

Ryuichi Sakamoto

By David Toop

Is it possible to talk about melancholy happiness, or virtuoso primitivism, or a feeling of drifting bliss mixed with profound sorrow, or the sense of being absorbed into software life yet plugged into the physicality of movement on the streets of New York, Seoul, Tokyo, Brasilia, or the flight of birds across Lake Turkana? All of these contradictions, if that is what they are, come to my mind if I think of Ryuichi Sakamoto. There is nobody quite like him. As a composer, he need never leave his studio – after all, he has the facility to write heartbreaking melodies seemingly to order. That is one significant aspect of his work, for sure, whether the now classic film theme, *Forbidden Colours*, composed for Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* in 1983, or more recently, *Bibo no Aozora*, used in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*. For some that would be enough to stay indoors, but instead Sakamoto combines his incredible gift for melody with less marketable concerns: political and environmental activism, his quest for a truly global musical language, and an open-minded curiosity about all developments in contemporary audio technology and music, ranging from Korean hip-hop and neo-bossa nova in Brazil to electronica and noise.

Many years ago I asked Sakamoto about his attitude to Japan's most famous classical composer, Toru Takemitsu. He told me about an incident when he was a young rebellious student. In those days he had protested on one occasion against Takemitsu, feeling that the Japonism of his music carried traces of nationalism. This is a complex issue, since in the immediate post-war period, Takemitsu had been involved in his own struggle against a legacy of nationalistic and militaristic ideas that had been imposed on Japanese traditional music. Through his theories and composing he found new ways to listen to his own cultural history and to contextualise it within contemporary settings. In a sense, Sakamoto has achieved an updated version of something similar and there are intriguing parallels between his own career and that of Takemitsu. In both men one can hear overpowering lyrical tendencies and great gifts of melody, the same love of the great French composers of the *fin de siècle* - Debussy, Ravel and Satie - along with the compulsion to delve into all forms of musical experimentation and genre.

Struggling to emerge from ruins in 1945, occupied Japan reinvented itself as one of the most technologically advanced and inventive nations on earth. When Ryuichi Sakamoto formed Yellow Magic Orchestra with Haruomi Hosono and Yukihiro Takahashi in 1978, this ascendant technocracy lay at the heart of their music, and yet they satirised both orientalism and the racist stereotypes of Japanese people that were commonplace at the time (and still are now). Any feelings that YMO's music was strictly of its time were dispelled last year when the band played with an augmented line-up in London to a rapturous capacity audience, some of them still small children when tracks like "Simoon" and "Fire Cracker" were first released. Of course, now we can look back with hindsight and understand that YMO were far ahead of their time. This futurology is sometimes remarkable. When I was writing my first book, *Rap Attack*, in 1984, I listened to all the tracks that anticipated New York electro. One of the most prescient in its blueprint was Ryuichi Sakamoto's "Riot In Lagos", from 1980.

This same finely tuned radar is evident on more recent collaborations – particularly Sakamoto's work with alva noto on albums such as *Insen* and *Vrioon*. Sakamoto's piano romanticism meets its opposite in Carsten Nicolai's minimalist clicks and glitches, yet the meeting is somehow a melting of extremes, a space in which seemingly divergent strategies can meet and flourish.

"I always have to be positive," Sakamoto once said to me, and even in his starkest, saddest film scores – *Gohatto*, *Love Is the Devil* or *Tony Takitani* – this spirit of positive energy filters through. He described his philosophy to me as outernationalism: "Being outernational is like Moses in the desert. There's no country. There is just trade, transportation, communication and merchants, but there's no nationality. It's a utopia and I like it I don't want to be Japanese. I want to be a citizen of the world. It sounds very hippie but I like it."

David Toop ist Musikjournalist, Schriftsteller und Musiker. 1984 erschien sein richtungsweisendes Buch „Rap Attack, zuletzt veröffentlichte er „Haunted Weather: Music, Silence, and Memory“ (2004). Als Musiker hat er unter anderem zusammengearbeitet mit John Zorn, Evan Parker oder Bill Laswell. Er veröffentlichte etliche Soloalben und kuratierte Ausstellu