Appropriation or Appreciation? Musical Representations of Japan in Screen Media

Ryoka Hagiwara, Heidelberg University, Germany

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between musical representations of Japan and the concepts of cultural appropriation and appreciation within screen media, including film and television. As global interest in the culture and history of Japan rises, the use of Japanese portrayals and representations in the media becomes more prevalent, raising critical questions about authenticity, respect, and hierarchical structures. I will analyse case studies, exploring how specific music genres, instruments, and compositional techniques associated with Japan are employed and utilised in the media. This includes the use of traditional Japanese instruments like the shakuhachi and koto, the incorporation of J-POP and anime music, and the creation of original scores inspired by traditional Japanese music such as gagaku. Through a critical lens, I will investigate whether these musical representations contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture, or perpetuate stereotypes. How are musical signifiers of "Japan" constructed and deployed? What are the arguments on authenticity in their use by non-Japanese musicians and artists? How does the line between appreciation and appropriation shift with context, intent, and reception? By analysing musical aesthetics, cultural context, and audience reception, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between music and cultural representation in the globalised media landscape. I argue that education and critical examination of these representations are essential for cultivating a more ethical and culturally sensitive approach to media production and consumption.

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In recent years, Hollywood and the U.S. entertainment industry have made measurable strides toward greater diverse representation, both on-screen and behind the scenes. In 2024, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) made up 44.3% of the U.S. population, and in streaming, BIPOC actors now exceed that proportion in representation, while BIPOC hold 41% of directing roles (in the theatrical film sector, BIPOC lead actors and directors held 25.2% and 20.2% of roles, respectively) (*Hollywood Diversity Report*, 2025). However, this progress has not yet extended to film music composition. Although there is no comprehensive report on BIPOC composers in major Hollywood productions, only 8.2% of film composers were women in 2022 (Smith et al., 2023), and only 10.4% of all programmed works by American orchestras were by living BIPOC composers, which is a notable increase from 2016's 1.8%, but still a small fraction overall (Deemer & Meals, 2024).

This trend of the lack of diversity in composers persists even when films focus on non-white cultures and stories. For instance, there have been multiple popular films that have either been set in Japan and/or heavily featured Japanese culture and characters, and a majority of the films have been scored by non-Japanese composers, mainly White composers. 2003's *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick, was scored by Hans Zimmer; *Memoirs of a Geisha*, released in 2005, featured a score by John Williams; 2006's *Letters from Iwo Jima*'s score was composed by Kyle Eastwood and Michael Stevens, despite featuring a Japanese-heavy cast; *47 Ronin* (2013)'s composer was Ilan Eshkeri; Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2016) was scored by Kim Allen Kluge and Katherine Kluge; Alexandre Desplat for Wes Anderson's stop-motion film *Isle of Dogs* (2018); and Dominic Lewis for *Bullet Train* (2022). Even 2024's critically acclaimed TV series *Shōgun*, which was widely praised for its authenticity and representation, was scored by Atticus Ross, Leopold Ross, and Nick Chuba. The rare exception is 2022's *Minamata*, directed by Andrew Levitas, which was scored by Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Thus, while representation among actors and directors increasingly reflects the diversity of contemporary U.S. society, the voices shaping a film's musical landscape remain overwhelmingly homogeneous, raising critical questions about authenticity, representation, and whose perspectives are heard and whose remain silent. This paper aims to look at these questions in depth through four case studies.

The Last Samurai

The Last Samurai, a period drama-action film following the story of an American captain who comes into contact with samurai after the Meiji Restoration, was inspired by the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion and is almost entirely set in Japan. While actor Ken Watanabe praised the film for depicting Japan "in a way that we were never able to before", many criticised the film for its "White saviour" narrative, as well as its exoticisation and romanticisation of Japanese culture (Lee, 2022).

Hans Zimmer's score includes a Western orchestra alongside Japanese instruments such as shamisen, shakuhachi, taiko, and koto, as well as the Chinese erhu. Unlike many of the other film scores discussed in this paper, there are no credited Japanese musicians or supervisors for the score of *The Last Samurai*. Musically, the score largely incorporates Hans Zimmer's signature style of film scoring, with epic and dynamic orchestral sounds combined with unconventional instrumentation, which in this case is the Japanese instruments. The music relies heavily on Western harmonies and rhythm, with the Japanese instruments often

accentuating the melody or setting the scene. While Zimmer's inclusion of traditional Japanese instruments might suggest an attempt at an authentic representation of "Japaneseness", the score ultimately represents a Westernised perspective of what Japanese culture looks like, using musical tropes that align more with Hollywood's idea of the "Exotic East" than authenticity, representation, and opportunities for underrepresented musicians.

Zimmer's involvement in *The Last Samurai* can also be explained through the lens of commercial practices. By the early 2000s, Hans Zimmer was one of the most commercially successful and well-known film composers in Hollywood, known for his epic and emotionally charged scores, usually using a large orchestra alongside non-Western instruments and digitally manipulated sound. His name would have lent prestige and saleability to the already marketable film (the film stars Tom Cruise, one of the consistently highest-grossing actors since the 1990s), a factor that likely influenced the studio's decision more than questions of cultural authenticity and representation. Zimmer's appointment symbolises Hollywood's ongoing reluctance to entrust non-White stories to non-White artists. Furthermore, this reinforces a vicious cycle of Asian composers not being hired due to a lack of prominence in the main media, but not being able to build the necessary portfolio or stature to begin with.

Memoirs of a Geisha

This pattern of prioritising marketability and security continues in 2005's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Like *The Last Samurai*, the film is set in Japan and is deeply rooted in Japanese cultures and traditions, and yet its score was composed by yet another Western giant: John Williams, known for his scores for films such as the *Star Wars* films, the *Indiana Jones* franchise, the *Harry Potter* series, and many more. Williams, celebrated for his sweepingly dramatic orchestral style and lyrical use of musical themes, approaches the story through a similarly (or potentially even more aggressively) Western lens. Despite featuring Japanese instruments, including shakuhachi, koto, shamisen, and tsuzumi, and renowned Asian soloists such as Yo-Yo Ma on cello, the musical voice that emerges is unmistakably that of Williams', and more importantly, Western. In a film about one performing an art form that frequently references traditional Japanese songs and music, Williams himself references none of this.

In the piece titled "Going to School" in the soundtrack, Williams uses the tsuzumi in much the way drums would be scored in a Western orchestra. This is followed by a string solo in a major pentatonic scale, which is often described as having an "oriental" feel. Indeed, in an interview with Classic FM, John Williams states that the aim of the score was to "create an oriental atmosphere by using traditional Japanese instruments that would be supported by a broad, Western harmonic vocabulary" (*John Williams Discusses Memoirs Of A Geisha*, n.d.). This quote directly falls into Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, established in his 1978 book of the same name, which refers to the exaggeration of difference and application of clichéd analytical models for perceiving the "Oriental world" and its cultures (Said, 1978).

The selective use of instruments fits within what musicologist Ralph Locke refers to as "musical exoticism", a practice where non-Western sounds are incorporated to signal difference and convey foreignness to Western audiences (Locke, 2009). The result is not a Japanese landscape, but a sonic construction and Western interpretation of "Japan" filtered through a Hollywood perspective, which emphasises Western fantasies, stereotypes, and misconceptions. The film *Memoirs of a Geisha* itself was criticised for its Westernisation and fetishisation of Japanese culture, as well as for its casting choice, in which all three main female

roles went to non-Japanese actresses. The film had greater popularity in the United States than it did in Japan, where it only achieved average to moderate box office success.

Shōgun

Two decades after *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* were released, the TV series *Shōgun* was released on FX by Hulu. *Shōgun* quickly became the hit show of 2024 and was the first Japanese-language series to win a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series. Famed for its authenticity and representation, it featured a majority Japanese cast and crew, with star and producer Hiroyuki Sanada saying in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, "We tried to put more Japanese lenses on the script. We wanted to show more details of the culture, and the characters, rules, atmosphere and everything else" (Vognar, 2024).

Despite the overwhelming and unprecedented emphasis on authenticity and representation, however, the series was scored yet again by not only one but three White male composers: Oscar-winning composer Atticus Ross, his brother, Leopold Ross, and their frequent collaborator, Nick Chuba. In interviews, the trio mention the name of their arranger, Japanese composer and music producer Taro Ishida, as someone who was able to bring his authenticity and expertise on Japanese traditional music (Ingenthron, 2024).

Having some form of "ethnic advisor" to White composers has been common practice in Hollywood for decades. A notable example is Japanese-American composer Tak Shindo, who was "repeatedly called upon to 'represent the authentic' during the postwar years by serving as the 'Japanese musical advisor'" (Sheppard, 2019). It is important to note, however, that these "advisors" do not get credited as composers, but merely as musicians or arrangers. Not only does this limit their notability as a composer, but it also limits their earnings, as most arrangers do not earn as much as a composer in the first place, nor do they receive the residual incomes that a composer would. Again, this prevents a Japanese composer from gaining the reputation and recognition they may have earned had they been hired and credited as a composer rather than an arranger, and thus obstructs or limits prospects as a film composer for blockbusters and high-budget, commercially successful films and TV series such as *The Last Samurai*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and *Shōgun*.

Bullet Train

David Leitch's *Bullet Train* (2022) is another film that is, for the most part, set in Japan. While the three aforementioned films and TV series have largely focused on historic Japanese stories, *Bullet Train* represents a twenty-first-century rendition of Hollywood's fascination with Japan and its culture and aesthetics. Based on Kōtarō Isaka's novel *Maria Beetle*, the film follows a group of assassins on a high-speed bullet train, led by Brad Pitt's character "Ladybug". Despite its Japanese settings and literary origins, the film features a predominantly non-Japanese cast and is told almost entirely in English; even the passengers on the train seem to be majority non-Japanese. The film prompted accusations of whitewashing of the main characters, and was publicly criticised by David Inoue of the Japanese American Citizens League, who suggested that "foreigners, or gaijin, remain a distinct minority in Japan, and to populate the movie with so many in the leading roles is ignoring the setting" (Burton, 2022). Furthermore, civil rights activist and leader of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Guy Aoki, accused the film of making excuses for "the tired Hollywood practice of exploiting Asian source material, leaving out most of the Asians in it, and calling the casting of white, black, and Latino actors a triumph for diversity" (*MANAA Blasts Whitewashed 'Bullet Train,' Calls Out Actress*, 2022).

Japan, in the context of this film, becomes less a cultural space than a cinematic playground where cultural specificity gives way to pop spectacle, with a neon-lit backdrop of convenience stores, vending machines, and anime and post-modern cute mascot imagery.

Perhaps then, it is not surprising that the score for this film was written by White British composer Dominic Lewis. Known for his energetic scores for action films such as *The King's Man* (2021) and *Violent Night* (2022), Lewis constructs a sonic landscape that fuses Western orchestral and electronic film music conventions with conspicuously "Japanese" musical signifiers. The score alternates between pulsating electronic beats, electric guitar riffs, and moments of lush orchestral writing typical of Hollywood action cinema, interspersed with uses of Japanese-language pop songs and covers. Some notable examples include a Japanese city pop rendition of "Stayin' Alive" and a tongue-in-cheek dance cover of "Holding Out For A Hero". These musical choices, while distinctive, often function as ironic musical jokes rather than authentic or respectful musical gestures. The only two tracks in the soundtrack written by Japanese musicians were Carmen Maki's *Tokiniwa Hahano Naikono Yoni* (lyrics by Shuji Terayama and music by Michi Tanaka) and Kyu Sakamoto's *Sukiyaki* (by lyricist Rokusuke Ei and composer Hachidai Nakamura), which is the only Japanese song to reach number one on the Billboard pop charts in the United States. Although several Japanese vocalists appear on the soundtrack, no Japanese composer (or musical supervisor, for that matter) is credited, reinforcing the recurring absence of Japanese creative authorship in Western depictions of Japan.

The film's visual and musical aesthetic can be examined through the lens of techno-Orientalism, a concept coined by David Morley and Kevin Robins in their essay "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic" (1995). Writing in the context of the late-twentieth-century anxieties about Japan's technological and economic rise, Morley and Robins argue that the Western media's portrayal of a "hypermodern" Japan functions as a projection of Western fears about technology, automation, and cultural decline: "Through the projection of exotic (and erotic) fantasies onto this high-tech delirium, anxieties about the 'importance' of Western culture can be, momentarily, screened out" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 169). They also argue that "the West's imaginary Japan works to consolidate old mystifications and stereotypes: 'they' are barbaric and 'we' are civilised; 'they' are robots while 'we' remain human; and so on" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 172).

Bullet Train exemplifies this framework. Its depiction of Japan is saturated with the aesthetics of speed, efficiency, and brute-force violence. Lewis' score echoes this by fusing mechanical textures, synthesised melodies, and glossy J-POP-style refrains. The score's sonic atmosphere and hyper-electric sheen align with Morley and Robins' notion of Japan as a fantasy of hypermodernity, which is dazzling but dehumanised (Morley & Robins, 1995). The score's somewhat ironic use of Japanese-language pop further accentuates this distance, providing what might be described as performative diversity. It may appear to be inclusive upon first glance, but its creative hierarchies and motivations remain firmly Western. Just as *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* curated an exotic past, *Bullet Train* offers up Japan packaged up with exoticised futurism, with an illusion of cultural hybridity while maintaining systemic exclusion.

Representation, Authorship, and Power in Media

Discussions of representation in media often focus and end on who appears on the screen. However, while visibility and inclusion of diverse faces are of course important, representation

extends far beyond casting choices. As Stuart Hall argues in "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", representation is "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (Hall et al., 1997, p. 15). Therefore, representation is a crucial aspect in shaping how audiences understand people, cultures, and social relations, and those who control it hold a form of power, for they can influence which perspectives are amplified, which are silenced, and how cultural similarities and differences can be interpreted. In film, this power extends to the composer, as they play a major part in shaping the emotional narrative of the scene, cueing audience empathy, and defining how cultures are sonically understood. When non-Western stories are constantly mediated through Western musical authorship, they become filtered through an interpretive lens that reaffirms dominant hierarchies rather than challenging and redefining them. This is not to say that non-Japanese musicians cannot write music for Japanese stories; indeed, there are plenty of Japanese who write music for non-Japanese stories. However, the problem arises when a majority of Japanese stories are scored by a narrow pool of composers, as this incurs the possibility of providing a one-sided and biased interpretation of these stories. Ryuichi Sakamoto's score for *Minamata* demonstrates how a Japanese composer (and one outside of the majority White male pool of composers) can bring nuanced cultural and emotional depth to a film's narrative. Yet such examples are few and far between, leaving aspiring composers with few tangible role models.

This has consequences for cultural authorship and opportunity. As the case studies demonstrate, even when the films claim authenticity, Japanese composers rarely hold creative authority, instead appearing as featured artists or consultants. In these cases, inclusion remains at the level of appearance rather than authorship or creative power, and representation becomes a matter of optics, with the visual indication of the inclusion of Japanese elements or artists seemingly legitimising the work's authenticity, while the structural power dynamics remain the same. This is not an isolated issue, but a part of the systemic exclusion of BIPOC creatives from key creative decision-making roles in Hollywood production ecosystems.

Diversity in composition is not only important from a moral standpoint but also a creative and artistic one. Composers draw upon cultural histories, idioms, and personal experiences that shape narrative meaning, and to exclude non-White composers (whether intentional or unintentional) from the majority of projects is to narrow the possibilities for the film and the industry itself. New voices bring new sounds, structures, and emotional and narrative vocabularies. Representation, in this sense, is not merely about filling quotas but about redistributing creative power fairly, and making sure that soundtracks to non-Western stories told are not just about them, but by them. This counters the homogenising tendencies of Hollywood's globalised sounds, offering a plurality of musical perspectives that reflect the diverse landscape.

With the visible lack of representation of BIPOC composers both in Hollywood and in concert, there is also an obvious lack of role models for aspiring BIPOC composers. Time and time again, research has shown that seeing someone with a shared racial or cultural background in a professional role increases the likelihood of aspiring for that role yourself (Perez-Sepulveda et al., 2025). In the absence of BIPOC composers in Hollywood, young musicians may internalise the idea that these positions are inaccessible or unattainable. This also perpetuates the structural barriers for young BIPOC musicians. Without role models, mentors, networks, or professional recognitions, aspiring composers struggle to build the portfolio necessary to break into major projects, reinforcing the cycle of underrepresentation. Increasing the representation of BIPOC composers would not only provide role models and mentorship

opportunities for emerging talent but also diversify the musical vocabulary of mainstream film, creating more innovative and creative cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Despite visual or narrative claims that suggest representation or emphasise cultural authenticity, musical authorship in Hollywood's depictions of Japan remains largely dominated by White male composers. This reflects deeper structural issues of inequalities in who gets to create, define, and shape a cultural experience for global audiences, and limits opportunities for musicians and composers from a wider range of backgrounds.

Representation in media is a crucial part of cultural exchange and dialogue. With the majority of sonic representation following persistent Orientalist tropes (Said, 1978) or their modernist counterparts, such as techno-Orientalism (Morley & Robins, 1995), Japan's cultural representation has been repeatedly mediated by Western authorship. Furthermore, the hiring of "ethnic advisors" or featured artists, who are not credited as composers and certainly not featured in the title credits (unlike a composer), reinforces surface-level inclusion without the authorship. This practice keeps the structural hierarchies intact. True representation requires access to creative decision-making roles, not just symbolic participation.

The lack of BIPOC composers perpetuates both cultural and creative homogeneity. Expanding authorship and opportunities for underrepresented composers would therefore allow for a richer, more sonically nuanced storytelling that moves beyond exoticism toward genuine intercultural dialogue. Without such inclusion, Hollywood's soundscapes risk remaining confined within a narrow, self-referential framework that reproduces existing power dynamics and stereotypes rather than challenging or reframing them. To rethink this dynamic, attention must shift from visual or superficial inclusion toward the redistribution of creative authority, including in the sonic landscape. Only through such a reconfiguration can cultural exchange move toward an ethics of authorship that genuinely acknowledges multiplicity, agency, and co-presence within global media culture.

References

Burton, J. (2022). *'Bullet Train' Author Defends Brad Pitt Casting From 'Whitewash' Claims*. Newsweek. https://www.newsweek.com/bullet-train-movie-author-defends-brad-pitt-whitewash-casting-japanese-culture-1728707

Deemer, D. R., & Meals, D. C. (2024). *2024 Orchestra Repertoire Report*.

Hall, S., Nixon, S., & Evans, J., eds. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications.

Hollywood Diversity Report. (2025). UCLA Social Sciences https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/initiatives/hollywood-diversity-report/

Ingenthron, B. (2024). *Atticus Ross, Leopold Ross, Nick Chuba Collaborate On Score For FX Limited Series SHŌGUN*. BroadwayWorld.com. https://www.broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/Atticus-Ross-Leopold-Ross-Nick-Chuba-Collaborate-On-Score-For-FX-Limited-Series-SHGUN-20240224

John Williams Discusses Memoirs Of A Geisha. (n.d.). Classic FM. Retrieved 5 October 2025 from https://www.classicfm.com/composers/williams/guides/john-williams-discusses-memoirs-geisha/

Lee, A. (2022). *'Each little thing in my life is precious': Ken Watanabe on cancer, childhood and Hollywood cliches.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/may/19/ken-watanabe-cancer-childhood-hollywood-cliches-last-samurai-tokyo-vice

Locke, R. P. (2009). *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*. Cambridge University Press.

MANAA Blasts Whitewashed 'Bullet Train,' Calls Out Actress. (2022). Rafu Shimpo. https://rafu.com/2022/08/manaa-blasts-whitewashed-bullet-train-calls-out-actress/

Morley, D., & Robins, K. (1995). *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*. Routledge.

Perez-Sepulveda, B. M., Cunningham-Oakes, E., & Waters, E. V. (2025). Importance of diversity and representation in science: Benefits towards strengthening our response to global challenges. *NPJ Antimicrobials and Resistance*, *3*(1), 26. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44259-025-00101-7

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

Sheppard, W. A. (2019). *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190072704.003.0008

Smith, D. S. L., Pieper, D. K., Wheeler, S., Case, A., Mercado, Z., Neff, K., Moore, Z., Hernandez, K., & Neff, S. (2023). *Inequality in 1,600 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ+ & Disability from 2007 to 2022*.

Vognar, C. (2024, May 28). *How Hiroyuki Sanada plays his own hero in 'Shōgun'*. Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2024-05-28/hiroyuki-sanada-shogun-lord-yoshii-toranaga