

Robots, Romance, and Ronin

Music in Japanese Anime

by MILO MILES

JAPANESE ANIMATION, known as anime, has slipped into the fabric of American entertainment media. Almost everyone, especially parents, has seen swatches of anime on video—if not *Pokémon*, then *Sailor Moon* or *Macross*. Those who explore beyond the most popular titles for children will find anime that looks so exotic, bright, dynamic, and confident that American watchers might assume that almost everything in the form is hip, futuristic, and experimental. As someone who devours a wide range of music, I've listened to soundtracks from a host of flashy anime videos with high expectations, but found most of them surprisingly formulaic, old-fashioned, soppy, and stiff when played at home without the visuals. Still, a few vigorous, gleaming anime soundtracks match the imagination and action of the drawings on screen. This guide will touch on some of the finest.

Understanding anime matters, because it has a particularly immediate aura of cool nowadays, both in its homeland and in America. Trendy Japanese gallery artists like Takashi Murakami draw heavily on cartoon images for the so-called “superflat” style. Pace-setting U.S. animation, like Genndy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack*, could be called “Amer-Anime.” Anime zealots (known as “anime otaku”) have plenty of media resources. Boutique shops, glossy fanzines, and zesty Web sites keep the faithful informed up to the minute. But there's very little help for discriminating listeners who want to grab an anime CD that will stand up to listening on its own.

A serious problem is that there's no satisfactory anthology introduction to anime music. The only easily available domestic item, *The Best of Anime* (Rhino), falls short for fanatics and newcomers alike. The tinker-toy themes

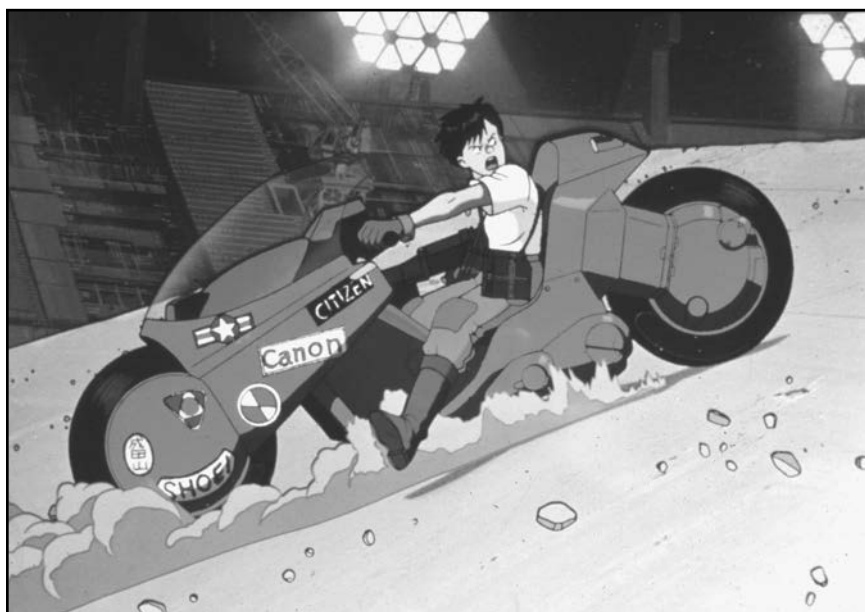
of historic shows such as *Gigantor* put off latter-day devotees, and those who are not in the know about recent insider hits like *Oh My Goddess!* and *Macross Plus* will be left unmoved by the themes, which are no more than pleasant souvenirs. There's little help for those who simply want to enjoy anime soundtracks as songs that belong in an eclectic music fan's collection.

If one wants to hear the roots of the best modern anime soundtracks, the early solo work of Ryuichi Sakamoto is ideal. (Sakamoto is best known in the West for his elegant, restrained movie soundtracks such as that of *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* [1983].) On *Esperanto* (1986), *Musical Encyclopedia* (1986), and even the more muscular *Neo Geo* (1987), Sakamoto pioneered pop electronica that set a miniature scene in every track with what sounded like cavorting, spinning, or resting characters, set to springy percussion and aptly high-pitched chorus chants. (Although superficially similar at times, these tunes have none of the oily languor of the recently revived "lounge" music.) Sakamoto's work could be adapted to anime in the same way that Carl Stalling set Raymond Scott's wacky and winsome jazz to animation. The Sakamoto numbers are self-contained, never intended to work as a soundtrack. The potential of the wacky and winsome mode in anime was confirmed, however, by the antic, unique *Cynical Hysterie Hour* (1990) by John Zorn, which was written for Kiriko Kubo's cartoon shorts of the same name, but has so far not been synchronized with them.

Now available on Zorn's own Tzadik label, *Cynical Hysterie Hour* involves players including guitarists Marc Ribot, Robert Quine, Bill Frisell, and Arto Lindsay, as well as drummer Bobby Previte and percussionist Cyro Baptista, so the twenty-three tiny tunes (almost all less than two minutes long each) have outsized vitality and precision. Darting from ruminative country and blues interludes to clattering bursts of punk thumps and sunny samba breaks, *Cynical Hysterie Hour* blends a child's energy with an adult's shrewdness. Kubo's drawings use the blunt, hyper-simplified and blatantly cartoony style that often signals an experimental, faux-innocent attitude in anime. Several established Japanese performers write more tranquil, equally toy-like songs and instrumentals that could fit with more mainstream anime figuration and plotting. These include Pizzicato Five (ripe for an upscale spy or fashion-world adventure), Fantastic Plastic Machine (romance and comedy built in already), Takako Minekawa (clouds drift by, rain falls, lonely girls look out windows), and Yoshinori Siunahara (the world as a sterile but cheery airport disco).

Anime music does not have to directly mirror the action on screen, or sound “cartoonish” itself. The blandly polite and tasteful music of the later Disney full-length features shaped the background music for many early anime productions. Among the more sophisticated recent incarnations of this style is Joe Hisaishi’s work for *Princess Mononoke* (1999), which dwindles to a thin stream indeed without the sumptuous visual foreground. Perhaps pastoral settings are not conducive to radical thoughts about music. The angst of a future metropolis had already broken through in every way with Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* (1988), where Disney sub-classical lulling finally gave way to avant-ambient.

The *Akira* soundtrack, constructed by Shoji Yamashira and performed by the group Geinoh Yamashirogumi, slides through musical cultures and knits them together with the easy grace of Toru Takemitsu. But the disturbing results seem to twirl through unknown psychic space not far removed from Teiji Ito’s soundtrack for Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Yamashira combines synthesizer washes and pulses with echoes of Javanese gamelan, Tibetan Buddhist chanting, and Japanese taiko drummers. But this simply sounds like the combination of styles that happened to evolve in the



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future Neo-Tokyo of *Akira*. This is a sequence of music with an internal logic unlike any other and the single most mesmerizing anime soundtrack.

Those looking for anime on audio CD are particularly in luck with *Akira*, because the soundtrack appears at this time in two complementary packages, each worthwhile in its way. The “original soundtrack” version (Demon DSCD 6, British import) plays like a regular album of music and belongs in the collection of every fan of adventurous sounds, not just anime buffs. Japanimation specialists, however, must also pick up the “original Japanese soundtrack” version (Demon DSCD 7, British import), because it includes the sounds of the movie running along with the music. These two strains interact in a relentless, sometimes violent ballet that recalls the thrilling eye-and-ear coordination of master exploratory animators John and Faith Hubley and Norman McLaren. The voices, noises, and music click like a seasoned trio of collaborators.

Nothing comes close to matching *Akira*, but of course, there are imitators, or simply soundtracks operating in the same orbit. The slyest is the *Ghost in the Shell* album (1998), a standout effort from the prolific Kenji Kawai. This is a “conceptual” sequence of tracks—sparse, stately, dominated by electronic and natural percussion and ritualistic chants. Two starkly melodic musical themes, one for the cyborg heroine and the other for her elusive, beloved Puppet Master, slide closer over the course of the album and finally merge over the closing credits. (Be sure to seek out the original Japanese version of the movie; this very satisfying musical conclusion was ditched in favor of an amiable but misguided rock number for the English-speaking edition.)

There are numerous anime scores that fall between traditional elegant sounds and avant-ambient, some worthy to go to the head of the New Age class. A fine example is *Patlabor 2 the Movie: Original Soundtrack “P2”* (Demon DSCD 15, British import, 1996). Kenji Kawai is again in charge. This time he boosts conventional verse-chorus pop-song structure for a few numbers, avoids the acerbic choir chants that make *Akira* and *Ghost* jittery, and adds swatches of synthesizer space rock that are far more introspective than the anime norm. Particularly intriguing cuts, like “IXTL,” evoke the airy side of 1970s rock-jazz fusion.

The final type of progressive anime soundtrack either directly involves current techno or hip-hop performers, or simply reflects a vigorous fan’s interest in contemporary pop and funk. These soundtracks actually match the form’s casual image of being bright, dynamic, hip, and futuristic—call them “wild style” anime. Recently, this has become very marketable in the United

States through the success of domestic cartoon series like *Powerpuff Girls* (surely the American *Pokémon*) with their lite drum 'n' bass theme tune, and *Samurai Jack*, which borrows numerous techniques and appearances from anime, but fast-paced music ideas from recent Hollywood youth flicks. Leiji Matsumoto, a veteran master of sci-fi anime, recently did a series of videos for the très cool French techno artists Daft Punk. Likewise, the brainy hip-hop collective Gorillaz aided their hit single "Clint Eastwood" by recreating themselves as an anime-style martial-arts gang in video clips. The group even performs on stage behind a scrim on which an animated film fills in for their real bodies—they have become today's multimedia equivalent of the old cartoon Archies.

Some sturdy earlier soundtracks were forerunners of the current wild-stylers. One example is the first volume of *Key the Metal Idol* (Viz, 1997; movie released in 1994). This appealing, if disorienting, album alternates cuts with wiry electric guitar solos and lean, leaping arrangements with big tormented ballads that suggest classy versions of standard Japanese pop-schmaltz (more soulful accordions, fewer dripping string sections, and soaring synthesizers). It sounds as if it were created by committee, not a band, but it is not an embarrassment when compared to contemporary youth-action-movie soundtracks from the West. *Key the Metal Idol's* plot, about a female star singer with mental instability and many secrets, came to fruition with the Hitchcockian *Perfect Blue* (1997), which sadly gave the heroine only glossy pap to sing.

Drenched in music awareness, *Cowboy Bebop* is the prime anime series that goes all the way into wild style and promises to become an enduring favorite equal to *Akira*. A number of episodes are named after Rolling Stones songs or albums, some thoroughly obscure (as Monty Python would say, "Nobody expects 'Jamming with Edward'!"). Yoko Kanno and the group Seat Belts drive many of the songs and instrumentals, but while Kanno contented herself with high-quality syrup and stratosphere synths for spectacular-effects titles like *Macross Plus*, here she jumps from genre to mode to form with abandon, as blithely as the series' spaceships vault from one corner of the solar system to the other. The repeated theme, "Tank," suggests a reenergized James Bond ditty, but the constant, intelligent references to blues, country, and especially jazz are nourishing fare. When the Seat Belts are flapping free, and their horns are under control, they wing it with the sharpest Japanese acid-jazz combos, like United Future Organization.

Even better, the voluminous *Cowboy Bebop* material—pop tunes, torchy numbers, electronica and rave-up rock—hits equally hard as part of the visuals or as CDs (almost: some overwrought ballads wither without image distraction). The richest music selections are available on *Cowboy Bebop Volume One* and *Cowboy Bebop Volume Three: Blue* (both RCA Victor, Japanese import). These soundtracks, a success by word of mouth as much as the series they accompany, can show the way for anime. These already look like the cartoons of tomorrow. For the music to keep up, anime composers will have to understand that fun does not mean froth, poised does not mean stiff, and no matter how fast you go, hold the groove.

A footnote on useful websites for those who want to find out more about anime and listen to samples of the music: <http://store.yahoo.com/animation> is the mother of all anime sites on the web; and <http://animemusic.com> is a clearly organized website that sells many available anime soundtracks.