

On how your work changes as you get older



January 15, 2021 - Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto's work includes pioneering electronic music as a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra, globally inspired rock albums, classical pieces, minimal/ambient music collaborations, and over 30 film scores. He's won an Academy Award, two Golden Globes, a Grammy, and received the Order of the Cavaleiro Admissão from the government of Brazil and the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France. In 2014, Sakamoto was forced to take the first major break of his career after he was diagnosed with throat cancer. In 2017, he released his 16th solo album, [async](#), his most personal collection to date. He lives in New York.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2060 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#).

async is your first major work in eight years. Was there anxiety about returning after such a long pause?

The pressure I had was that the album would be the first one in eight years, which is almost a decade. Only one album in a decade means if I live for another 10 years, there will be only one other album. That would be it! I was nervous about that.

But you know, musically or creatively, I didn't have any pressure on me. I was going to make an album in 2014, the year I was diagnosed with cancer. I canceled everything, and then two years later, I started making this album, and I decided to forget everything and dump everything I had at that point.

I wanted to start from scratch, because I was the closest to death I'd been in my life. This was an important experience, and I wanted to dig into that experience. I wasn't trying to reflect this experience onto my music, but naturally there might be some reflection of this severe experience.

Generally, I dislike the process of making music based on a blueprint or purpose or aim. If I was an architect, I would be a bad one, because I don't like having blueprints. Of course, without blueprints, nobody knows what the building will be. But that's exactly what I like to do. I shouldn't know what I'm making, or what it will be. I want to make something I don't know, and that I've never done or never known. Hopefully, for me, it's going to be a surprise, and a new experience.

Are there certain systems or techniques you go back to, or are you reinventing the way you approach music each time?

I try not to repeat what I've done in the past. I've been trying very hard to do something new each time, for years.

I studied Western music for a long time, ever since I was 10 or 11. I started taking piano lessons when I was six years old, and I also did composition techniques and the history of different styles from Baroque to contemporary music. For this album, I tried to forget everything I'd learned. I had to invent for each track, each piece, everything. But I was open to a track being something very similar to a style or a form that existed in the past. For example, a track I was making sounded like a Beethoven sonata, which is okay. I didn't want to control myself. I wanted to let the music be.

Over the years your music has gotten quieter and more spacious. Is this just how it's coming out, or is it intentional?

It has been getting less dense since maybe 2000. For composition and for performance, for playing, too. Almost 10 years ago, when I was touring, I played some concerts in London. A friend of mine, [Dai Fujikura](#), who is a very successful contemporary composer-like [Pierre Boulez](#) loved him very much-knew almost all the music I'd made in the past. He grew up with my music. He knows it more than I do.

After the concert, we started talking, and he complained that I played much slower than the original songs or pieces. He asked, "Why?" That made me think, "Why do I want to play much slower than before?" Because I wanted to hear the resonance. I want to have less notes and more spaces. Spaces, not silence. Space is resonant, is still ringing. I want to enjoy that resonance, to hear it growing, then the next sound, and the next note or harmony can come. That's exactly what I want.

Has getting older changed your approach?

Well, especially after I had cancer three years ago, full concerts or a tour would be too hard for me. So no touring anymore. Not like a solo concert, one hour or two hours. This is not only because of the cancer. As I get older touring is hard, especially touring in Europe, because we usually use a bus with 14 beds, going from one country to another overnight, and that's tiring. I'm not a rock and roller, so I'm not used to it.

The other thing about getting older: Sometimes I listen back to the [Yellow Magic Orchestra](#) stuff. Sometimes I have to, when making compilation or something, and I'm very surprised that the music of YMO sounds very violent. Very wild, really. [Yukihiro Takahashi's](#) drumming was so wild. He was very young.

At that time we thought it was a kind of cold, cool techno pop, but now it's such muscle-oriented music. I was playing very hard on the synth. It doesn't sound very hard, but it's really muscle-oriented music. Now we have less muscle strength, and I'm not interested in playing very fast. But Yukihiro, he's still very wild. We're almost the same age, but he's still very wild.

Some years ago, the other member of YMO, [Haruomi Hosono](#), he's five years older than we are, went to Cuba to look for some musicians, and he saw a very old musician, maybe in his 80s, playing bass in a club or a bar, and his expression about this old musician was, "This old guy plays the bass like cutting tofu." You must be very gentle cutting tofu, otherwise you can damage it, break it. I love that expression, and I want to be like that. I should be like that at 80.

In 15 years.

Yes, 15 years older. So since that conversation with Hosono, I like getting older, and I'd love to see whether I can play like that, you know, like cutting tofu on the piano. This is my hope.

You were born the same year [John Cage](#) released his [4'33"](#). Do you attach any symbolism to that? Was Cage important to you?

Very important. Since I got into high school, or around that time, I've been influenced by modern art. Around that time, I started reading the only available modern art magazine in Japan. Through this magazine, I got to know John Cage, [Joseph Beuys](#), [Andy Warhol](#), [Nam June Paik](#), and [Fluxus](#). I was very interested in mainly the New York art scene and experimental music, too, from the late 60s. I started listening to the post-John Cage generation of composers, like [Philip Glass](#) and Steve Reich, Terry Riley and La Monte Young, but at the same time I was kind of studying more conventional, academic music, like Messiaen, Bartok, Stravinsky and that. So I was kind of divided, and I still am. I like very experimental music. I am very interested, and I want to do something like that, but also I have a very conventional academic part inside of me.

You've been making many different kinds of music for a long time, and have gone through different projects and collaborations and phases. Do you still get creative blocks, or are you able to move through things at this point?

You know, I have doubts, but the images, like the movies, always inspire me. So when I'm empty, vacant, I start watching any movie, b-class, c-class, it's okay. B-class kung fu movies are so inspiring. The music, for kung fu movies, very old kung fu movies, not sophisticated ones, is so inspiring. They're so wild. I was watching those kung fu movies while I was making [async](#).

Is that part of why you framed *async* as a soundtrack for a non-existent film? The idea of giving it that kind of framework, but also tying it to the visual?

I think so. Of course, I have been influenced by the images, the visuals, for a long time, but this album is probably the most that I was influenced by moving images.

When you're soundtracking a film that doesn't exist, what images did you use?

Well, mainly some images of [Tarkovsky](#) movies. You know, I said this album is a soundtrack for an imaginary Tarkovsky movie, but imaginary Tarkovsky movie means some images and scenes and sounds which I remember seeing from Tarkovsky movies in the past. So it is a Tarkovsky movie, in a way.

You've lived in New York for some time. Do you think living in New York versus living in Tokyo has changed the kind of music you made?

I never thought of that, but it's an interesting question. If I was living in Tokyo, would I make an album like *async*? I don't know. Maybe.

I have been recording sounds of New York a lot. Every time it's raining, I'm still recording the rain sound, but I'm sort of fed up of with the sounds of New York, because not so much surprises me anymore.

That's why I drove upstate. The sound environment is completely different. Even a big city like New York has a unique soundscape. Paris is a big city, but last year in June or something, July, I was walking around in Paris recording sounds. Sounds are very different. To me, recording is like fishing. You know, catching fish and then I get back home and start cooking with the fish. And that's exactly how I feel. So, in Paris I got the great fish. It made me really happy. All of a sudden I started hearing some children's voices from a building, like a school. In Japan, schools have a big yard. But in New York or Paris, they don't have a yard. Very tiny. So from the street all of a sudden I heard children singing. I don't know that I have heard children singing from the schools in New York.

I was surprised that in the Paris streets—these very small streets—there's a lot of water. Probably water that was used for cleaning and washing dishes or whatever, plates or something, maybe in the 19th century or even in the first half of the 20th century, but now it's just water coming out. No one is using it; it's just there for the pleasure of seeing it. Each one has a totally different sound, so I was enjoying and looking and recording.

What is it about water that interests you?

Water has three states, but you know, not really only three—clouds, fogs, mist, rain, and many others. A rainbow is related to water. Our bodies are 70% water, and our planet is also 70% water on the surface. We're almost like a puddle of water. As you know, those different states of water can look very beautiful, but sometimes they can be very violent, like a tsunami.

You have a project based around a piano damaged by the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. Have you completed that, or that you're still working on?

I'm still working on it. I'm going to purchase it from the school. My idea is to get the realtime earthquake data of the world, the whole world, and transform the data to MIDI signals, to play the piano. So the piano, damaged by the tsunami, is now a device to express the vibrations of our planet.

How do you decide if a project is done, and then when it is done, how do you judge whether it's a success for you or a failed project?

I guess it's by some degree of my own satisfaction. It's not numeric. For instance, I'm very proud of *async*, but in the 90s, I was making fake R&B, fake House music, and fake Hip-Hop music. I don't like that. I'm not happy about it. I wish I could erase that time. Making film music is different. It's for other people, not yourself. It is still my own music, but it's for other people. My solo work is entirely for myself, so it's judged by my own satisfaction and whether I have proceeded enough, if I have pushed myself to another level. That's how I judge it.

Essential Ryuichi Sakamoto by Ryu Takahashi:

[Thousand Knives](#) (1978) (debut solo album)

[insen](#) (Alva Noto + Ryuichi Sakamoto - 2005)

[out of noise](#) (2009)

[Three](#) (2012)

[async](#) (2017)

Name

Ryuichi Sakamoto

Vocation

Musician, Composer, Producer

Fact

Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto's work includes pioneering electronic music as a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra, globally inspired rock albums, classical pieces, minimal/ambient music collaborations, and over 30 film scores. He's won an Academy Award, two Golden Globes, a Grammy, and received the Order of the Cavaleiro Admissão from the government of Brazil and the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France. In 2014, Sakamoto was forced to take the first major break of his career after he was diagnosed with throat cancer. In 2017, he released his 16th solo album, *async*, his most personal collection to date. He lives in New York.



