" (Herd 53). In doing so, one could espouse modernity rather than being bogged down by the illusory dichotomy concerning what is traditional and what is foreign.

This is precisely the idea that is manifested by the music in Kurosawa's films: the idea that celebrates hybridity rather than downplaying it as if it were tainted. It is under this lens that Kurosawa's choice of Ravel's Bolero in *Rashomon* and also the jazzy groove by the Japanese taiko in *Yojimbo* make a lot of sense. In both, the music is effective not only at the aesthetic level and then at the thematic level, but also at the social level given the social context in which the movies were made. Providing a social commentary on the dynamic influx and outflux of culture in Japan at the time, the music serves to reference the Japanese traditions while embracing the modern state of art. In other words, the music potently exhibits flexible negotiation of cultures in play by transcending the traditional sense of genre. What results is a presentation of mindful compromise in a global society, a compromise that we all can learn from -- even today.

To sum, music in *Rashomon* and *Yojimbo* definitely plays an active role in the films, in fact multiple roles: of enhancing what is on screen every second, of highlighting thematic elements that the films present, and of embracing hybridity of cultures in a modern society. Indeed, it is remarkable how even music (seemingly trivial part of filmmaking) reflects the ingenuity of the grand master Akira Kurosawa. As it is tempting to take music for granted especially nowadays, it should be kept in mind that music can in fact function as a powerful filmic device and that it might deserve more attention and discussion.

Works Cited

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