

The Invention of ‘Kankyō Ongaku’

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Ambient music in Japan has been around for decades, but ‘Japanese ambient music’ as a discrete genre is a recent invention. The latter was born at the interface of bubble-era nostalgia and algorithmic optimization. It has also redefined ambient music in the image of its one-time nemesis: functional, corporate background music for increased productivity and effective branding.

In the first half of the 2010s I wrote a book on the emergence of ambient aesthetics in the 1970s and 1980s, with a focus on their history in Japan.¹ I was interested in what happened when people first began to use recorded media as tools of everyday mood regulation. Amidst the burgeoning lifestyle capitalism of the 1970s, individuals began to use the ambient moods of recorded music, film and video, and even literature to reflexively adjust their moods towards a goal of relaxation and stress-relief.

Background music had been used in factory and retail contexts for decades at this point, in the hopes of increased productivity, focus, and sales. But *ambient music*, in Brian Eno’s late 1970s formulation of the genre, set itself at an aesthetic remove from these more purely utilitarian styles. Ambient music borrowed some of background music’s mood-regulating properties; at the same time, it aimed to retain a greater degree of aesthetic complexity and emotional ambiguity than its more thoroughly commercial cousins. Never simply calming, the style also

¹ Roquet, Paul. *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

aimed to register the uncomfortable situations that made such coping technologies necessary in the first place. As I argue in the book, this made it both more effectively therapeutic *and* offered a handy rationalization for middle and high-brow listeners who didn't want to be seen anywhere near the rudimentary emotional reassurances of 'relaxation music.'

Since the book was published in 2016, however, the listening environment has changed dramatically. Physical media more fully gave way to streaming, and music discovery shifted from record store browsing, radio, and shared mixtapes to online music blogs and recommendation algorithms. The history of recorded music was now understood as a capacious archive for enterprising record hunters hoping to help the next long-forgotten release go viral online.

This is the new music ecology that allowed 'Japanese ambient music' to emerge as a distinct genre. Previous publications had written about specific Japanese artists working in an ambient idiom, but stopped short of arguing for a specific Japanese style. In my own case, my background in film studies left me wary of leaning too heavily on a nation-based category. Attempts to stylistically define "Japanese cinema," for example, have tended to generate a distorted understanding of Japanese film history, prioritizing auteur directors legible to international (Euro-American) audiences and downplaying films that didn't match overseas viewers' preexisting image of "Japan."

The emergence of 'Japanese ambient music' as a global genre in recent years has followed a similar trajectory. But unlike the mid-century international film festivals that gave rise to 'Japanese cinema,' Japanese ambient music emerged thanks to the online interventions of both humans and algorithms based in the United States. Both were essential for the genre to emerge as it did in the late 2010s.

As a possible starting point, journalists point to a series of streaming mixes of 1980s Japanese "forth-world" music posted to the music blog *Roots Strata* (2008-2018) by Portland, Oregon-based musician and curator Spencer Doran. These relatively informal online mixtapes eventually

coalesced into a more formal business proposition with the Empire of Signs vinyl reissue imprint, launched by Doran in 2016 in collaboration with *Roots Strata's* Maxwell August Croy. Empire of Signs' first record, in 2017, would be a rerelease of Yoshimura Hiroshi's *Music for Nine Postcards* (1982).

The imprint borrows its name from the title of Roland Barthes' *L'Empire des signes* (1970), which the French essayist and semiotician penned after several trips to Japan in the mid-1960s. Barthes' famously reads Japan as a country awash in layers of carefully crafted symbolic systems but no real concern for what lies underneath; a beautiful kind of meaninglessness. As with the title of Noël Burch's later classic of Japanese film studies, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (1979), the nod to Barthes' book emphasizes Doran and Croy's position as foreign interlocutors ready to help decode these arcane Japanese projects and unlock them for overseas listeners.

This framing would be reprised in the release that fully announced the arrival of 'Japanese ambient music' as a global genre, the compilation *Kankyō Ongaku: Japanese Ambient, Environmental & New Age Music 1980-1990* (2019), which Doran curated and released on Empire of Signs' parent label, Seattle-based Light in the Attic. Widely reviewed and eventually nominated for a Grammy in 2019 in the "Best Historical Album" category, this compilation established both the scope and historical narrative for what would come to be understood as a distinct Japanese genre.

Key here is Doran's choice to leave *kankyō ongaku* untranslated, and to use it as a broader holding category for the three genres (ambient, environmental, and new age) the compilation claims to present. Much like how katakana transliteration often functions in Japanese to give foreign concepts a mysterious appeal they might lack given a more direct translation, keeping 'kankyō ongaku' untranslated in English implies there is something uniquely Japanese about the genre (even as the album's booklet essay admits the term is just the Japanese for 'environmental music'). This echoes a popular strategy in recent overseas self-help books

centered around what the authors' claim are distinctly Japanese concepts, such as Héctor García and Francesc Miralles' *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (2017).

Deploying 'kankyō ongaku' as the overarching frame works to dissolve tensions between the three genres, obscuring how Eno's ambient music was originally set against both new age and more utilitarian environmental music. The compilation instead pushes the image of 'Japanese ambient music' more in the direction of commercial sound design. While wide-ranging, the playlist includes tracks written for use in office buildings, museums, and retail in-store BGM. These functional settings are further emphasized by the image of Maki Fumihiko's Iwasaki Art Museum (1983) serving as the compilation's cover. While Eno's *Music for Airports* still stood at something of a remove from actual air travel (and reportedly was not much appreciated when finally installed in an actual airport), these works take their institutional funding as a given.

Doran's introductory essay to the compilation emphasizes how much 'kankyō ongaku' was commissioned by private companies, with each project buoyed by the corporate largesse of Japan's bubble-era economy. While the essay draws on my research into Japan's ambient music history, it also introduces a shift to situating 'kankyō ongaku' as a nostalgic object unearthed from an imagined past of Japanese affluence and presented for contemporary global consumption.

Doran and other online curator's careful efforts to establish Japanese ambient music as a distinct genre operated in tandem with an even stronger force introducing listeners to these once-forgotten albums: the YouTube recommendation algorithm. This is clearest in the rapid reappraisal of Yoshimura Hiroshi's music and career. At the time I was writing in the early 2010s Yoshimura was largely unknown outside of Japan, and even in Japanese-language sources I encountered his name largely in the context of soundscape and sound design contexts, not ambient music.

This all changed after clips of his albums began gaining traction among a global audience of YouTube listeners in search of chilled-out background music. YouTube began frequently recommending uploads of his 1986 album *Green* to follow relaxation videos or other similarly calming selections. The most popular upload of the album, first posted in 2016, is now nearing 3 million views. The comments under the video make clear the music is mostly being used as a relaxation aid or as background music for studying and other cognitive pursuits. In parallel with Doran's emphasis on corporate background music, on YouTube the understanding of 'Japanese ambient music' has likewise moved closer to serving as more purely functional BGM for users of the platform.

As a result of the intertwined efforts of Doran and a cadre of largely anonymous YouTube posters, Yoshimura has posthumously moved from being a largely unknown figure to becoming the most prominent face of 'Japanese ambient music' overseas today, along with other musicians whose 1980s work has found new audiences overseas like Takada Midori, Ashikawa Satoshi, and Ojima Yoshio. Not all these artists actually benefited from the economic surplus at the time: Takada has noted her budget was extremely limited when producing *Through the Looking Glass* (1983), for example. But clearly the overseas desire for "bright, beautiful, unashamedly corporate pieces" (as Jack Needham puts it) is no accident, emerging in tandem with a similar surge of interest in contemporaneous City Pop styles.² As Lewis Gordon notes, it's enough to produce a "nagging suspicion that western audiences fetishize or exoticize Japanese ambient music."³

This kind of 'borrowed nostalgia' for the bubble period has strong echoes of the techno-orientalist reveries originally found in 1980s cyberpunk, with English-language writing on Japanese ambient music (including Doran's) making frequent reference to a combination of

² Needham, Jack. "Lullabies for Air Conditioners: The Corporate Bliss of Japanese Ambient." *The Guardian*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/feb/19/lullabies-for-air-conditioners-the-corporate-bliss-of-japanese-ambient>.

³ Gordon, Lewis. "Another Green World: Inside the Resurgence of Japanese Ambient Music." *Fact Magazine*, January 14, 2018. <https://www.factmag.com/2018/01/14/japanese-ambient-hiroshi-yoshimura-midori-takada/>.

'Japanese tradition and cutting-edge technology.' But now that Japan no longer signifies a direct economic threat to audiences in the United States and elsewhere, the once-menacing image of an affluent urban Japan has been replaced with a soft-focus nostalgia for a more easy-going era, one that knows its place and will always stay firmly in the background. Much like Barthes' fantasy of Japan as a country of signs with no substance at its center, this image of Japanese ambient music is rooted in the dream of a life so subsidized the music doesn't need to mean anything at all.