

Ryuichi Sakamoto | Year Book 1971-1979

Disc 1:

01. Sonata pour Violon et Piano

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

Sakamoto composed this piece in 1970, during his freshman year at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music as an assignment in modern composition. It was first performed in 1971; however, the version on this compilation was performed on December 22nd, 1984, as part of a concert series in which music critics presented the works of young composers. Upon hearing it, Ryuichi recalls thinking that it was rather orthodox and conservative.

02. Quatuor à Cordes, études I, II

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

Sakamoto composed this piece in 1971 as a second year student at university, also as an assignment in composition. “In the era of Ligeti, Stockhausen, and Xenakis, this piece feels quite conservative and academic,” Sakamoto says. After minimally doctoring the score, Sakamoto recorded this piece with a string quartet in 2015 in New York.

03. Quatuor à Cordes

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

Sakamoto composed this piece in 1971 during his second year at university, also as a composition assignment. You can hear the influence of composers such as Bartok, Webern, Tokyo National professor Akira Miyoshi, and his mentor, acclaimed pianist and composer Yuji Takahashi. Sakamoto remembers cramming all of his influences at the time into this piece, forgoing musical cohesion. For example, the fourth movement abruptly changes to reflect Takahashi’s style. “I think I got a bad grade on this piece as an assignment. If I were the teacher here, I would be disappointed in this student.”

04. Hitori Heyani Ite

By Masato Tomobe

Masato Tomobe is a Japanese folk singer and songwriter who debuted in 1972. First active in the Kansai region of Japan, he moved his home base to Tokyo after a period traveling the United States. A chance encounter with Sakamoto in Golden Gai of Shinjuku produced an immediate connection, strong enough that Tomobe invited Sakamoto to record piano on his third album, released in 1975. This was the first time Sakamoto stepped foot in a recording studio.

Though not particularly a fan of folk music, Sakamoto was quite impressed by Tomobe. He ended up playing piano on all of the tracks on the album, subsequently accompanying Tomobe on a national tour. “I’m a bit embarrassed at how bad I was at piano. I chose this song because it’s the most listenable out of them all.”

05. Hoshino Aru Kawa - Rikoppuomanai

By Children’s Choir Mizuumi

This piece comes from Kohei Oikawa’s album from 1975. Kohei, who is from

Hokkaido, wrote original lyrics based on Ainu mythology, which he had sung by a children's choir. Kohei knew Sakamoto through some mutual friends, and brought him in to write and arrange the music for the whole album.

"There were no recordings of Ainu music back then," Sakamoto recalls. "I couldn't reference actual Ainu music, so I based these compositions purely on the fact that it was to be sung by children. So I thought simple, beautiful melodies, influenced by the group The Stylistics, would be appropriate. At the time, my friend Shigeru Suzuki had introduced me to black music, so I had been listening to a lot of funk and soul too. Had I known anything about Ainu music like I do now, I would have composed something very different."

06. Dispersion, Boundary, Sand

By Aki Takahashi

Sakamoto composed this piece in 1975, and it was first performed in concert by Aki Takahashi (Yuji Takahashi's sister) in 1976. Rikio Harada, best known as Toru Takemitsu's piano technician and friend, organized this concert. He asked 20 unknown young composers to submit piano compositions to be performed by Aki Takahashi. From these submissions, 6, including this piece by Sakamoto, were chosen. Musicians as renowned as Toru Takemitsu, Toshi Ichihyanagi and Joji Yuasa attended the concert and heard Sakamoto's piece.

"I was reading quite a bit of Michel Foucault, which influenced how I thought about what contemporary music ought to be. This made it easy for me to write." In this era after the deconstruction of western music—Nam June Paik deconstructed the piano with an axe and Yosuke Yamashita lit the piano on fire—Sakamoto felt as though the piano was an instrument that had already been fully explored. "That was the context in which I wrote this piece."

Invited out for drinks after the concert, Sakamoto met Takemitsu, who praised his piece and complemented his ear.

Disc 2:

01. Parade

By Niagara Triangle (Tatsuro Yamashita)

Niagara Triangle is a collaborative album created by Japanese pop legends Eiichi Otaki, Ginji Ito, and Tatsuro Yamashita, released in 1975. Sakamoto performed on 9 of 10 tracks as a piano and vibraphone player. This piece was quite popular, as it was released as a b-side to Yamashita's hit single, "DOWN TOWN". Eiichi Otaki was part of the well-known rock group Happy End (Eiichi Otaki, Haruomi Hosono, Takashi Matsumoto and Shigeru Suzuki), which Sakamoto greatly admired at the time, so he remembers his eagerness to be part of these recording sessions. It was on one of these sessions in which Sakamoto first met Haruomi Hosono, with whom he would later form Yellow Magic Orchestra along with Yukihiro Takahashi.

"Otaki would make music as if creating a collage, like 'more rhythmical, like The Meters here' or 'play more like Dr. John on this one,' which for me was quite fascinating. For the opening of this track, Tatsuro Yamashita asked me to come up with an intro, so I improvised something on the spot. I was more dexterous back then. I can't play like this anymore," Sakamoto says. "I met Haruomi Hosono during these recording sessions. I

often say this, but I assumed he studied people like Debussy and Stravinsky, so when I found out he hadn't, I was quite surprised.”

02. Kawarano Hikoojoo

By Lily

Lily is a Japanese singer/songwriter and actress who debuted in 1970. Her single, ‘Watashi wa Naite Imasu’ (I am crying) was a huge hit, selling approximately 1 million copies in 1974. Sakamoto was a part of her Bye Bye Session Band from 1975-1976. As the primary arranger for the band, Sakamoto arranged all of the tracks on their album *Auriola*, from which this piece is taken. *Auriola* was also Sakamoto's first album as a professional arranger. After revisiting the album, Sakamoto chose this piece to include in this compilation.

“Bye Bye Session Band was the first and only band I was in before YMO. I was initially a kind of stand-in member, but once I became involved, I couldn't help but comment on the music and arrangements. Before I knew it, I was an official member.”

03. Repetition and Chant

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

A third-year grad student in the two-year composition department at Tokyo University of Art and Music (although he wanted to stay for a fourth, his professors begged him to graduate), Sakamoto wrote this piece as his final composition assignment in 1976. It was first performed in 1984 on a well-known music program called *Untitled Concert*, hosted by the famous composer Toshiro Mayuzumi. Sakamoto later learned that Mayuzumi was very fascinated by this particular piece and stole it from the university so he could keep it.

“It doesn't strike me as a great piece when I listen to it now. I didn't attempt to bring in anything new in contemporary music at the time... ‘Repetition’ in the title refers to the rhythm, and ‘Chant’ refers to Native American chanting, which influenced me quite a bit in this song. These were completely irrelevant to what was going on in the contemporary music world at the time.”

The recording, which was taken from the television program mentioned above, is a shortened version of the full piece. In the program, the middle 32 bars were omitted.

04. Nakaorebousi wo Kamutta Otousan

By Taeko Tomioka

The title translates to “The Father Who Wears a Fedora.” Taeko Tomioka, a poet and novelist born in 1935, wrote and sang on this 1977 album. She was quite interested in the relationship between the tradition of Japanese performing arts and *kayōkyoku*, at the time, so she created this album to explore her research further. The A&R rep on this project strongly recommended Sakamoto for the job. Sakamoto composed and arranged every track, also playing piano, synth, vibraphone and drums on the record along with some of his fellow musicians from Bye Bye Session Band.

“It's so impactful isn't it? I don't know why they picked me, but I'd been reading her poetry since I was a child because of my father who was an editor. I don't know if she realized that my father was Kazuki Sakamoto—I don't think she ever knew.”

“I don’t dwell on things too much, so I think I just wrote music that seemed to fit the poetry. Since Taeko is not a professional singer, I remember thinking I should compose music that could be sung fairly easily. But listening over it, it’s a hard song. Tomioka-san told me that apparently I made a demo tape for her in which I played piano and sang to show her the music. It’s definitely a rare tape, but I wouldn’t want anyone to listen to it.”

05. Yakusha Kagyo

By Piranha Gundan

Piranha Gundan was a collective of actors in the mid-70s who could not get any roles aside from supporting and villain roles. At the same time, Kan Mikami, a well-known folk singer/songwriter and actor, was spending a lot of time in Kyoto as a film actor, eventually meeting Piranha Gundan and collaborating on an album together. Mikami produced and composed the album, hiring Sakamoto as an arranger for many of the tracks. “Yakusha Kagyo (Being an Actor)” was produced in 1977. Masaru Shiga sings on this Marvin Gaye-ish arrangement. Many of the songs on the tracks arranged by Sakamoto were greatly influenced by R&B, Soul, and Funk.

“This is so impactful as well. I wonder why I was asked to do this? I didn’t even know who Piranha Gundan was—they just seemed like scary people. I didn’t know how to arrange the songs either. Clearly I wrote music that I was simply interested in,” says Sakamoto.

06. The Cosmos

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

The Cosmos was a 1978 sound documentary album commissioned by Victor Entertainment. Sakamoto was hired to create sound effects and music that evoked space travel. The project was mainly to promote Victor’s bi-phonic mixing technology, and used sounds from NASA’s transmissions and narration that described the solar systems and spaceships. This project proved to be the perfect playground for Sakamoto to experiment with new technology, right before YMO’s debut.

07. Tropical Love

By Teresa Noda

This track comes from the second single of singer/actress Teresa Noda, released in 1979 and produced by Kazuhiko Kato. The group flew to Jamaica to record, which was the first time Sakamoto travelled outside of Japan. This proved to be quite a culture shock for him. It changed his outlook on life.

“It took me a couple of years to understand reggae since it first came to Japan in the mid 70s. In 1977, Bob Marley came to Japan and I went to see him. I didn’t understand what was so interesting about such a simple style of music, but I eventually saw the deep complexity of it. At the hotel in Jamaica, there was a huge PA system by the pool. I will never forget how the bass shook the water. It was surreal. In the studio, I carefully watched how the other musicians used their bodies to create that groove.”

08. The End of Asia (Live in London 1979)

By Yellow Magic Orchestra

This is a live track taken from YMO's first European tour, performing in London's The Venue on October 16th, 1979. Although many YMO live albums have released the second performance of this series, this is the first time the October 16th performance has been released.

In his autobiography, Sakamoto mentions performing this song during the London concert: "Right then, on the dance floor right in front of the stage, a couple started to dance. The couple was very new wave and quite fashionable. I remember the intensity of joy and emotion when I realized that the music we were playing was making this cool couple dance. It felt like an electrical shock. At that moment, I felt like I was doing the right thing."

"'The End Of Asia' has two meanings: the first is a geographical one, literally referring to the Far East, or the edge of Asia. The other is a cultural one. Globalization is soon to encompass the whole world, and Asian-ness will be obliterated.

"When I performed this song with these dual meanings in London I saw these hip, young new wave couples, where even the men were wearing make-up. One young couple couldn't help but stand and start dancing, even though everyone else was still seated. They didn't care about what other people thought. Seeing that struck me, because that kind of free-spiritedness didn't seem like it existed in Japan.

"Everyone's so young and full of energy when I listen to this now. Yukihiro's drumming is so powerful, even aggressive. That energy is incredible. Youth is an amazing thing."

Disc 3:

01. 02. 03. 04. 05. 06. 07. 08. 09. 10. 11. 12. 13.

Memories of Nazca

(Anti-oneiric device or music as a function of anti-collectivism)

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

This track, released in May of 1978, is what inspired the release of this compilation. Upon hearing this tape, Haruomi Hosono decided to ask Sakamoto to join YMO, giving it something of a legendary status. Previously believed lost, this is the first time the performance has been made available to the general public. Sakamoto edited down the longer original to fit it onto one CD for the compilation.

Before his solo debut, *Thousand Knives*, Sakamoto held a solo, improv-based performance using synths and keyboards for an installment in a series called Solo Exhibition. His performance ran nightly from January 30th – February 1st, 1978 in a very small venue that charged only 770 yen and gave out drinks for free. On May 14th of the same year, Sakamoto held a similar, improv-based performance of the same concept, but this time he invited three women artists—violinist/singer Kazuko Omura, Junko Oda, and Fumiko Takahashi—to perform. It was the tape from this show made its way to Haruomi Hosono leaving a strong impression that eventually led to the formation of YMO.

"Back then, I used a Moog III C sequencer. It was analog, so it took a lot of time to set up, but the resulting sound was unique and interesting. I was so busy around that time with lots of gigs as a studio musician and arranger. I couldn't really do it anymore. Looking back at my life in 1976 and 1977, I never really stopped working. I moved from studio to studio, performing and arranging one after the other, even in the taxis in between studios. After work, I would go to a bar to unwind and drink with my friends.

This was really unsustainable, and I wanted to do something for myself. Naturally I was very happy when I received the offer to do this piece.

“During this live performance, I had multiple layers of pre-recorded material playing back as I improvised using synths. I mostly used a Korg PS-3100 for the recording. I loved this equipment back in the day—I even used it on the first YMO album. It was a pretty expensive synth, but I just went for it. Somehow these Korg and Roland circuits sound more Japanese compared to the Moog or Arp synths, even though in theory they are the same. You can hear what I’m talking about on the YMO pieces ‘Simoon’ and ‘Firecracker.’ From the second album, *Solid State Survivor*, our sound became sharper, but the first album really contained a lot of exotic sounds which all came from the Korg.

“After this first gig, Hosono-san called me and asked me to join YMO. I can’t remember if he already heard the performance or I gave him the tape. Listening back to this recording, I hear a lot of the idioms that were present in a lot of the contemporary pieces at the time. It makes me smile at how young I was. I’m also realizing just how amazing the sound of an analog synth is. I’m revisiting analog synths more these days. I’m using analog a lot more compared to the last few years. It seems like a lot of musicians are doing this—going full circle back to analog.”