

Yoko Kanno On Her Music For 'Escaflowne', 'Cowboy Bebop' And Letting Her Imagination Run Free

One of the finest composers in anime is without question that of [Yoko Kanno](#), so to be able to sit down with her and ask her about her work was a rare and fascinating privilege.

Coming from a musical background myself, I have been hoping to interview Kanno for a very long time. In fact, one of the first pieces I wrote professionally was about her work in *Gramophone* magazine in the UK back in the 90s.

This was because Kanno by that point was already prolific in terms of her work for scoring anime. From [Macross Plus](#) to [Escaflowne](#), she had already proven her skill and versatility at orchestral composition.

However, her ability to transcend genres entirely is something that she has shown in the decades since, but before I get to that it's worth going back to how she started out.

"I was born in [Miyagi-ken](#), which is in the northern part of Japan. My parents were also very strict, and I have an older brother who learned electrical engineering. My father was a teacher of Japanese and my mother was a nurse. However, no one in my family had any kind of interest in music, with the expectation that we would all become teachers one day. In short, that meant that I thought I would be a teacher, but I was also interested in writing. So I thought I might end up as an author.

"When I was two years old, I visited the house of one of my relatives and they had an upright piano. I was completely inseparable from it, although I had trouble reaching the keys. I would throw up my arms to hit the keys and figure out what was happening with the sounds that came back. Seeing that I was completely crazy about this piano, my parents decided to get one for me at home.

"As we lived in a rural area, it was hard for my parents to find a piano teacher nearby, so I basically learned on my own. Enjoying playing the piano and singing by myself.

"A few years later, when I was 4, I started going to the nearby Yamaha music school. I say nearby, but it took an hour or so to get there. Anyway, my parents wanted me to go, so I went. Most of the other students were a lot older than me though, around 10, so it was hard for me to find friends. All the other girls could also read and write musical scores, which was something I was unable to do at the age of 4. The first few years weren't very pleasant, but there was a regular composing contest and everyone praised my work. I sort of became like a mascot for everyone.

"After a few more years, a famous composer called [Yasushi Akutagawa](#) visited the school as a judge for some kind of contest. He took me to one side and talked to me, explaining that I should probably quit this school. Looking back, I now understand why Akutagawa gave me that advice. At that time, Yamaha had a brand image of supporting genius kids. So I was often told at school that I shouldn't make music that was so serious; it should be more cheerful, bright and enjoyable. So I think Akutagawa saw that and realized that Yamaha was trying to fit me into the image of children that they had in their heads.

“When I left Yamaha, at around 9 or 10 years old, I started to learn under a proper piano teacher. However, they were located in the neighboring prefecture, so it took about 3 hours to get there. As I was learning piano, a big part of that was learning about harmony but I didn't seem to pay much attention to that at the time. The piano teacher would also give me songs to practice, but I dislike playing the same song over and over again. I much preferred to play something for the first time, so I went out and bought songbooks or scores and tried to play everything for the first time.

“I was also in the brass band at school, you were normally assigned to one instrument but I wanted to play them all. I settled on the oboe though and if there wasn't an oboe part I would play the piccolo or the flute. At that time, I wasn't able to find any cool songs I was excited about, so I made songs on my own or arranged songs that other people would play.

Around the time when I was a teenager, I somewhat rebelled against my parents, as most teenagers do. So I ended up hating playing the piano and stopped going to see my piano teacher. I quit playing the piano and wanted to become an author.

“Moving on to Waseda University, I still wanted to become an author. However, at one of the University's festivals, I found a pop music band. As someone that grew up in a rural area, I hadn't really heard or seen that before. I initially thought they must be some kind of genius band to come up with all this music, but it turned out they were playing covers of famous songs. Specifically, they copied the music of an American guitarist called [Al Di Meola](#), but I was so moved by their playing I ended up joining that pop music club.

“After joining the club, it turned out that the senior members of the club had no musical background in a classical sense. They couldn't come up with their own musical score of the songs they wanted to copy, but I could. So I was asked to help with this. In that, I would listen to the songs and then break them down into a score for each instrument. This gave me experience in understanding the structure of how each part and instrument were linked to one another.

“Naturally, this pop music club wanted to copy the really popular songs from that time, the songs they really loved. As a result, I learned a lot of the tricks that tended to make these songs such hits. Such as having a specific pause before the melody starts, or stuff like that. This gave me a good understanding of the mechanics behind these songs. Looking back at my time at University, these experiences really helped me a lot.

“To explain, for a professional composer they are expected to know how to write the score for each instrument, but I cannot do that. So my scores must have looked strange to conductors like [Anthony Inglis](#). That means that when I compose, I don't come at it in a typical way I suppose”.

Macross Plus And Working With Shoji Kawamori And Shinichiro Watanabe

Anthony Inglis is also an important figure here, as he conducted much of Kanno's initial scores, starting with *Macross Plus*. I also [interviewed Inglis on his work with Kanno years ago](#), so it was interesting to hear Kanno's side of the story.

“When I started working on *Macross Plus*, I had no knowledge or understanding of the orchestra. So I asked a musician I knew, who happened to be a studio musician about things like how many string parts would you have in an orchestra and he said 6, 4, 2, 2, 1. So 6 first violins, 4-second violins, 2 violas, 2

cellos and 1 bass. However, this was for the studio and not for an orchestra. Without knowing that a full orchestra would be bigger, I went with this setup instead. So when I brought my score to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra I thought it was odd that the string section sounded so light. After that, I realized that orchestras were bigger in terms of the number of parts and instruments they used.

“I was working with a coordinator from Paris at the time, and that coordinator contacted the [Israel Philharmonic Orchestra](#). However, the orchestra wasn't used to working with external composers like this. Thankfully, the head of the orchestra [Zubin Mehta](#) seemed to accept our proposal and were very happy to work with us. It was strange though, as they had never done anything with anime before. The instrumentalists in the orchestra were really nice though and prepared snacks for me and put things like cookies on my piano. I suppose I looked like a 15-year-old kid to them. I felt very lucky about it all really and it was a great experience. It was an honor.

“Much like when I worked on [Cowboy Bebop](#), I didn't really know anything about jazz. So I asked another studio musician about it, and they recommended [Rudy Van Gelder](#). However, he was famous for not liking people. Again, I don't know why, but he also agreed to work with me.

“Going back to my time at university and how all this come about, the pop music club I joined had a long history behind it. Something like 30 to 40 years' worth. That meant many of the past members had ended up working in the music industry. Places like record companies or music labels, and they often came back to the University and visited the pop music club. Through that network of people, I was invited to help with a very popular girls idol group called [Onyanko Club](#) back in the 80s. They would have been the equivalent to something like [AKB48](#) these days. In any case, through the many past members of the pop music club, I ended up getting to play in front of people in general and to work on game music as well.

“On top of all this, I was also doing musical composition for commercials. Through this, I ended up being introduced to people in the anime industry. However, from my standpoint, there's no real difference between composing for games or anime. I think the first anime I worked on would have been [Please Save My Earth](#) back in the 90s.

“Back to *Macross Plus*, someone who listened to my work on commercials introduced me to Shoji Kawamori. As I'd not done much work anime productions by that point, I didn't know how to compose music or songs for anime. Since I loved literature and writing, when I received the screenplay for *Macross Plus*, I really enjoyed reading it. That meant I could use my imagination to picture the story and I found the whole idea of the virtual idol being used as a weapon was really interesting.

“Obviously, I've never piloted a fighter jet, but I imagined how that experience might be like after reading the script for *Macross Plus*. Things like flying up through the clouds and when you pop out above them, the world would feel somewhat silent. Things like white noise or the sound of silence would affect me. So I tried to imagine how that experience might be like and then express that through my music.

“For the combat scenes, I tried to imagine the smell of oil, death or debris. However, I think I got too into it, as I started to hear imaginary noises. So I probably went too far.

“As there were quite a few scenes in *Macross Plus* in the desert, I went and visited Death Valley on my own. I tried to experience the heat and the sense of thirst that produces. For this and to express these kinds of feelings, I chose to write music for the guitar.

“In terms of the musical selection, that was up to [Shinichiro Watanabe](#). He is very good at letting music tell a story. So I felt he did a great job of picking the right music for each scene in the anime. I don't remember working much with Watanabe directly, but I remember working with [Shoji Kawamori](#) a lot, as he was the main director. Kawamori was like an enthusiastic kid.

“In *Macross Plus*, two guys fight each other in repeated dog fights, fighting over one girl. That part really impressed me, as in the end they become good friends. I now understand that this kind of thing is fairly common in Macross-related anime.

“This was also the first time I worked with conductor Anthony However, composer [Akira Senju](#) used to work with Anthony, on anime such as *Victory Gundam*. I saw Anthony working on some of Senju's music in Warsaw, and I asked Senju to introduce me.

“As for Gabriela Robin, back when I was a student, I had a traumatic experience. The students were gathered in a hall and the teachers were scolding the students. I was talking with my friends and one of the teachers got very angry at me. As punishment, he made me stand up and sing the high school's anthem on my own in front of everyone. That experience made me hate singing in front of people, and that extended to having to sing with my own name in public. So when I came up with the pseudonym of Gabriela Robin, that happened because I was unable to find a suitable singer for a song I composed called *Santi-U*. After that, I managed to find a Russian singer called [Origa](#) and her voice matched what I wanted to deliver. Talking of pseudonyms, I actually have a lot already but those are a secret.”

Escaflowne And Working With The Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra

Escaflowne was one of the next big works that had a much broader and sweeping orchestral score. With multiple cultural influences, Kanno worked in Warsaw to get the sound she wanted.

“*Escaflowne* was a totally different kind of story from *Macross Plus*, as in a high school girl doing fortune telling and travelling to an alternate world. The story was so exciting and enjoyable, so I really enjoyed the work.

“That whole scene early on with the dragon and the [Torii gates](#), I made sure to visit those kinds of places. Places where legends of dragons actually exist. There were also parts of the story set in versions of Medieval Europe, so for that I visited Warsaw and the Czech Republic.

“Looking back on my work for *Macross Plus*, I felt that the music was the best fit for the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. However, for *Escaflowne*, as the Japanese economy was so strong at that time it meant we could travel further and use orchestras in Poland or the Czech Republic. I also wanted to have a bigger orchestra, in terms of the number of instruments used and an actual chorus. For that reason, I went with the [Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra](#) for *Escaflowne*.

“As an orchestra, they love to do modern music, as in modern orchestral music. They also loved pessimistic or dark-themed music.

“For the TV series, Kawamori had a strong say for the entire show, but for the movie, [Kazuki Akane](#) had more say. Telling Kawamori to shut up. That meant that Akane's tastes were more reflected in the movie version. Moreover, since Anthony is British, his style was more fun and enjoyable, but the movie was

darker and so we switched conductors. I also ended up conducting some of the movie's score myself, as it wasn't quite how I wanted it.”

Jazz, Cowboy Bebop And The Disappointing Hollywood Process

By the time *Cowboy Bebop* came around, Kanno was bridging multiple musical genres at once. While many think jazz is the main aspect of *Cowboy Bebop*'s score, it is in fact far more varied than that.

“When it came to *Cowboy Bebop*, I actually received the offer to compose the music from Watanabe very early on. Even the anime's title hadn't been decided yet. The only available assets we had were some very rough and early sketches of the characters. These were also totally different from what ended up being in the actual series. I knew nothing really about the content or the story at that point. However, Watanabe said that this should be Jazz. I felt that this wouldn't work in an outright sense and that we needed something more catchy. So I came up with more varied music that I thought would catch on more and fit better.

“As for the opening, I didn't initially compose *Tank!* for that. It was one of the fifteen brass-related tracks I had done for the show. So it was Watanabe who picked *Tank!* for the opening and *The Real Folk Blues* for the ending.

“When I heard Jazz for the first time, I realized that there was a common format. So for *Cowboy Bebop*, I tried to understand and express that with a more standard chord progression. However, I wasn't particularly aware of the *twelve-bar blues* when I composed *Tank!*. To give you a better idea, by the time I finished all the music but only 6 to 7 episodes had been actually written. So my guess is that Watanabe listened to the music I had written while he was doing the remaining episodes, and then worked them around to fit. It was almost like Watanabe made music videos around my music.

“That said, I did know more about the characters by that point. So I wrote music for characters like Jet or Ed or the dog, Ein. For Ein, Watanabe let Ed sing that song. As for me being the basis for Ed, I didn't know that during the series. I only found out much later when Watanabe explained that in an interview.

“The process on the *Cowboy Bebop* movie was totally different. When I received the offer, the story had been written. In addition, Watanabe made very specific requests for certain music in certain scenes. For the track *What Planet Is This?*, I first came up with a short version and I thought that this could maybe fit that dogfight sequence, so I extended it. For some of the movie, I also worked with storyboards and early animation. This was also true for the track *Dog Fight* at the end of *Macross Plus*, I was able to check out early animation for that as well. With *Escaflowne*, I didn't get to see the end but I came up with music for that anyway and it seemed to fit really well.

“From my perspective, everybody asks how can I do so many different genres, classical, and jazz. I never care about genre. What I care about are the emotions and feelings each scene tries to deliver. As a result of that, I come up with different music.

“In *Macross Plus*, the two main characters of Guld and Isamu are very different. Guld is very strict as a character, whereas Isamu is more laid back. So their different mindset is what I focused on. However, with the *Cowboy Bebop* movie, Spike and Vincent looked very similar to me and both felt very lonely as individuals. So I wrote music around that.

“When it came to the live-action *Cowboy Bebop*, the most difficult part is that the structure of the production is totally different from anime in Japan. The producer seems to have the biggest and final say, so it means I could never bring how I feel about anything to the production. That meant there was no way for me to give my input. That was very frustrating and difficult.

“After that experience, I realized that if I was brought on as a producer at the beginning, then I could have my input heard. So if another opportunity like that pops up, I will try and get involved as a producer from that start.

“Looking at the Hollywood style, the Japanese production style is far more democratic, hands-on and more people have a creative voice, even those who are not coming from the field of production. So I think that's very good.”

Brain Powerd, Turn A Gundam And Working With Yoshiyuki Tomino

Kanno also worked a fair amount with writer and director [Yoshiyuki Tomino](#), from *Brain Powerd* to *Turn A Gundam*. However, his approach definitely affected her, as she explains.

“Back when I worked on *Brain Powered*, Yoshiyuki Tomino hadn't fully recovered from his depression. So working with him in that way strongly affected me. I ended up getting sick actually. Tomino told me that as he recovered, he used to walk barefoot on the ground outside his house. This apparently helped him to recover. When he told me that story, I felt that the power of the Earth coming through the ground to empower people was a big part of all this. So I tried to include that in my music. This sense of recovery and curing. While the story of the series was quite hard to follow, I tried to include this aspect into the music.

“By the time we worked on *Turn A Gundam*, Tomino had recovered from his depression. He still seemed to have this respect for the power of the ground though, as though Earth was the mother. This maybe fits into the whole story in *Turn A Gundam*, with people living on the Moon coming back to the Earth. This was also used as the baseline for my own musical composition.

“For a long-running series like *Gundam*, with lots of old fans, it is very tough for me to work on something like that. So I intentionally don't watch any of the previous series, I don't want to be affected by them. I shut out all the images I can. In that regard, it takes time to set the environment to get working.

“Compared to the other directors I worked with, I found it really hard to understand what Tomino was trying to say. He tries so hard to explain everything through words, but even after reading his screenplays, I am not sure I really understand them. So when I talk to him, I feel like he only believes in words. In that sense, it makes me feel that I somehow need to play the mother's role and tell him that "it's okay, it's okay" and that he doesn't need to worry so much.”

Wolf's Rain, Ghost In The Shell And The Future

Finishing up, we talked about her work on *Wolf's Rain* and *Ghost in the Shell*, as well as why she loves living in Vienna.

“With *Wolf's Rain*, that was also written by [Keiko Nobumoto](#), who wrote *Cowboy Bebop*. I didn't hear much about how people turned into wolves, but I felt there was a similar connection to the world of

Cowboy Bebop. That everything has been devastated. The main visual in my head was with wolves running in the fields covered with snow. So for that, I visited Yellowstone National Park. The sense was that if wolves were going nearly extinct, it was whether they would or would not be able to find their friends in such a devastated world.

“I've travelled a lot actually, and gone to many places. I've even been to the bottom of the ocean to see strange fish and I wondered how these animals came to be. This was in the Maldives.

“For *Ghost in the Shell*, as I don't have much of a scientific background, I don't really know what is going on. [Kenji Kamiyama](#) told me that he wanted to use *The Catcher in the Rye* as a base, and then I thought I maybe able to understand what this is.

“A long time ago, when Origa came to Japan for the first time in the 90s. She was going to make an album and I was invited to be the pianist. Of course, we didn't share the language, but there were some songs with only her singing and me playing the piano. So that's how we worked together.

“The reason I wanted to work with Origa on *Ghost in the Shell*, is that like Motoko Kusanagi she had a really strong soul.

“As for the future, I feel I could write really good songs for a musical but nobody is asking me to do that. I am also interested in other stage works, such as ballet. I like dancing. Completely separately, I love animals and I want to visit Africa.

“I borrowed an apartment in Vienna when I worked on the NHK drama [Gochisōsan](#). The reason I love Vienna so much is because in such a small area, there are lots of places where Mozart lived or Beethoven went or a bakery where Mozart bought bread or a wine shop where Beethoven bought wine. So in Vienna, these composers were living their lives frustrated with their reputation, so that's really similar to how we also live our lives now. In that sense I feel a strong affinity to that.”