

Music of Escaflowne

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Sunrise Studio's anime masterpiece, *Vision of Escaflowne*, brings an immense, intricate, genre-crossing story line, combining the most gripping aspects of fantasy, romance, and science fiction. Maybe the wonderfully sculpted and multi-dimensional characters, or else the unusual and very conscientious attention to unique architectural and cultural design of the various kingdoms the characters find themselves visiting. But, as beautiful as the art is in *Escaflowne*, it is its music that elevates the series above the anime norm.

Although music is something whose presence you may not always be acutely aware of, its removal would be as detrimental to the integrity of the story line as removing characters or eliminating random lines from the script. Music in film and other works of visually based narrative art is an often overlooked, under-appreciated, but a demanding essence of the work. The technical term for music in visual programming, background music, or "BGM", seems to sum up the general attitude towards it. It is assumed to be merely background filler material that holds value only in the immediate context of augmenting or shaping an mood for a particular scene, and its nature is that it cannot stand musically on its own outside of the larger work in which it is intended for. For the majority of current western films, TV programs, and "cartoons", this is quite true. Pick any movie playing at your local mass market movie-plex and you're likely to be treated to a simplistic, cliched fax-in of an orchestra score and depressingly bad pop music. There are, of course, wonderful exceptions I could mention.

However, inhibition of musical creativity is by no means an inherent limitation of the art form as a whole, but the fault of simply poor, unimaginative composers. In Japan, the situation is quite different especially in anime. While a good amount of anime, especially television, features the same type of bland junk we're used to hearing here, there are a surprisingly large number of genuinely creative, intelligent, and stylistically well-versed composers exist working in the fields of animation and film. When BGM succeeds, it not only serves as an effective, abstract aural crystallization or framing of the mood of on-screen events, but also does not require that visual material as a crutch to justify its existence. It is, in itself, a perfectly valid work of art capable of standing on its own merit. In anime, this happens surprisingly frequently. But nowhere is it epitomized so clearly as in *Escaflowne*.

Escaflowne's music is the work of two composers, Yoko Kanno and Hajime Mizoguchi. Prior to Escaflowne, Yoko Kanno was best known as the composer of the superb Macross Plus score and "Magnetic Rose" portion of Katsuhiro Otomo's 3 piece compilation film Memories. Mizoguchi's most visible anime work was the music for Please Save My Earth. Escaflowne can easily be considered the apex of their fairly long history of collaborations. Combining grand, contemporary American gestures reminiscent of George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, theatrical epicism of John Williams, the sweeping, emotional style characteristic of the Late Romantic era, and the striking, bold harmonic contrast of early modernists like Igor Stravinsky, these composers fire the score with a musical consciousness and class far exceeding what has ever been heard in anime. What makes the work even more exceptional is that the inspiration from the western orchestral realm comprises only half of it. An awesomely varied range of eclectic styles are employed, such as jazz, middle-eastern, Gregorian chant, folk, and electronically realized pieces. Of course modern day rock and pop vocal songs are also represented. Except for the anomalous ending theme, none fall within the standard Jpop: instead it covers a wider, fresher spectrum of genres.

Even music that succeeds perfectly on its own can still be considered poor soundtrack material if it fails to operate cohesively within the program for which it was designed. The relationship of the music to Escaflowne's overall atmosphere and appeal is critical. Music gains new dimensions through visual connection, while at the same time, the visual content benefits greatly from the impact of musical direction. Every episode of Escaflowne demonstrates this convincingly. In episode 1, as the hideous Energist Dragon chases down Hitomi, Yuki and Amano with Van in hot pursuit, the eerie, industrial organized rhythms of machinery bring the relentless, animalistic drive of the dragon to a frightening intensity. A scene at the beginning of episode 8, as Hitomi stares longingly at Earth in the night sky and receives a message from Amanosenpai on her "pokebell," is given immeasurable emotional impact by the leitmotivic use of Hitomi's "theme", a tender, gently poignant guitar and cello ballad that subtly illustrates the sentiments of nostalgia, regret, and love present in the character. And who can argue that the closing scene of episode 14, as Van goes on a merciless berserker rage in Escaflowne against Dilandau's team of Guymelefs, would have been half as effective without the chilling, apocalyptic choral and orchestral setting.

The task of illustrating life through sound is a powerful imaginative stimulant, and offers the composer the liberating chance to translate their interpretation of a character's motives and into musical statements. All the styles are used to separate and create identity on another plane, supplementing the more obvious differences in

artistic and character design, scene construction, and environmental. While a lot of musicians can set a basic mood fairly easily, it takes a special kind of musical talent to be able to do more. With Escaflowne, Yoko Kanno and Hajime Mizoguchi prove that they are two of the greatest composers working today.

For those who would like to know more about Escaflowne's music CDs, a brief rundown follows:

Escaflowne OST1- The focus of this CD is on the orchestral music used in the first half of the series. The opening and ending themes, as well as two insert vocal songs, are included.

Escaflowne OST2- This CD contains all the experimental, ethnic and world oriented music that gives the score its incredible versatility. Also contains 4 insert vocal songs.

Escaflowne OST3- This CD is of similar content to the first. It contains the remaining series orchestral music, this time of a much darker, climactic scope, and 4 more vocal songs.

Escaflowne Lovers Only- This CD serves as a combination best collection and the fourth soundtrack. Half the material is a mix of instrumental and vocal music assembled from the prior three soundtracks, while the other half includes the final missing instrumental BGMs, three new vocal songs, and some re-edits and retakes. The longest of the soundtracks and the best one to get if you can only get one.

Yakusoku wa Iranai CD-S- A single CD containing the full and karaoke version of the series opening theme, the insert song "Tomodachi", and a mini-drama track of Hitomi reading from her tarot cards.

Mystic Eyes CD-S- This second Escaflowne single contains the series end theme, written and sung by Hiroki Wada, a new Jpop artist. The single also includes a second song of his, unrelated to Escaflowne.

A drama CD, "Thoughts of the Jeture", containing a supplemental side story to the main plot of the anime, has also been released, and it features the original cast. Cast member Maaya Sakamoto, who made her solo acting and singing debut as main character Hitomi Kanzaki in Escaflowne, also released a solo album last year, "Grapefruit", containing songs from Escaflowne and new songs produced and composed by Yoko Kanno. She has had no major anime acting roles since Escaflowne, but she sings the new ending theme for Clamp Studio's "Clamp School Detectives" series. She also has a main voice role in Sega's recently released Panzer Dragoon RPG Saturn

game. As for Kanno, her next project is the music for Sunrise Studio and much of the Escaflowne staff's new science fiction series, Cowboy Bebop, which began airing this April.