OUTSIDE THE BOX: WABI-SABI BEHIND
THE SCENES IN SAKAMOTO

May 2023

Schulich School of Music
McGill University, Montréal

A paper submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of D. Mus. Performance Studies

ABSTRACT

The Japanese aesthetic *wabi-sabi* (侘寂) has received attention as a versatile philosophy for examining and elucidating different aspects of imperfection in soundscape music. Yet, research that uses *wabi-sabi* to elucidate deeper contexts in imperfection-inspired soundscapes often overlooks *wabi-sabi*'s historical and spiritual aspects — resulting in inauthentic interpretations.

This paper establishes a background about imperfection in the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto's soundscape album *async* — then presents *wabi-sabi* as a theoretical application — drawing research from the architecture, visual arts, and design fields to integrate their frameworks into Sakamoto's soundscapes and the possibilities it provides. Three underlying aspects of *wabi-sabi* serve as interpretive grounds in elucidating *async's* imperfection: Natural Imperfection, Asymmetry, and Emptiness/Nothingness. Selections from Sakamoto's album *async* are presented as case studies to illustrate each underlying aspect and to understand how *wabi-sabi* can be adapted to various aspects of imperfection throughout the album.

RÉSUMÉ

Le concept esthétique japonais wabi-sabi (侘寂) a suscité un certain intérêt en raison de sa philosophie polyvalente permettant l'étude et la compréhension des différents aspects de l'imperfection dans le domaine de la musique d'ambiance. Cependant, les recherches utilisant le wabi-sabi pour analyser le sens profond des ambiances sonores influencées par l'imperfection négligent souvent les aspects historiques et spirituels du wabi-sabi, donnant ainsi lieu à des interprétations erronées.

Cet exposé décrit la notion d'imperfection dans l'album d'ambiance sonore « async » du compositeur japonais Ryuichi Sakamoto, puis présente le wabi-sabi comme un outil théorique, en s'appuyant sur des recherches menées dans les domaines de l'architecture, des arts visuels et du design afin d'intégrer ces perspectives dans les ambiances sonores de Sakamoto, et en mettant en évidence les possibilités ainsi offertes. Trois aspects fondamentaux du wabi-sabi nous offrent un cadre de réflexion pour mieux comprendre l'imperfection d'« async » : l'imperfection naturelle, l'asymétrie et le vide/le néant. Des extraits de l'album « async » de Sakamoto sont présentés comme des études de cas afin d'illustrer chacun de ces aspects et comprendre comment le wabi-sabi peut être associé aux différents aspects d'imperfection présents tout au long de l'album.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This degree and project were made possible through the support and guidance of many people. I would first like to thank Shahzad Ismaily for providing me with the initial spark, ideas, and courage to pursue this project on Sakamoto. Your presence has made this project more meaningful to me and multi-dimensional. I particularly want to thank my teacher and supervisor, Professor Kyoko Hashimoto, for her boundless musical insights, experiences, and unconditional support during my studies at McGill University's Schulich School of Music. My appreciation goes out to my other committee members, Dr. Simon Aldrich, Dr. Ichiro Fujinaga, and Dr. Ilya Poletaev, for their time and work. They have been a wonderful support system during my Doctoral studies, and I thank them for their kindness, patience, and mentorship.

To my peers, colleagues, and friends for their support through my triumphs and failures, thank you.

To my past teacher, late Marietta Orlov, words cannot describe your irreplaceable role and influence in my musical journey.

Finally, I want to share my deepest gratitude for my family. To my parents, your unconditional love, unwavering support, and belief in me are the only reasons I have had the opportunity to pursue all my dreams and passions in this world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 6. *async*: Emptiness/Nothingness

Introduction

I. Wabi-sabi in Soundscape: A Background

Wabi-sabi (侘寂) is a Japanese philosophy that originated during the 8th century and centered on appreciating beauty in imperfection.[1] *Wabi-sabi* focuses on spiritual and metaphysical aspects of imperfection. Scholars turn to Zen Buddhism as the origin of *wabi-sabi*, whose spiritual influence became a seminal foundation and aesthetic framework in modern Eastern and Western architecture, visual arts, and contemporary design.[2] Over the last decade, *wabi-sabi* has become a popular aesthetic in 21st-century music for elucidating imperfection's deeper meanings — particularly in a genre called soundscape composition. This is because *wabi-sabi*'s rich history and philosophy provide soundscape music with an infinite capacity to re-interpret sounds initially viewed as "not beautiful."[3]

Many soundscape artists have been inspired by *wabi-sabi* as a tangible way to illustrate different aspects of imperfection in their sonic compositions. In 2018, the soundscape album *Occasus* by the American artist Keith Kenniff used untuned piano riffs, unprocessed recordings filled with static, and single-take improvisations to focus on the beauty of "mistakes."[4] These "mistakes" resulted in tarnished or unprocessed sounds in *Occasus*, which served to reflect Kenniff's illustration of imperfection — shifting the artist's tendency for accuracy towards an element of spontaneity.[5] These sonic qualities are what Kenniff refers to as the sounds of *wabi-sabi*.[6]

---

[1] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2016), 25-26.
[2] Andrew Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2003), 69.
[3] Keith Kenniff, liner notes for *Occasus*, by Keith Kenniff, Western Vinyl, 2018, CD.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

In 2018, *The Trail Loops Back* by Adrian Dziewanski furthered Kenniff's *wabi-sabi* philosophy of "sonic mistakes" by extending these mistakes towards sonic imperfections found in the environment. Dziwanski illustrates environmental imperfection by focusing on nature, whose sounds are often spontaneous, accidental and finds kinship with *wabi-sabi*.[7] In Japan, Hiroshima-based artist Meitei wanted to examine *wabi-sabi*'s relationship to musicology and traditional arts. He invented the term "lost Japanese mood" to examine how imperfection greatly influences the creative philosophies of Japanese traditional arts and whether these imperfections could be applied to Japanese ethnographic recordings.[8] In 2019, Meitei released *Komachi*, a series of soundscapes that featured remixes of traditional Japanese folk songs inspired by the principles of imperfection in Japanese art. The album *Late Spring* (2021) by Chihei Hatakeyama would also follow Meitei's influence. Like Meitei, Hatakeyama acknowledges the influences of traditional Japanese mediums, notably film and theatre, as mediums that illustrate *wabi-sabi*'s metaphysical traits.[9]

Despite growing interest in exploring imperfection and *wabi-sabi*'s interpretive potential in soundscape music, academic studies seem to lack in-depth discussion. Perhaps due to the esoteric and niche nature of the genre and topic, few researchers dedicate their effort to realizing the historical inferences and interpretive kinship between *wabi-sabi*'s existing scholarly framework and the soundscape genre. While research in the fields of the visual arts, architecture, and urban design has extensively explored *wabi-sabi*'s abstract nature, I feel that scholarly

---

[7] Kevin Press, "Adrian Dziewanski – The Trail Loops Back," *The Moderns,* April 3, 2018. https://themoderns.blog/2018/04/03/adrian-dziewanski-the-trail-loops-back/.

[8] Gabriela Helfet, "Discovering Japanese Wabi Wabi soun with Meitei," *The Vinyl Factory*, March 21, 2019. https://thevinylfactory.com/features/discovering-japanese-wabi-sabi-sound-with-meitei/.

[9] Narushi Hosoda, "Chihei Hatakeyama talks about the Intersection of Ambient and Jazz or Improvisation. Part 1: The Reticulated Relationship Between Ambient and Jazz in Late Spring," *Tokion*, June 4, 2021, https://tokion.jp/en/2021/06/04/ambient-and-jazz-or-improvisation-part1/.

discussions surrounding *wabi-sabi* and sonic imperfection in soundscapes find limited

representation, resulting in one-dimensional, inauthentic, and inconclusive findings.

A comprehensive survey of album reviews, blogs, and online commentaries about *wabi-sabi*'s influence on soundscape music reveals minimal findings. In *Occasus,* only Jeremy Bye, among published reviews, formally considers imperfection as a departure point in the discussion.[10] Even so, Bye's observations seem to explain imperfection from a narrow perspective that refrains from discussing how *wabi-sabi* can serve as a theoretical study, representation, or metaphor of sonic expression in sound. Kevin Press gives a more expansive treatment of Dziewanski's ideas of nature as a metaphor for *wabi-sabi* but a much too literal explanation of imperfection.[11] The same issue can be mentioned for Hatakeyama and Meitei, where music reviews addressing *Late Spring* and *Komachi* have often paid disproportionate attention to the artist's treatment with electronic equipment instead of the album's ontological explications about *wabi-sabi*. Like Kenniff, only two reviews by Narushi Hosoda[12] and Hani Hanball[13] address Hatakeyama's ideas about *wabi-sabi* in his music. Yet, Hatakeyama's *wabi-sabi* influence in *Late Spring* is only implied in passing, which both Hosoda and Hanball refrain from further discussion throughout the interview.[14] While reviews by Gabriela Helfet[15] surrounding Meitei's *Komachi* provide a historiographic and ethnographic background about *wabi-sabi* and its portrayal in sounds that are imperfect, in my opinion, reviews have yet to give adequate detail to Meitei's extensive engagement with *wabi-sabi* hermeneutics.

---

[10] Jeremy Bye, "Goldmund Occasus," *A Closer Listen*, May 27, 2018, https://acloserlisten.com/2018/05/27/goldmund-occasus/.

[11] Press, "Adrian Dziewanski – The Trail Loops Back."

[12] Hosoda, "Chihei Hatakeyama talks about the Intersection of Ambient and Jazz or Improvisation. Part 1: The Reticulated Relationship Between Ambient and Jazz in Late Spring."

[13] Chihei Hatakeyama, "Self-Portrit: Chihei Hatakeyama," Interview by Hani Hanball, *Stamp the Wax*, January 7, 2021, https://www.stampthewax.com/2021/07/01/self-portrait-chihei-hatakeyama.

[14] Hosoda, "Chihei Hatakeyama talks about the Intersection of Ambient and Jazz or Improvisation. Part 1: The Reticulated Relationship Between Ambient and Jazz in Late Spring."

[15] Gabriela Helfet, "Discovering Japanese Wabi Wabi Sound with Meitei."

II. Filling the gap: Objective and Process

This research aims to study the soundscapes of the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, providing credible and qualitative findings about how *wabi-sabi*'s philosophy, characteristics, and aesthetic ramifications can tangibly serve as a theoretical model for illustrating these soundscapes' "imperfectness."

My research process will consist of three components: 1) to formulate the underlying aspects of *wabi-sabi* from historical, traditional, cultural, and ontological perspectives 2) to associate these underlying *wabi-sabi* aspects with Sakamoto's widely documented literature written about him, interviews, and films to further the definition of "imperfection" 3) to create an ontological framework where *wabi-sabi* becomes a topic theory and aesthetic signifier widely compatible with other musical genres.

My theoretical study of *wabi-sabi* will use a holistic approach. Qualitative research and publications draw from different scholars of diverse backgrounds, notably Leonard Koren, Andrew Juniper, and Yuriko Saito, whose aesthetic research about *wabi-sabi* can possibly elucidate imperfection's deeper meanings in Sakamoto's soundscapes. Specifically, aesthetic descriptions, illustrations, depictions, opinions, and anecdotes in describing *wabi-sabi* from visual art and architectural perspectives will be referenced and applied to help me better understand the interrelated synergies in Sakamoto's "imperfection" with more informed, diverse, and multidimensional contexts.

For this research paper, Sakamoto's soundscape album *async* (2017) will be the primary focus of the discussion. Considered a pioneering figure in synth-pop and electronic dance music,

Sakamoto remains an internationally recognized figure of the soundscape genre.[16] *async* was an electroacoustic soundscape album composed after the composer's terminal illness diagnosis, which significantly shifted his creative approach and outlook towards imperfection. Specifically, *async,* I believe, is quintessential for examining different dimensions of imperfection, notably natural imperfection, asymmetrical imperfection, and metaphysical imperfection — a new creative approach and philosophy never explored by the composer.[17]

To provide a personal and authentic touch in uncovering potential connections between *async* and *wabi-sabi*, referencing Sakamoto's close friends' and collaborators' published works will be of my primary emphasis. These published works by Sakamoto's friends include curated volumes, essays, and documentaries about *async*: Stephen Nomura Schible's concise and groundbreaking *Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda;*[18] M. Woods Museum's *Seeing Sound Hearing Time;*[19] Shinichi Taketa's *Music for a Divided World;*[20] Nobuo Suzuki's *The Wisdom in Imperfection*.[21] Each volume containing conversations, film segments, episodes, interviews, recorded commentaries, and archived memorabilia has been instrumental in my research towards revealing and appreciating different aspects of *wabi-sabi* in the album *async*. In addition to the published writings of Sakamoto's friends, hundreds of documents/paraphernalia about *async* have been published by critics. These published documents about *async* appear in printed

---

[16] Victor Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," in *Seeing Sound Hearing Time*, edited by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Lin Han, Sachiko Namba, and Victor Wang (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 57.

[17] Ryuichi Sakamoto, liner notes for *async*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Commmons Records, 2017, CD.

[18] Stephen Nomura Schible, director, *Coda: A Portrait of Ryuichi Sakamoto* (London, UK: Modern Films, 2018), DVD.

[19] Namba, Sachiko, Victor Wang, Zhang Youdai, eds. *Ryuichi Sakamoto Seeing Sound Hearing Time* (Beijing United Publishing, 2021).

[20] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World," interview by Shinichi Taketa, *NHK World Television*, April 21, 2017. https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/3963/index.html.

[21] Nobuo Suzuki, *Wabi-sabi The Widsom of Imperfection* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2021).

journals, magazines, and online commentaries that suggest the interpolations between *wabi-sabi* and Sakamoto's ideas of imperfection share amicable relationships.

Unfortunately, these online documents and printed material remain scattered; like a puzzle, these documents await consolidation. This opens a rare opportunity in my research endeavors to gather and organize these fragmented documents related to Sakamoto into a meaningful and comprehensive synthesis for my research paper.

The research paper consists of seven chapters. The first chapter opens with two sections discussing Sakamoto's life. The first section outlines Sakamoto's musical journey and his pioneering contributions to electronic music during the late 1970s. The second section considers Sakamoto's 2014 cancer diagnosis and how the illness may have influenced imperfection in the composer's creative outlook. Chapter two gives a background of the album *async*, a brief history of soundscape, and how Sakamoto popularized soundscape. Chapter three provides a history of *wabi-sabi* and I use Zen history to elaborate on the *wabi-sabi* philosophy. Chapter three examines three underlying aspects distinguishing *wabi-sabi*: 1. Nature 2. Asymmetry 3. Emptiness/Nothingness. Chapters four, five, and six are case studies of selected pieces in *async* arranged by the three principles presented in chapter three. Each case study begins with an aesthetic summary highlighting the underlying aspect of *wabi-sabi*. Each underlying aspect of *wabi-sabi* will then be applied to selections found in *async* and Sakamoto's creative worldview. Specifically, chapter four elucidates the *wabi-sabi* concept of natural imperfection inside the soundscape "Zure" from *async*. My personal soundscape experiment *Fragile Glim* will also help elaborate on the relationships between "Zure's" natural imperfection and *wabi-sabi*. Chapter five discusses pieces from *async* that relate to *wabi-sabi*'s concept of asymmetry and how asymmetry relates to a concept of sonic asymmetry called asynchronism in *async*. The concept of symmetry

will be established as a contrasting context that makes asymmetry/asynchronism in *async* more

discernable. Chapter six focuses on the concept of nothingness and emptiness and how *wabi-sabi*

can illustrate Sakamoto's state of nothingness/emptiness in *async*.

Chapter 1. Sakamoto & His Musical Journey

1.1 A Preamble

Sakamoto's aesthetic experiments with imperfection can be described as a creative turning point that uniquely evolved from the composer's early musical period.[22] During his late period, Sakamoto's creative approach was reflected by a spiritual reverence inspired by nature, transiency, and mortality. Although Sakamoto never uses the word "imperfection," it is evident that he practices with the same values in mind — imperfection being a philosophy and tendency surrounding his creative experience and process since 2014 until his death.

The contrasting perspectives and creative outlooks differentiating Sakamoto's early and late periods are outlined biographically in this chapter to establish a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of Sakamoto's creative shift towards *wabi-sabi* aspects of imperfection. Sakamoto's early period will also serve as a contrasting reference point that allows for his late creative period to be examined with more focus and clarity. Specifically, Sakamoto's creative philosophies throughout his late period will provide a preliminary segue towards understanding imperfection's aesthetic qualities and elements in his album *async*.

I begin by tracing Sakamoto's adolescent years towards his early musical period in the 1970s and 1980s before discussing imperfection in his late period in greater detail. I focus on his major musical activities for Sakamoto's early period until 1981. While Sakamoto was also heavily involved with scoring film music in his early period, his electronic music will be of primary focus.

---

[22] Shigeru Matsui, "Artist Timeline," in *Ryuichi Sakamoto Seeing Sound Hearing Time*, ed. Sachiko Namba, Victor Wang, and Zhang Youdai (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 286.

1.2 Upbringing: Adolescence to University Years

Ryuichi Sakamoto 坂本 龍一 (fig. 1) was born

in 1952 and grew up in Tokyo at Nakano City. His

father was a renowned literary editor, and his mother

was a fashion designer. Sakamoto enrolled at the Jiyu

Gakuen School, known for its Christian-oriented,

egalitarian teachings in the arts and music.[23] This was

where he first began his musical training. At three, he

was taking piano lessons. At age ten, Sakamoto was

already composing his own music and studied

composition privately at the Tokyo National

University of Fine Arts and Music.[24]

Figure 1. A portrait of Ryuichi Sakamoto. (Zakkubalan, Ryuichi Sakamoto, January 1, 2021, photograph, M Woods Museum, Beijing, https://www.mwoods.org/Ryuichi-Sakamoto-seeing-sound-hearing-time-1.)

In the period after World War II, Western intervention and economic growth paved the

way for Japanese culture to grow. This introduced new technologies and music into the country.

The new cultural growth exposed Sakamoto to different Western music genres ranging from pop,

exotic, and classical to contemporary music. He cites Claude Debussy, the pop band Rolling

Stones, and Johann Sebastian Bach as favourites during his adolescence.[25]

Another interest that he developed was political activism. While being a Tokyo Shinjuku

High School student, he participated in political movements. These political movements included

---

[23] James Sterngold, "A Building by Wright Incites Debate in Tokyo," *New York Times,* March 18, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/18/arts/a-building-by-wright-incites-debate-in-tokyo.html.

[24] Mark Prendergast, "Ryuchi Sakamoto Japanese Artist: World Musician," *Sound on Sound* 5, no. 11 (Sept 1990): 58.

[25] James Hammond, "An introduction to Ryuichi Sakamoto in 10 records," *The Vinyl Factory*, October 9, 2015, https://thevinylfactory.com/features/the-many-faces-of-ryuichi-sakamoto-an-introduction/.

the 1968-1969 student protests, which rallied against university corruption, and the "Shinjuku riot," which protested for peace during the Vietnam War. This political awareness was also speculated to derive from his father's editorial work with Post-war literature. Authors of books that his father helped edit would become central figures in Post-war Japanese literature, notably Yukio Mishima and Hiroshi Noma.[26]

In 1970, Sakamoto entered the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music to study composition with Taminosuke Matsumoto.[27] During his studies, Sakamoto began tinkering with the electronic music equipment at the university, which he described as a revelatory discovery because these electronics made him feel possibilities that exceeded his imagination.[28] The electronic equipment that he experimented with included synthesizers, computers, and drum machines. With Fumio Koizumi, Sakamoto developed a passion for ethnomusicology with aspirations to become a field researcher.[29] He was interested in world music traditions, particularly Okinawan, Indian, Balinese, and African musical traditions. Sakamoto, during his youth, often expressed wanting to be a world citizen, traversing different geographies, breaking down nationalities, and combining musical cultures into one utopia and unity.[30] Sakamoto would call this utopia "outernational,"[31] or "neo-geo,"[32] to describe his dreams of worldwide musical diversity.

---

[26] Shigeru Matsui, "Artist Timeline," 286.
[27] Bradley Bambarger, Liner notes for *Cinemage*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Sony Classical, 1999, CD.
[28] Schible, *Coda.*
[29] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Ryuichi Sakamoto interview," interview by Nolen Gasser, *The Classical Archives*, October 1, 2010, https://www.classicalarchives.com/feature/sakamoto_interview2.html.
[30] David Toop, "Ryuichi Sakamoto," *Site Sakamoto Archives* (March 2010): 2.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

1.3 The Early Creative Period

Sakamoto's curiosity about musical diversity combined with his technological interests would signify his early musical period. After earning a master's degree in electronic and ethnic music, Sakamoto was invited by the musician Haruomi Hosono to partake in recording sessions for the albums *Paraiso* and *Pacific*.[33] Joined with Sakamoto in the sessions was drummer Yukihiro Takahashi. These three musicians would form the electronic band Yellow Magic Orchestra (YMO). The YMO (fig. 2) was the first band in Japan to use electronic instruments and computers to create sounds that were futuristic at the time. The YMO also became known as the first band in Japan to

Figure 2. The Yellow Magic Orchestra. (Masayoshi Sukita, *The Yellow Magic Orchestra,* 1979, photograph, Center for Contemporary Art Tokyo, https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/p8-tokyo-artscouncil-a-20151111.jpg.)

tour internationally.[34] The critic Minoru Inaba, would describe the YMO as "the age of the computer programmer as a rock star."[35]

Sakamoto described his work with the YMO as one of the most important milestones in his early period.[36] Acknowledged as the brainchild and "professor"[37] behind the theories and

---

[33] Matsui, "Artist Timeline," 286.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Minoru Inaba, "Computer Rock Music Gaining Fans," *Sarasota Journal* (August 1980): 11.
[36] John Lewis, "Back to the Future," *The Guardian*, July 4, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/jul/04/electronicmusic.filmandmusic11.
[37] Ibid.

philosophies surrounding the YMO, Sakamoto wanted to fuse his ideas about musical diversity and technology with his so-called "outernational" utopia.[38] Sakamoto would incorporate Asian melodies, scales, modes, and instruments focusing on Okinawan, Indian, and Chinese musical traditions in the YMO.[39] These musical traditions were then interwoven with electronic genres such as American film music, arcade music, Italian disco, German techno, and rap music. Sakamoto explained that he intended the fusion of musical diversity and technology in YMO to be a musical parody mocking the West's fascination with Asian culture, cuteness, and exoticism.[40] With the *San Francisco Weekly*, Sakamoto explained how the YMO was "tired" of Japanese musicians' imitating Western and American music: they wanted to "make something very original from Japan."[41] By embracing technology with a plethora of musical traditions and musical styles associated with "oriental culture," the band adopted an anti-colonial stance that resisted Western culture's diminutive understanding and aural perception of exoticism.[42] In particular, the *YMO* explored musical styles that "fed on the West's stereotype of Japan"[43] and the West's imagined "utopia" for what Eastern exotic music could be — imbuing their electronic music with elements of irony, mirage, fantasy, and paradise.[44] Particularly, Sakamoto's wanted the YMO to become a creative outlet that made fetishized elements of exotic music feel "joyous and liberating."[45]

---

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Andrew Stout, "Yellow Magic Orchestra on Kraftwerk and How to Write a Melody During a Cultural Revolution," *San Francisco Weekly*, June 24, 2011, https://www.sfweekly.com/music/yellow-magic-orchestra-on-kraftwerk-and-how-to-write-a-melody-during-a-cultural-revolution/.
[43] Shuhei Hosokawa, "Soy Sauce Music," in *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music*, ed. Philip Hayward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 135.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lewis, "Back to the Future."

Embodying his spirit of "outernationalism." Sakamoto's experiments with the YMO in fusing different musical styles and traditions with electronic music genres became a stylistic hallmark that permeated much of his early musical output. In his debut album, *Thousand Knives* (1978), Sakamoto wanted to mock Western people's fetishization of Asian culture by creating musical crossovers between electronic music genres and Chinese traditional music.[46] Notable crossovers in the album include fusing acid house music with Mao Zedong's poetry, remixing China's National Anthem during the Cultural Revolution into ambient-styled synthpop, and turning a Buddhist-inspired traditional song into an electronic techno beat. Other albums that followed his dreams of "outernational" utopia included *B-2 Unit* (1980) and *Left Handed Dream* (1981).[47] These albums would seal Sakamoto's reputation as an influential pioneer of electronic music genres: notably electro, disco, hip-hop, techno, and EDM music.[48] Sakamoto's electronic piece *Riot in Lagos* from *B-2 Unit* was noteworthy for using African-styled rhythms to foreshadow the rhythms and sounds that would later become electro-funk and hip-hop.[49] The artist Afrika Bambaata, an early hip-hop pioneer, cites *Riot in Lagos* as an influence on his music.[50] Other pieces in *B-2 Unit,* such as *Differncia* "with its relentless tumbling beats and stabbing bass synth," would anticipate the genres of afrobeat and dub music by over a decade.[51]

---

[46] Jordan Ryan Pederson, "What's Past is Epilogue: The Thousand Knives of Ryuichi Sakamoto," *Passion of the Weiss*, November 21, 2019, https://www.passionweiss.com/2019/11/21/whats-past-is-epilogue-the-thousand-knives-of-ryuichi-sakamoto/.

[47] Elizabeth Lennard, director, *Tokyo Melody: Un Film sur Ryuichi Sakamoto* (Paris, France: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel INA, 1985), DVD.

[48] Leo Lewis, "Ryuichi Sakamoto: To Create Something is a Strange Thing to Do," *Financial Times*, July 3, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/166c867f-5b6b-4e7f-8be1-5f7036552c46.

[49] David Toop, "A-Z Of Electro," *The Wire*, March 2011, https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/a-z-of-electro.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Mikey IQ Jones, "The Essential… Yellow Magic Orchestra," *Fact Magazine*, January 22, 2015, https://www.factmag.com/2015/01/22/the-essential-yellow-magic-orchestra/.

1.4 Changes in Creative Perspective

Sakamoto's late creative period in 2014 was influenced by his battle with a terminal illness, marking a turning point in his creative perspective. In June 2014, Sakamoto described feeling a lump in his throat. At first, he thought it was a sign of aging.[52] Doctors later revealed that he had stage three oropharyngeal cancer. The composer cancelled his concerts, festival appearances, and artistic directorships to undergo treatment. For the next seven weeks, Sakamoto received radiation therapy until the cancer went into remission.

Since his illness, technological advancements and the advent of electronic music became a curiosity of the past.[53] Sakamoto no longer desired to create technological utopias in his music because he considered his early works extremely "arrogant" and "really muscle-oriented."[54] Instead, Sakamoto's late creative period is the antithesis of technological utopia centered on the humble view of imperfection and transience. Looking back at his early career, Sakamoto stated that he had a positive view of technology and its potential.[55] Nowadays, Sakamoto has "absolutely no desire to praise technology."[56]

How Sakamoto integrated different aspects of imperfection into his creative work during his late period was unique. In my opinion, Sakamoto refrained from viewing imperfection as a negative quality. Instead, imperfection was examined by Sakamoto as a positive ramification

---

[52] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "After battling cancer, Ryuichi Sakamoto learns about its cause," Interview by Yamauchi Misako, *Asahi*, February 11, 2019, https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13054202.

[53] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "On How Your Work Changes As You Get Older," Interview by Brandon Stosuy, *The Creative Independent*, January 15, 2021, https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/ryuichi-sakamoto-on-how-your-work-changes-as-you-get-older/.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Composer Ryuichi Sakamoto Reflects on His Life, Work, and Battle with Cancer," interview by Craig Hubert, *Hyperallergic*, July 16, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/451093/ryuichi-sakamoto-coda-interview/.

[56] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Interview: Ryuichi Sakamoto," interview by Kunihiro Miki, *Time Out*, December 29, 2017, https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/music/interview-ryuichi-sakamoto.

filled with unfound potential, spirituality, and beauty. One integral aspect of imperfection explored in Sakamoto's creative view was the concept of natural imperfection.[57] Natural imperfection is the beauty of flaws and defects found in our natural environments. Sakamoto appreciated natural flaws and was curious whether natural imperfection could be illustrated in music.[58] Sakamoto believed most of the world's music was mainly motivated by anthropocentric attitudes and perspectives. As a result, the music we create does not reflect organic creations: "our creations, they're not natural. We build things that aren't natural…"[59] As discussed in chapter four, one notable example of Sakamoto's idea of natural imperfection was explored through the sounds in a piano that survived the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake called the Tsunami Piano. Sakamoto purposely used this piano in its imperfect state with broken strings, chipped keys, and cracked soundboard, which became direct pathways to expressing imperfection.[60]

Sakamoto's perspective on natural imperfection was sometimes challenged. Many critics on social media and magazines commented and questioned Sakamoto's continuation of using the "not-natural" medium in his late compositions.[61] For many, Sakamoto's use of electronic synthesizers was viewed as an artificial medium that contradicted his ideas about natural imperfection — arguing that the composer owed his career to electricity. In 2018, during an interview with Moog Music, Sakamoto defended his relationship with technology by suggesting

---

[57] Schible, *Coda.*

[58] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71

[59] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Survived Cancer and an Earthquake to Make the Most Personal Album of His Career," interview by Corinne Przybyslawski, *Vice*, April 28, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/5377en/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-interview.

[60] Schible, *Coda.*

[61] Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution will not be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 68.

that: "electronic sounds, like thunder, are also natural sounds."[62] Despite this brief response,

Sakamoto's statement perhaps implied that the composer wanted to approach the electronic

medium from a natural and organic perspective. Instead of viewing electronic instruments as

artificial tools shaped by technology, it seemed that Sakamoto viewed synthesizers as spiritual

inventions allowing electricity (such as lighting) to be expressed as sonic mediums that are

organic extensions of nature. Sakamoto also believed that these instruments felt more natural

because he would rather use synthesizers in their analogue, than digital form.[63]

Another branch of imperfection that Sakamoto was experimenting with was asymmetry.

With asymmetry, Sakamoto often mentioned that he wanted to create "untraditional music"[64]

that did not fit into a discernable beat, tempo, harmony, and narrative structure.[65] As described

by journalist Shinichi Taketa, Sakamoto often confounded listeners' expectations by creating

music that sought to question traditional conventions of proportion and order in music.[66] In his

subjective opinion, Sakamoto expressed how humans often do not take the liberty to step outside

a world confined by structure and rules.[67] As a result, he wanted to see how music could possibly

function without much rigid, or pre-established musical parameters. It seemed that his motivation

to infuse asymmetrical elements in his music stemmed from a desire to reflect the diverse yet

chaotic state of the world, where myriad viewpoints and opinions should not be reduced to a

single meaning, conclusion, or intention. Instead, one should appreciate the myriad of

---

[62] Spence Kelly, director, *Moog One: A Meditation on Listening* (Ashville: Moog Music, 2018),
Film.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."*Television*, April 21, 2017.
https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/3963/index.html.

[65] Sachiko Namba, "Seeing Sound, Hearing Time – Installing the Music of Ryuichi Sakamoto," in *Ryuichi Sakamoto Seeing Sound Hearing Time*, ed. Sachiko Namba, Victor Wang, and Zhang Youdai (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 37.

[66] Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."

[67] Ibid.

imperfections and flaws in chaos, which can lead to newfound perspectives. Sakamoto used the term "asynchronism" to define this asymmetrical concept in music which will be elaborated on in chapter five.

Sakamoto also developed an interest in Zen Buddhism to clarify for himself the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of imperfection, which Sakamoto termed "emptiness/nothingness."[68] "Emptiness/nothingness" is described by Zen as a state of enlightenment.[69] According to Zen doctrines, enlightenment is reached when the individual has freed themselves from their ego to see the world in a selfless and open-minded state.[70] Sakamoto aimed to illustrate this enlightened state of "emptiness/nothingness" in musical contexts. This was achieved using a concept coined by Saito called *insufficiency*. *Insufficiency* is a characteristic of imperfection that involves using materials, objects, and space to evoke a sense of incompleteness in art and architecture — which allows for "emptiness/nothingness" to be illustrated.[71] This concept of *insufficiency* to illustrate "emptiness/nothingness" in Sakamoto's soundscape will be elaborated in chapter six.

1.5 Sakamoto's Late Period - "Sound" instead of "Music."

Throughout his late creative period, Sakamoto tended to use the word "sound" instead of "music" when discussing different aspects of imperfection in his work. Other critics also began refraining from the word "music" and gravitated towards the word "soundscape" or "sound art" as appropriate terms for describing Sakamoto's late work.[72] In Sakamoto's opinion, the term

---

[68]Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "We are destroying the world." Interview by Ari Stein, *52 Insights,* January 15, 2019. https://www.52-insights.com/ryuichi-sakamoto-we-are-destroying-the-world-interview-music/.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 24.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Schible, *Coda.*

"music" was too artificial and perfect because music involves melody(s).[73] A well-structured melody for Sakamoto was too perfect for creation because melodies are artificial and insist on certain motives, intentions, and sentiments.[74] In contrast, "sounds" could exist independently, and do not impose any preconceived ideas or sentiments, and allow for the pleasant and unpleasant to co-exist.[75] According to the art curator Victor Wang, Sakamoto understood "sound" as a medium that precedes musical rules and boundaries.[76] By preceding musical rules and boundaries, Wang describes Sakamoto's concept of "sound" as filled with "non-history." The expression "non-history" by Wang infers that Sakamoto viewed "sound" as a medium that is not categorized by any musical rule or hierarchy — that "sound" is an act of deconstructing music's semantics.[77] As a result, "non-historical" sounds refrain from being associated with any prescribed or fixed musical tradition or genre.[78] It seems that Sakamoto hoped that using the word "sound" could convey different aspects of imperfection to listeners without the burden of pre-conceived musical ideas and notions.

1.6 Sakamoto's Final Years

In 2021, Sakamoto posted on his website that his throat cancer that went into remission had returned with the cancer cells spreading to his lungs.[79] To document his experiences, Sakamoto started contributing to a monthly series titled "*How Many More Times Will I See The*

---

[73] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Themes and Variations: An Interview with Ryuichi Sakamoto," interview by Kevin Nguyen, *GQ*, July 18, 2018. https://www.gq.com/story/ryuichi-sakamoto-interview.
[74] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Ryuichi Sakamoto : entretien fleuve avec le maître," interview by Azzedine Fall, *Les Inrockuptibles,* July 18, 2019. https://www.lesinrocks.com/musique/ryuichi-sakamoto-linterview-son-vs-melodie-324369-18-07-2019/.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 57.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Christian Eede, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Reveals He Has Stage Four Cancer," *The Quietus*, June 9, 2022, https://thequietus.com/articles/31649-ryuichi-sakamoto-reveals-he-has-stage-4-cancer.

Full Moon Rise" in a magazine published by *Shinchosha*.[80] Anticipating his death, homage concerts that honor Sakamoto's life and work have been frequent. The first homage concert dedicated to Sakamoto was *Asynchrone's "Hommage à Ryūichi Sakamoto,"* performed by Jocelyn Mienniel & Chassol in Paris on September 4, 2022.[81]

Due to deteriorating health and poor prognosis during the final months, Sakamoto decided to retire from the concert stage.[82] Sakamoto's final live performance took place at the 509 Studio in Tokyo on December 13, 2022.[83] This concert was live streamed around the world and featured piano pieces and renditions of songs, which have been considered classics throughout Sakamoto's life. During his final months, Sakamoto continued to create works in his home studio whenever his health would allow. On January 14, 2023, Sakamoto released his new and final solo album titled *12* on his record label, Commmons.[84] Continuing the quest for imperfection, Sakamoto mentioned that the album's unedited soundscapes consist of improvisations done on a single take — "There are no adornments. I'm intentionally putting them out as it is."[85] These twelve pieces were described by Sakamoto as "diary entries" during his stay at the hospital and temporary housing beginning in March 2021.

[80] Ibid.

[81] "Jocelyn Mienniel & Chassol Dress Code / Asynchrone "Hommage à Ryūichi Sakamoto," Philharmonie de Paris, accessed December 26, 2022. https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/activity/concert/23892-jazz-la-villette.

[82] Jordan Hoffman, "Ryuichi Sakamoto, Oscar-Winning Composer and Musical Innovator, Dies at Age 71," *Vanity Fair*, April 2, 2023, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/04/ryuichi-sakamoto-oscar-winning-composer-and-musical-innovator-dies-at-age-71.

[83] "Streaming+ quality of MUSIC/SLASH Ryuichi Sakamoto: Playing the Piano," e+, accessed April 13, 2023, https://ib.eplus.jp/sakamoto2022.

[84] Matthew Ruiz Ismael, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Announces New Album 12," *Pitchfork*, November 12, 2022, https://pitchfork.com/news/ryuichi-sakamoto-announces-new-album-12/.

[85] Ibid.

In April 2023, Sakamoto's company KAB America Inc. publicly announced the composer's death.[86] Sakamoto passed away on March 28, 2023, due to complications with stage-four cancer.[87]

---

[86] Jordan Hoffman, "Ryuichi Sakamoto, Oscar-Winning Composer and Musical Innovator, Dies at Age 71.".
[87] Ibid.

Chapter 2. *async*

2.1 An Overview

Scholars Sachiko Namba, Victor Wang, and Zhang Youdai consider *async* as Sakamoto's first album in which he explores the aesthetic of imperfection in soundscape.[88] *async* (fig. 3) was composed in March 2017 [89] and was Sakamoto's first major soundscape album to be released after recovering

Figure 3. *async*. (Shiro Takatani, *async main cover,* 2017, artwork design, Milan Records, https://milanrecords.com/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-out-today/.)

from cancer [90] — eight full years separated this work from his previous composition, *Out of Noise,* composed in March 2009.[91] The gap of years in between was due to Sakamoto's inability to find the inspiration and creative energy to compose new solo works. During this creative slump, Sakamoto decided to focus his remaining energies on composing soundtracks for various films.[92]

Consisting of fourteen pieces, *async*'s first sketches began in 2014 before Sakamoto put the work on hold due to his illness.[93] After finishing the treatment, Sakamoto stated that he was worried that his cancer would return and that *async* may be his unfinished final work —

---

[88] Sachiko Namba, Victor Wang, Zhang Youdai, eds. *Ryuichi Sakamoto Seeing Sound Hearing Time* (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021).
[89] Ryuichi Sakamoto, liner notes for *async*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ryuichi Sakamoto, *Out of Noise*, Commmons Records, 2009, CD.
[92] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Sonic Memories: A Conversation with Ryuichi Sakamoto," interview by Hillary Weston, *The Criterion*, June 1, 2017, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4625-sonic-memories-a-conversation-with-ryuichi-sakamoto.
[93] Ibid.

Sakamoto returned to his studio in New York and decided to create a set of aesthetic representations that gravitated to the idea of imperfection.[94]

As a soundscape album focused on different aspects of imperfection, Sakamoto tended to create outside the box of tradition. Among his non-traditional experiments included recording on prepared and out-of-tune pianos, fusing Bach-like chorales with noise generators and synthesizers, juxtaposing Tibetan singing bowls with Russian poetry, and commissioning percussion ensembles to record a never-ending triangle trio.[95]

Sakamoto also experimented with various biophonic techniques such as field recordings conducted throughout his travels in New York, Tokyo, Kyoto, and Paris; sound walks and foley from Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut; recordings of the Tsunami Piano that survived the Great East Japan Earthquake; sound sculptures by Harry Bertoia at the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan;[96] and audio excerpts from the novel *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles recited in 10 different languages.[97]

async's different sonic experiments with biophonics were influenced by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky.[98] Sakamoto expressed how Tarkovsky would incorporate field recordings into his work that showed a "profound reverence for the sound of things" and "compelling language based on sound's potential for ambiguity and abstraction."[99] Like Tarkovsky, Sakamoto wanted to see whether there were "musical properties" to everyday noise/sounds normally considered unconventional or unbeautiful. Particularly, Sakamoto

[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "async, A Complete Interview," interview by Susumu Kunisaki, *Sound and Recording Magazine*, issue 6 (2017): 110.
[97] Ryuichi Sakamoto, liner notes for *async*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto.
[98] Schible, *Coda.*
[99] Ibid.

admired Tarkovsky's way of using sounds such as water or walking as sonic metaphors expressing mortality – "the memory of one cut or one scene" where sounds are more than music, but a timeless journey "of images and sounds."[100]

2.2 *async* and Soundscape

Because *async* is a soundscape work, my discussion surrounding the creative philosophies in *async* will be examined through an ontological lens focused exclusively on the aural perceptions of sonic textures in the album rather than through a written and compositional perspective. This is because no notated score or graphical representation has been published by Sakamoto that fully outlines the entire musical geography of the soundscapes.

There is a varied history in the use of the word soundscape depending on the discipline ranging from computer science to environmental ecology and urban design. How the word soundscape is defined in function and medium is largely subjective and dependent on the composer's intentions. With *async*, Sakamoto defined the soundscape as "a strong desire to incorporate [sounds] into my work, [and] mix them with instruments … a sonic blending of the world that is chaotic and unified"[101] Many composers over the century have also tried to define what a soundscape is: "a collection of sounds almost like a painting is a collection of visual attractions,"[102] as told by R. Murray Schafer; "the relationship of man and sonic environments of any kind"[103] by Barry Traux; "the quality and type of sounds and their arrangements in space and

---

[100] Karl Smith, "Karl Smith on Ryuichi Sakamoto's async," *The Quietus*, April 27, 2017, https://thequietus.com/articles/22297-ryuichi-sakamoto-async-album-review-tarkovsky-mortality-soundtracks.

[101] Schible, *Coda.*

[102] David New, director, *R. Murray Schafer: Listen* (Ottawa, CA: The National Film Board of Canada, 2009), DVD.

[103] Barry Traux, "Soundscape Studies: An Introduction to the World Soundscape Project," *Numus West*, no. 5 (1974): 36.

time"[104] by Southworth; "an acoustical composition that results from the voluntary or involuntary overlap of different sounds"[105] by Farina.

Due to the plethora of soundscape definitions, there is much ambiguity generated among composers on how to define this genre in the musical field. Despite this ambiguity, many composers universally agree that the soundscape is where the sounds of our environment, and acoustic sounds, either recorded or sampled, become the primary medium for artistic composition. These recorded and sampled sounds are an arrangement or juxtaposition of different sonic recordings that blend to reflect certain meanings, notions, and sentiments around a particular place, experience, or environment.[106] The soundscape "lies at the intersection of diverse musical/non-musical traditions." It focuses on the aural perception and presentation of electroacoustic and acoustic-based sounds to illustrate their sonic landscapes.[107]

2.3 *async* - Emerging Success

Following *async*'s release in 2017, promotional efforts and publicity campaigns that can be considered extensive for a soundscape album, were launched. *async*'s promotional efforts are speculated to be Sakamoto's personal mandate for announcing his new creative shift towards imperfection in music as well as establishing soundscape as a more formal and public genre across the public. Sakamoto would debut *async* in a live performance that took place on April 26,

---

[104] Ibid.

[105] Elie Grinfeder, Christian Lorenzi, Sylvain Haupert, and Jérôme Sueur, "What Do We Mean by Soundscape? A Functional Description," *Hypothesis and Theory*, no. 10 (Spring 2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2022.894232.

[106] Hildegard Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology," *Organized Sound 7*, no, 1 (Spring 2002): 51.

[107] Barry Traux, "Soundscape Composition as Global Music: Electroacoustic Music as Soundscape," *Organized Sound* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 105-106. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771808000149.

2017, at the Seventh Regiment Armory in New York.[108] Open to an intimate audience of 160

people, the performance was recorded and released as a concert film titled *Ryuichi Sakamoto:*

Performance in New York, which also premiered in Japan in 2018.[109]

Between April 4 and May 28, Sakamoto and the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art

also organized exhibition shows featuring installation work designed by Sakamoto, Neo Sora,

Figure 4. Installation "async - volume."
(Ryuichi Maruo, 2017, photograph, Watari Museum of
Contemporary Art, https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-
content/uploads/2017/05/p12-tran-sakamoto-a-
20170503.jpg.)

and Shiro Takatani.[110] These exhibitions aimed
to illustrate *async*'s imperfection in a physical
space and context. One of the exhibition
installations, *async-volume* (fig. 4), featured 21
iPhones and iPads arranged across the walls in
the gallery, aimed to explore Sakamoto's idea
of asymmetry.[111] To illustrate the idea of
asymmetry, each of the screens played
different portions of *async*'s soundscapes
without a proper tempo, which sought to create

disjunct, fragmented and non-linear atmospheres of musical narrative. Accompanying the

screens was also footage of various objects, scenery, and instruments, allowing viewers an

---

[108] Gamall Awad, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Performs New async Album At New York's Park Avenue
Armory," *Self Titled*, April 18, 2017, https://www.self-titledmag.com/live-review-ryuichi-sakamoto-park-avenue-
armory/.

[109] Stephen Dalton, "'Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Live at the Park Avenue Armory': Film Review |
Berlin 2018," *The Hollywood Reporter,* February 22, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-
reviews/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-live-at-park-avenue-armory-review-1087336/.

[110] John L Tran, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Provides a Soundtrack to Life at 'async' Exhibition," *The
Japan Times*. May 2, 2017, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/05/02/arts/ryuichi-sakamoto-provides-
soundtrack-life-async-exhibition/#.WsDn7tPwY6h.

[111] Ryuichi Sakamoto, and Zakkubalan, "async-volume," in *Seeing Sound Hearing Time*, edited by Ryuichi
Sakamoto, Lin Han, Sachiko Namba, and Victor Wang (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 199.

intimate view of Sakamoto's unique personal creative environment.[112] Another installation, *Is Your Time* (fig. 5), uses the Tsunami Piano, where the piano keys are triggered by software, which diffuses the sounds of out-of-tune chords, broken strings, and hammers into the gallery. The keys on the piano also react to projected visualizations of seismic data from the Great East Japan Earthquake.[113]

On December 13, 2017, Sakamoto released *ASYNC – REMODELS*, an album of remixed tracks from *async*. Also centered on different aspects of imperfection, this album was conceived "to see how others could use this same material to express something different or expose something obscured."[114] Each soundscape was assigned to a particular

Figure 5. Installation "Is Your Time."
(Ryuichi Maruo, *Ryuichi Sakamoto + Shiro Takatani, IS YOUR TIME,* 2017, photograph, NTT Inter Communication Center ICC, https://www.mwoods.org/Ryuichi-Sakamoto-seeing-sound-hearing-time.)

artist to reimagine the theme of imperfection. The contributions span a diverse plethora of electronic genres made by Sakamoto's personal friends and musicians he admired: Electric Youth, Motion Graphics, and SURVIVE were artists that his label Milan suggested; personal friends that contributed included Oneohtrix Point Never, Fennesz, Alva Noto, Jóhann Jóhannsson; Yves Tumor, Cornelius, Andy Stott, and Arca, being solicited artists that Sakamoto admired.[115] Sakamoto emphasized that the tracks on *REMODELS* should not be considered

---

[112] Ibid.
[113] Brian Hioe, "A Haunting Meditation on Fukushima: Ryuichi Sakamoto's Is Your Time,"
Electric Soul, September 28, 2021, https://www.electricsoul.com/magazine/a-haunting-meditation-on-fukushima-ryuichi-sakamoto-s-is-your-time.
[114] Louise Brailey. "Ryuichi Sakamoto talks us through Async Remodels track by track." *Crack Magazine*, February 22, 2018. https://crackmagazine.net/article/lists/ryuichi-sakamoto-talks-us-async-remodels-track-track/.
[115] Ibid.

remixes but rather sonic "reconstructions"[116] of *async*:[117] Some of the tracks, such as Motion Graphic's rework of Sakamoto's piece "Fullmoon," maintains much of the original work's audible structure, while others such as Arca's remix of the track "async," sounded like a completely new piece divorced from the original version.

In 2018, *CODA*, a film by Stephen Nomura Schible, was released, showcasing Sakamoto's creative process and creation of *async*. *CODA* is the only documentary to date that provides an intimate portrait of Sakamoto's life and his return to music after his cancer diagnosis. Especially important is the plethora of personal accounts, interviews, and commentaries, which offered a newfound perspective and discussion surrounding Sakamoto's interest in imperfection. *CODA* is considered one of the first films dedicated to the soundscape genre to have received nominations from prestigious film awards and festivals, notably the critics Choice Documentary Awards, Golden Carp Film Award, and Faro Island Film Festival, Oslo Films from the South Festival.[118]

---

[116] Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "40 Years On, Ryuichi Sakamoto is Still Searching for Parts Unknown." Interview by Josh Baines, *Vice*, February 16, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en/article/3k7v78/ryuichi-sakamoto-interview-async-remodels-2018.
[117] Ibid.
[118] "Ryuichi Sakamoto Coda (2017) Awards," IMDb, accessed December 27, 2022., https://m.imdb.com/title/tt6578572/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.

Chapter 3. Wabi-sabi

3.1 A Preview

An introduction to *wabi-sabi* is essential for illustrating and understanding different aspects of imperfection in *async.* This chapter specifically provides an overview of wabi-sabi's history and evolution compiled from various sources.

The remaining chapters will further elaborate on the different aspects of *wabi-sabi* in greater extent and detail. The three main aspects of *wabi-sabi* namely, "Natural Imperfection," "Asymmetry," and "Emptiness/Nothingness," will serve as a personal and theoretical framework for examining and interpreting different aspects of imperfection in *async*. These three aspects of *wabi-sabi* will be studied by referencing scholars who practice *wabi-sabi* in architecture, visual arts, and design. I will then be applying their findings, frameworks, and principles to Sakamoto's creative worldview in *async*. These three concepts of *wabi-sabi* will also help communicate Sakamoto's subjective ideas about imperfection from metaphysical and philosophical standpoints.

Since *wabi-sabi* is such an abstract concept, dividing its aesthetic into smaller components allows for better comprehension and understanding of its interrelatedness with Sakamoto's worldview on imperfection. While the concepts of *wabi-sabi* are being discussed in respective individual chapters, it is important to note that these concepts should not be established or examined in isolation. Rather, my personal interpretation and process of classifying *wabi-sabi* into different characteristics serves specifically to illustrate how certain

aspects of *wabi-sabi* find interactive, communicative, and integrative synergies of imperfection in Sakamoto's *async.*

3.2 Wabi-sabi: A Definition

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese philosophy largely centered on the aesthetic appreciation of imperfection and incompleteness in objects and things — it is "the understated beauty that exists in the modest, rustic…or even decayed, an aesthetic sensibility in the impermanence of all things."[119] Most revealing about *wabi-sabi* is its aesthetic capacity for imbuing objects/things commonly dismissed as unconventional, flawed, or "not beautiful" with positive qualities and attributes — an aesthetic that places emphasis on valuing the beauty of impermanence, imperfection, and transiency.[120] As such, scholars sometimes describe wabi-sabi as "a love for the unconventional."[121]

Throughout the centuries, a rational understanding and concrete theoretical analysis of *wabi-sabi* have been intentionally avoided. Many scholars seem to believe that objective analysis becomes a filter that diminishes *wabi-sabi*'s philosophy because *wabi-sabi* stems from intuitive examination: "essential knowledge… can only be transmitted from mind to mind, not through written of the spoken word. Those who know don't say, those who say don't know."[122] As architect Leonard Koren mentions, some scholars might feel the need to maintain *wabi-sabi*'s air of elusiveness, mysteriousness, and hard-to-define qualities "because ineffability is part of its

---

[119] Dorinne Kondo, "The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis," *New Series* 20, no. 2 (June 1985): 292. https://doi.org/10.2307/2802386.
[120] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence,* 27.
[121] Ibid.,10.
[122] Leonard Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (California: Imperfect Publishing, 2008), 16-17.

specialness.[123] By embracing an abstract intuitiveness, *wabi-sabi* can penetrate the "soul" or

"essence" of things "where reason is always subordinate to perception" — in other words,

metaphysical perception overrides reality.[124] In addition, the difficulty of explaining *wabi-sabi* in

concrete terms is also due to its rich semantic meanings and descriptions being evolved

significantly over the millennia.

3.2 Wabi-sabi: A Brief History/Evolution

Wabi-sabi's aesthetic appreciation for imperfection is largely influenced by the

teachings of Zen Buddhism. During the Nara period, many monks from China went to Japan

to promote the philosophy of Zen.[125] Zen is a fusion of teachings originating from different

types of religions found in Indian Mahayana Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.[126] Zen first

arrived in Japan during the Nara period (710-794).[127]

Before Zen was recognized in Japan, *wabi-sabi* originally existed as two separate words

that conveyed pessimistic tastes and negative qualities of imperfection. Zen Buddhists defined

wabi and *sabi*'s negative qualities with a general term known as *mundanity*.[128] Specifically,

mundanity referred to *wabi* (侘) as being "connected with things that were sad, lonely, desolate,

shabby, dreary, and despondent."[129] *Wabi* was sometimes also described as a feeling or

emotional state, which translates to "the misery of living alone in nature, away from society."[130]

---

[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 18.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid., 31.
[127] Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture*, 25.
[128] Prusinski, "Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics through Japanese History," 292.
[129] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture,* 25.
[130] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers,* 21-22.

Mundanity in *wabi* originated from the word *wabu,* which translates "to languish."[131] With

respect to *sabi* (寂)*, mundanity* referred to dispirited sentiments that translated to "chill" or

"withered."[132] This "chill/withered" quality of *mundanity* in *sabi* was used to describe

imperfection in physical objects that carry an aged, rustic, tarnished, and worn-out appearance

in shape or form.[133]

When Zen arrived in Japan during the 8th century, Zen's spiritual tenets transformed

wabi and *sabi*'s *mundanity* toward more positive perspectives of imperfection. Zen did not

perceive *mundanity* in a negative light. Instead, Zen sought to promote the idea that

mundanity in *wabi* and *sabi* could serve as a tool to invigorate spiritual awakening and

mindfulness.[134] According to Zen teachings, if an individual can fully immerse themselves in

mundanity, one will eventually be able to see the beauty beneath imperfection's dispirited

qualities.

Zen's notion of immersing themselves in *mundanity* to inspire spiritual awakening was

nurtured through rituals and routines, which the monks regularly practiced in temples and

semimonastic environments.[135] Zen's earliest rituals consisted of meditation, tea drinking,

gardening, calligraphy, and painting. With these tasks repeated daily, insights and thoughts of

mundanity in *wabi* and *sabi* would slowly emerge. By being immersed in different emerging

aspects of *mundanity* for long periods, Zen doctrines emphasize that a sudden shift in

awareness would be awakened.[136] This shift in awareness happens when an individual

---

[131] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence,* 48.
[132] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers,* 21-22.
[133] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture,* 25.
[134] Juniper *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 48.
[135] Ibid., 26
[136] Ibid., 18.

immersed in *mundanity* has succeeded in calming their thoughts and emotions.[137] Zen

doctrines believe that by calming one's mind and emotions and finding comfort amidst

mundanity, the individual will begin to view *mundanity* in a positive light and experience —

where *mundanity*'s dispirited state is met with contentment and appreciation.[138] This

appreciation for *mundanity* is described as a feeling of acceptance and understanding that

everything in our world and our lived environments is inherently imperfect, impermanent, and

incomplete.[139]

Over the centuries, this Zen doctrine morphed *wabi* and *sabi*'s dispirited perceptions of

imperfection in Japan towards a positive reinforcement and appreciation for imperfection that

we know today. Presently, *wabi*'s *mundanity,* rooted in seclusion and isolation, is viewed as a

promising path toward spiritual prosperity.[140] *Wabi* finds contentment in a lifestyle ruled by

austerity, where poverty liberates the individual from material possessions and earthly

trivialities; that in the simplest of lives, one has found comfort and peace.[141] In *sabi,*

mundanity would evolve to describe the alluring attractiveness of objects and things that have

naturally aged and withered in the material world. In *sabi,* objects once viewed with negative

disposition; imperfect qualities that display aging, tarnishing, or wear and tear, have evolved

to become an indicator of dignity and character; "that something has lived its life."[142] From a

slightly asymmetrical bowl or a half-fallen tree, an aged person with wrinkled skin, to a rusted

temple gate, all these examples encompass the humble spirit of *sabi*.

---

[137] Ibid., 22
[138] Ibid., 18.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture,* 25.
[142] Juniper *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 48.

Today, *wabi* and *sabi*'s meanings have been fused and are always used as one entity — focused on the appreciation of material imperfection in our surroundings. While some scholars argue that *wabi* and *sabi* are joined together for no reason other than simply sounding pleasing to the ears, *wabi-sabi* continues to carry a distinct meaning and sentiment among the Japanese for describing imperfection.[143]

---

[143] Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 22.

Chapter 4. *async*: **Natural Imperfection**

4.1 Impressions

The first integral aspect of *wabi-sabi* that I will explore is the concept of natural imperfection. Natural imperfection elucidates many aesthetic insights and relationships in Sakamoto's creative views. First, an overview of the principles and characteristics of natural imperfection will be outlined. The soundscape "Zure" from the album *async* will then be introduced to explain how natural imperfection is illustrated in the sonic contexts. Particularly, the sounds from the Tsunami Piano will serve as a reference for examining the relationships between *wabi-sabi*'s natural imperfection and "Zure."

Artists have used natural imperfection in *wabi-sabi* over the centuries to create and examine art inspired by the rustic characteristics of the environment.[144] These rustic characteristics can contain a primitive quality, where natural imperfection produces an earthy, organic, and unpretentious feeling or aura (fig. 6).[145] By producing an earthy and organic feeling, art inspired by natural imperfection can produce rustic creations that replicate the natural environment by displaying few traces of human intervention or anthropogenic extremities.[146]

Figure 6. Vases with cracked shino glaze.
(Brooke Holm, *The Beautifully Flawed Work of Emerging Ceramists*, May 12, 2017, photograph, The New York Times, https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/05/12/t-magazine/potters-slide-WBLK/potters-slide-WBLK-superJumbo.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp.)

---

[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., 21.
[146] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture*, 26

When limited traces of human intervention are displayed in art, natural imperfection can "express respect for the qualities inherent in the natural materials."[147] By retaining as many natural characteristics inherent to the natural environment, natural imperfection can avoid feeling artificial or bound to intellectual entanglement.

Natural imperfection's rustic characteristics are said to contain a spiritual quality.[148] This spiritual quality in natural imperfection stems from *wabi-sabi*'s spiritual affinity with Zen.[149] For centuries, Zen has displayed reverence and gratitude to nature by organizing traditional seasonal festivals that sought mindfulness in the rustic details of our lived environments, such as cherry blossom viewing, moon viewing, or snow viewing festivals.[150] By showing mindfulness for the rusticities that permeate our environment, the spirit of nature could be met with greater intimacy.[151]

Zen's spiritual attitude that permeates natural imperfection originally derives from a Japanese religion called Shinto.[152] Shinto, like Zen, is known for personifying nature as a living force, where the environment is filled with Gods, spirits, and deities — "truth comes from the observation of nature."[153] Shintoism often subscribes to an animistic belief that nature contains divine energy that dwells in objects and things; notably, mountains, rivers, streams, animals, and wind.[154] While Shinto provided the basis in which natural imperfection's spiritual quality is

---

[147] Yuriko Saito, "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 25, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 239, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/25.3.239.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Juniper *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 2.
[152] Prusinski, "Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics through Japanese History," 27.
[153] Ibid.
[154] James Crowley, and Sandra Crowley, *Wabi Sabi Style* (Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2005), 9.

grounded, according to Andrijauskas, Zen would solidify the aesthetic correlations between nature and spirit.

4.2 A Visual of Natural Imperfection - Bonsai

Bonsai plants (fig. 7) make a useful example for highlighting natural imperfections in *wabi-sabi.* Bonsai is the Japanese craft of growing miniature trees in pots that mimic the wild, rustic, and austere characteristics of real-life trees.[155] Mimicking the shape of real-life trees and turning the trees into miniaturized representations also shows an attempt to bring nature into proximity to the artist's daily life.[156] Despite the bonsai being subjected to certain cultivation methods such as fertilizing, watering, and trimming to alter or restrict growth, the bonsai endeavors to retain qualities inherent to the natural

Figure 7. A visual example of bonsai. (Toshiki Senoue, *Bonsai plant by Masahiko Kimura,* November 14, 2022, photograph, The New Yorker, https://media.newyorker.com/photos/636ec ae4372f10b0a4a041b0/master/w_1600,c_li mit/221121_r41396.jpg.)

world[157] — the bonsai's unique bends on the stem, twists in the leaves, and knots from the branches wholeheartedly capture the essence of natural imperfection. Cultivating bonsai requires great skill and uses an artful approach in tending/pruning so that the tree ultimately appears rustic, spontaneous, and natural — seemingly "avoiding as much trace of the hand or the

---

[155] Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture*, 103.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 106.

cultivator."[158] The less the bonsai appears to be manipulated by human intervention, the more sacred, natural, and unique the bonsai appears.

4.3 Natural Imperfection in Zure: The Tsunami Piano

Connecting *wabi-sabi* ideas of natural imperfection with Sakamoto's album *async* makes for a compelling discussion. Art curator Victor Wang,[159] and filmmaker Stephen Nomura Schible[160] have considered one soundscape titled "Zure" in *async* as an exemplary study of natural imperfection.[161] While composing "Zure," Wang and Schible noticed how Sakamoto took an interest in the sounds of an instrument known as the Tsunami Piano. The Tsunami Piano is a Yamaha grand piano that survived the Tsunami during the Great East Japan Earthquake.[162] The Piano was discovered in the Miyagi Argicultural High School's gymnasium wreckage. Astonishingly, the instrument can still be played and remains in one piece.

Both Wang[163] and Schible[164] wanted to understand how the sounds from the Tsunami Piano are elevated to aesthetic prominence that are illustrative of earthly and primitive qualities found in natural imperfection. Particularly, both researchers were curious how the Tsunami Piano's sounds used in "Zure" reflects the natural world and environmental spirit. To make the concept of natural imperfection reflected in the sounds of the Tsunami Piano discernable,

---

[158] Ibid.
[159] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71.
[160] Schible, Coda.
[161] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71.
[162] Schible, *Coda*.
[163] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71.
[164] Schible, *Coda*.

Sakamoto subtly compared the differences between the sounds of an ordinary piano and the Tsunami Piano.[165]

With an ordinary piano, Sakamoto explained that the instrument's sound symbolizes humankind's tendency to use materials from nature and manipulate them into artificial extremities: this "matter taken from nature is molded by human industry by the sum strength of civilization."[166] For example, Sakamoto explained that humans use steel strings on the piano and stretches them with enormous force to reflect different aspects of musical perfection and proportion in tuning systems, scales, and pitches.[167] For Sakamoto, this made the piano's sounds feel inorganic and artificial — humans are always trying to find ways to conquer nature so that it can fit into human ideals.[168] Additionally, according to Sakamoto, how the piano was physically assembled played an artificial factor in the piano's sound. In the documentary *CODA,* Sakamoto emphasized how the piano's wooden frame are like extensions of the piano strings, which have been stretched by enormous forces: "several planks of wood, which are overlaid and pressed into shape by tremendous force for six months. Nature is forced into shape."[169] Sakamoto explained that due to the tremendous force applied to the strings and wooden frame, the piano communicates an extremely artificial and painful sound for him — the piano is a metaphor that humans find pleasure in abusing nature.[170] By having nature succumb to human ideals, nature's spirit could not be reflected in the piano's sound.

---

[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

Sakamoto viewed the Tsunami Piano as an instrument that was artful in producing sounds that were metaphorically spontaneous, organic, and reflective of the natural environment. This is because Sakamoto explained that the Tsunami Piano has been "naturally tuned" by the tsunami.[171] As described by Sakamoto, after the tsunami drowned the piano, the instrument appeared to became a "force of restoration,"[172] where nature reasserted itself to strip the Tsunami Piano's sounds from the original elements of human intervention.[173] "Naturally tuned" to liberate the instrument's sounds from the original human intervention, Sakamoto believed that a "spirit" emerged from the Tsunami Piano — becoming a medium that reflected the uncontrollable forces of nature "and can therefore express new sounds and tones due to its exposure to nature."[174]

Sakamoto described this new timbre emerging from the Tsunami Piano as carrying an "out of tune" sound.[175] Sakamoto believed that this "out of tune" sound represents natural imperfection because the sound symbolizes "matter that is struggling to return to a natural state."[176] How the Tsunami Piano's "out of tune" sound reflects a return to natural

Figure 8. Sakamoto examines the Tsunami Piano. (Stephen Nomura Schible, *CODA: A Portrait of Ryuichi Sakamoto,* November 4, 2017, screenshot image.)

---

[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71.
[175] Schible, *Coda.*
[176] Ibid.

imperfection is documented in a scene from *CODA* where Sakamoto visited the Miyagi Highschool gymnasium to try out the Piano.[177] Wang describes that Sakamoto perceived the Tsunami Piano's sound as containing earthy, rough, and aged characteristics.[178] Among the rustic sounds that are exemplary of natural imperfection include disintegrated strings, hammers that have fallen off, worn-out felts, and chipped and missing keys. Particularly, Sakamoto related the Tsunami Piano's rough and aged characteristics in sound with the metaphor of a dead "body" or "carcass." — only the instrument's skeleton and decayed parts remain.[179] This organic aspect of sound, underlined by the philosophies of natural imperfection, gives Sakamoto pleasure in his ears.[180]

When recording and sampling the sounds from the Tsunami Piano for "Zure," Sakamoto made great efforts to ensure that no alterations were made to the Piano so that the instrument remained in its most untouched state.[181] In his subjective opinion, Sakamoto believed the Tsunami Piano's sound could be used as a spiritual medium to participate in a close and mindful connection with nature. To extract sounds most illustrative of natural imperfection, Namba states that Sakamoto would often play internally inside the Tsunami Piano by plucking, scraping, or strumming the strings. Sakamoto chose to play internally inside the instrument because playing on the Tsunami Piano's keys would connotate Western musical traditions of piano playing — he aimed to eliminate another artificial part of human intervention.

---

[177] Ibid.
[178] Wang, "The World is a Sound Garden: Notes on Ryuichi Sakamoto and A Non-History of East Asian Modern Noise," 71.
[179] Schible, *Coda.*
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Ryuichi Sakamoto with Sadie Rebecca Starnes," interview by Sadie Rebecca Starnes, *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2018, https://brooklynrail.org/2018/06/film/RYUICHI-SAKAMOTO-with-Sadie-Rebecca-Starnes.

Being aware that his ideas on natural imperfection in "Zure" may surprise his listeners due to its experimental manner, Sakamoto strategically introduced the sounds of the Tsunami Piano into this particular soundscape. To introduce the sounds of the Tsunami Piano in "Zure" in an appreciative light, Sakamoto juxtaposed the recordings of the Tsunami Piano's sounds with some familiar sounds — notably sounds produced by electronic synthesizers, on which Sakamoto, as a musician, was most well-known for. The sounds of the electronic synthesizers were introduced in the opening of "Zure" as a series of pulsating chords.[182] Some critics such as Karl Smith have speculated that the synthesizer textures, particularly the chords in the low register of the soundscape, allude to the sensations of seismic waves felt during the earthquake.[183] These chords set the tone of "Zure's" poignant atmosphere, which proceed restlessly in an arrhythmic fashion. Midway into the piece, the synth textures slowly fade into the backdrop of the aural periphery and the decaying piano sounds gradually fade in.

In an interview with *Sound & Recording*, Sakamoto noted that the Piano's sounds in "Zure" are mimetic of the sounds of the tsunami, where "Zure" served as a sonic remembrance in preserving the circumstances and events that unfolded during the disaster.[184] In the spirit of sonic remembrance, Sakamoto has presented "Zure" in a soundscape installation project titled *IS YOUR TIME*. The project consists of collecting seismic wave data of earthquakes worldwide and transforming the data into MIDI signals and sounds. These MIDI signals were programmed into a device that played on the Tsunami Piano. Many critics have praised this project as a work that can tangibly portray different sonic aspects of natural imperfection in a physical space.

---

[182] Sakamoto, "async, A Complete Interview," 108-110.
[183] Smith, "Karl Smith on Ryuichi Sakamoto's async."
[184] Sakamoto, "async, A Complete Interview," 110.

4.4 Fragile Glim: A Personal Experiment Echoing Natural Imperfection

In October 2021, I was commissioned by the Buddies in Bad Times, a Canadian professional theatre company to present a soundscape installation and performance as part of their 43rd Rhubarb Festival for Contemporary Arts. Each year, the Rhubarb Festival invites a roster of artists to their theatre in downtown Toronto to present innovative and avant-garde art presentations. The festival's 2021 edition theme centered around the concept of nature and how different aspects of nature could convey an artist's creative views.

The soundscape composition was titled *Fragile Glim*, which uses an upright piano to elucidate the *wabi-sabi* concept of natural imperfection in sound. Specifically, my goal was to use the piano as a reference point to draw qualitative connections and relationships with Sakamoto's ideas about natural imperfection in the sounds of the Tsunami Piano when he was composing "Zure." Although *Fragile Glim* uses different electroacoustic elements, the observations I share in this chapter will focus mainly on the natural imperfection found in the piano's sonic expression.

The theatre provided me with a Yamaha upright piano, which I placed in an external location to expose the piano to the forces of nature. This mimics the similar environmental conditions that the Tsunami Piano encountered. Creating mimesis that elucidated Sakamoto's creative outlook from a *wabi-sabi* standpoint was crucial. Like Sakamoto, I wanted the sounds of the Yamaha piano to move away from human-made tuning systems towards imperfect rustic sounds and be representative of Sakamoto's "nature-tuned" sound. I first situated the Yamaha piano outside my backyard, where the instrument was exposed to the elements and forces of nature (fig. 9). To imitate what it was like for the piano to have drowned in the tsunami, I also

exposed the instrument's keys, hammers, and strings to the severe winter conditions. Over the three months, the piano was exposed to rainstorms, freezing rain, snow, and thaw. These environmental conditions gradually rusted the piano's strings, froze the felt on the hammers, and cracked the piano's soundboard. From my perspective, the piano's gradual deterioration is desirable because it indicates that the instrument's sound is slowly being assimilated back into the natural environment.

Figure 9. The Yamaha upright piano situated in the backyard during winter

After three months had passed, I decided to experiment and perform field recordings on the Yamaha piano to observe different aspects of natural imperfection in the instrument's sound. Certain sounds produced by the Yamaha piano resulted in timbres that were reflective of the natural conditions in the environment — notably, the piano hammers covered by rain and snow, which reflect a brittle and pale sound upon striking the strings. The sounds of the piano hammers felt like a mindful extension of nature's harsh conditions. Some sounds produced by the piano conveyed metaphorical representations of natural imperfection. Originally manipulated and tuned to create sounds that pleased human ideals, the piano tones appear to be more liberated from artificial extremities to express sounds influenced by nature's forces.

Like Sakamoto, these different sonic depictions of natural imperfection in the piano allowed me to feel mindful about the environment in ways I could not have imagined otherwise. As the piano was left for nature to drown, the Yamaha's sounds did not give the impression to me that it was a musical instrument. Instead, the piano was more like an intimate counterpart of nature, where the instrument slowly morphed and assimilated itself with the environment and its rustic imperfections.

Chapter 5. *async*: Asymmetry

5.1 An Overview

Another integral aspect of *wabi-sabi* is the concept of asymmetry. The concept of asymmetry in *wabi-sabi* shares common ground with Sakamoto's creative worldview. In the album *async,* Sakamoto uses the word "asynchronism" to describe asymmetry, which will be elaborated on in this chapter. The background will be explored into *wabi-sabi*'s asymmetry and its artistic applications in Japanese art. Asymmetry will then be compared with Sakamoto's ideas of asynchronism in the soundscapes of *async* to find connections.

The Oxford dictionary defines asymmetry as a "lack of equality or equivalence between parts or aspects of something."[185] Asymmetry uses materials to apply the ideas of uneveness, inconsistency, and irregularity into an arrangement, pattern, or space.[186] According to James Crowley, characteristics defined by equal proportion and axial in *wabi-sabi* are considered rigid and confining[187] — symmetry is the antithesis of asymmetry.[188] The Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki examined the origins of asymmetry in *wabi-sabi*. Suzuki explains that asymmetry emerged from Zen during the Heian era (794-1185) as a retaliation against the logical proportion in wealthy courtly art.[189] Wealthy art during the Heian era considered logic, precision, and proportion ideal, where "the intellectual primarily aspires to balance."[190] Aesthetic anthropologist Robert Cox explains that Zen would gradually shift the proportionate and uniform characteristics of Heian

---

[185] *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. "Asymmetry."
[186] Crowley and Crowley, *Wabi Sabi Style* 19.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Cuture* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1959), 2.
[190] Ibid.

courtly art towards more irregular asymmetry-related characteristics.[191] Anesaki provides examples of this shift towards asymmetry in Heian art: "from the lack of symmetrical designs on decorated swords and unequal pillars that stand in the toko-no-ma reception room of the Japanese home to the asymmetrical, and seemingly spontaneous arrangement of stones and trees in traditional gardens."[192] These examples have become quintessential visual depictions of asymmetry from a *wabi-sabi* perspective in Japanese aesthetics and art.

5.2 A Visual of Asymmetry - Ikebana

Many scholars consider the *nageire* style of flower arranging (*ikebana*) befitting of asymmetry in *wabi-sabi* (fig. 9). *Nageire* translates to "thrown in." This "thrown in" style of *ikebana* was developed by the famous tea master Sen no Rikyū, who wanted to incorporate Zen's rustic ideologies of the sporadic, uneven, random, and irregular into flower art.[193] Like other forms of art inspired by *wabi-sabi*'s asymmetry, asymmetry is illustrated through an artful combination of dissimilar elements/materials.[194] In *nageire,* the combination of dissimilar elements or materials includes different unique branches, leaves, stems, and flowers.

Figure 10. A visual example of ikebana. (Gavin Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture,* September 10, 2019, photograph.)

---

[191] Prusinski, "Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics through Japanese History," 34.
[192] Masaharu Anesaki, *Art, Life, and Nature in Japan* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1933), 53.
[193] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 86.
[194] Magoroh Maruyama, "Symbiotization of Cultural Heterogeneity: Scientific, Epistemological, and Aesthetic Bases," in *Cultures of the Future*, ed. Magoroh Maruyama and Arthur M Harkins (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 468.

Through the combination of dissimilar elements, *nageire* illustrates the impression of spontaneity that reflects the visual contrasts and imperfections found in nature.

Despite differences, all dissimilar materials expressed in asymmetry come together to form a co-existence.[195] From Gavin Blair's point of view, co-existence is central to *wabi-sabi*, where seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in style and appearance are viewed as one interconnected whole rather than many separate elements cobbled together — "that everything is connected."[196] The scholar Andrew Juniper sometimes refers to this *wabi-sabi* principle of co-existence in asymmetry as a state of non-duality — where expression is most profound when viewed as "centerless" without dichotomies.[197] According to *ikebana* specialist Mary Averill, this notion of non-duality in *nageire* could possibly be viewed as an artistic philosophy that emphasizes "the balance of inequalities."[198]

5.3 Asymmetry and Sakamoto's Asynchronism

Concepts surrounding *wabi-sabi*'s asymmetry align with Sakamoto's creative ideas and process. According to Zhang Youdai, Sakamoto invented the concept of asynchronism to explore asymmetry's characteristics in sound.[199] Investigating Sakamoto's use of asynchronism to illustrate asymmetry makes for compelling discussion.

Firstly, Sakamoto defined the differences between synchronism and asynchronism in music. According to Sakamoto, synchronism is like symmetry "where sounds and parts

---

[195] Blair, *Zen in Japanese Culture,* 16.
[196] Ibid., 15.
[197] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, 64.
[198] Mary Averill, *Japanese Flower Arrangement [Ike-bana]: Applied to Western Needs* (New York, John Lane Company, 2013), 26.
[199] Zhang Youdai, "Time Will Tell," in *Seeing Sound Hearing Time*, edited by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Lin Han, Sachiko Namba, and Victor Wang (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 87.

harmonize with each other."[200] Sakamoto also believed that synchronism is defined as music structured by tempo, key, rhythm, harmony, and melody rules.[201] According to Sakamoto, Synchronism gives many musical genres, such as popular, electronic, jazz, classical, and ethnic music, a sense of proportion.[202] As a reaction against synchronism's rigid rules, Sakamoto invented "asynchronism" and composed soundscapes to introduce listeners to "asynchronous music." Asynchronism is defined by Sakamoto as "musical sounds made up of different tempos, with each element in its tempo," where "all of its sounds come together but never seem to create a proper harmony."[203] These different sounds used to illustrate asynchronism can be described as melodic/rhythmic cells that seem to unravel independently from one another — each fixed and coherent in their consistent logic. According to Steinberg, these different musical sounds represent sonic events that are not coordinated in time and display a feeling of "arhythmic incongruity."[204] The concept of asynchronism results in atypical forms of listening because Sakamoto's soundscapes do not seem to adhere to traditional beats or structure. At times, the sonic events procured in the album *async* coalesce around a messy, disjointed, and conflicting tempo. This is because each musical element exists independently from one other and does not appear to fit within a unified pulse, beat, or narrative arc.

By connecting different musical/sonic parts disproportionately, asynchronism aspires for sonic imperfection that is akin to the visual descriptions illustrated in *wabi-sabi*'s asymmetry — where different materials of different forms, each with their own characteristics, are layered or juxtaposed against one another. By connecting different sounds and musical parts

---

[200] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Charles Steinberg, "Ryuichi Sakamoto async," *Under the Radar Magazine*, March 16, 2017, https://www.undertheradarmag.com/reviews/ryuichi_sakamoto_async.

disproportionately, scholar Zheng Youdai describes *async* as an album that confounds different

musical traditions and ideas of beauty associated with Western-oriented music.[205] By

confounding musical tradition, the sounds used in *async* comprise a dissemination of discernable

aural characteristics that "sacrifice coherency and consistency in" musical form and structure.[206]

This is because asynchronism, like asymmetry, seeks expressivity through the simultaneous

clash of spontaneous differences, inconsistencies, and disjointed elements. Additionally,

interactions between rhythm and other musical parameters, such as timbre and dynamics, refrain

from the relation between contrapuntal and homophonic voices. As such, Sakamoto would

jokingly describe asynchronism as "speaking in a language that doesn't exist."[207]

5.4 Appreciating Asynchronism without Prejudice in *async*

Critics and journalists have expressed interest in the soundscapes composed by Sakamoto

to illustrate asynchronism in the album *async* and how the concept of asynchronism could be

appreciated despite their seemingly unclear tempos, melodies, and rhythms.[208] In a radio talk

with Sakamoto, Shinichi Taketa was interested in a soundscape titled "Walker" from *async.* To

illustrate asynchronism in "Walker," Sakamoto used different various and contrasting materials.

These contrasting materials included found objects, traditional classical instruments, digital

effects, electronic synthesizers, and field recordings.[209] Like asymmetry, asynchronism's

aesthetic impact can be described as jarring. Throughout "Walker," Taketa expressed confusion

about asynchronism and told Sakamoto that "Walker's sounds seemed messy, contradicting, and

---

[205] Zhang Youdai, "Time Will Tell," 87.
[206] Daniel Bromfield, "Ryuichi Sakamoto: async," *Spectrum Culture*, May 15, 2018, https://spectrumculture.com/2017/05/15/ryuichi-sakamoto-async/.
[207] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[208] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[209] Ibid.

disorienting because the "sounds in no way seem to harmonize with each other."[210] "Walker,"

arranged without a discernable key, or tempo, infuses sonic materials ranging from the rhythms

of footsteps against the sounds of dead leaves, insect chirps overlaid against synthesizers, and

field recordings brushed against animal calls made with an EBow[211] on an electric guitar.[212]

These sounds appear in the form of sonic layers throughout the soundscape; each sound stream

seemingly existing with little relationship to one another — resulting in the feeling of an unstable

temporal continuum. Additionally, each sonic layer and sound stream in "Walker" contains

different rhythmic or melodic cells, which, enhanced by irregular temporal fluctuations, portrays

a soundscape that appears to lack any perceptive temporal or tonal landmark. According to

Taketa, this seemingly lack of discernable structure results in "music" that appears free,

unplanned, and, as Sakamoto puts it, "no center."[213]

   Taketa's impressions about "Walker" were also echoed by other critics such as Susumu

Kunisaki,[214] and Robert Ham[215] in several other pieces in *async* — notably the soundscapes

"Async" and "Disintegration." According to Kunisaki, each sound element inside "Async" is

almost never heard in unison, resulting in a "misalignment" within the horizontal or vertical

decorum of sounds.[216] When listening to the piece "Async," the asynchronous elements include

an orchestra that does not play together, bird noises interjected by pizzicato strings, and two out-

of-tune pianos arranged without tempo, harmony, or key. In the soundscape "Disintegration,"

Ham describes the soundscape as a series of textures that are recorded and layered on top of each

---

[210] Ibid.
[211] Schible, director, *Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Live at the Park Avenue Armory* (New
York: Borderland Media, 2018), DVD.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Ryuichi Sakamoto Interview."
[214] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[215] Robert Ham, "Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Review," *Paste Magazine*, May 9, 2017,
https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/ryuichi-sakamoto/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-review/.
[216] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "async, A Complete Interview," 111.

other to create a sense of asynchronism that feels like the "never-ending pendulum swing between solace and chaos."[217] Asynchronism is illustrated in "Disintegration" by using pre-recorded samples of two pianos from Sakamoto's home in New York. These different sounds result in unusual rhythms, textures, and timbres — "going about on their rhythms without conforming to the other sounds."[218]

In response to the confusion, Sakamoto explained that his idea behind asynchronism in the album *async* was to find beauty inside soundscapes encompassing different sonic elements and contrasting materials.[219] Like asymmetry in *wabi-sabi,* Sakamoto wanted to see whether a new-found appreciation for asynchronism could be found with dissimilar elements that "came together in an ununified manner." It is worth noting that asynchronism was not invented to disorient listeners. Rather, it was an experiment to seek different perspectives or ways of listening to "music" because, as Sakamoto stated, "we as humans tend to be in sync."[220]

Sakamoto explained that appreciating asynchronism is a message to a society that all sounds in the world are equally significant, exist for a reason, and have valid reasons for existing.[221] Despite the soundscapes in the album *async* not adhering to a unifying tempo, or key structure, Sakamoto acknowledged that each sound and sonic element independently contains its own structure, tempo, and characteristic.[222] As a result, these sonic elements used to illustrate asynchronism are not entirely formless but coincide with expressing new unfound patterns, ideas,

---

[217] Ham, "Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Review."
[218] Oganesson, "async by Ryuichi Sakamoto: Appreciating Differences in the Face of Death," *The Vault*, November 10, 2020, https://thevaultpublication.com/2020/11/10/async-by-ryuichi-sakamoto-appreciating-differences-in-the-face-of-death/.
[219] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.

and ways of listening that are not entirely reliant on anthropogenic ideals of order, polish, and standardized proportion in music.[223]

Sakamoto believed that we should refrain from listening to music with a judgmental filter to understand and appreciate asynchronism[224] — that our inability to appreciate different contradictions in asynchronous sounds is like: "human beings, [where] we take the liberty [even in traditional music] to decide which sound is good or bad."[225] As a result, Sakamoto suggested that asynchronism will serve as a way for people to "open our ears and listen to each sound without prejudice."[226] Sakamoto's thoughts about perusing sounds non-judgmentally to illustrate different aspects of asynchronism are akin to how asymmetry is appreciated in *wabi-sabi* art. Asymmetry, like asynchronism, reveals its beauty in the co-existence and combination of different materials — where each material, each significant in their way, accumulates to break the boundaries that separate beauty with non-beauty: "if beauty and ugliness are just two sides of the same coin separated only by intellectual activities, then accepting their coexistence is not an issue."[227]

As mentioned, Sakamoto's desire to appreciate asynchronism in soundscape without prejudice also stemmed from his desire to relate asynchronism with humanity's struggle to find coexistence with different voices and values.[228] Sakamoto wanted asynchronism to reflect the chaotic state of humanity and explained that: "in this world of myriad viewpoints and unlimited information, every single person is choosing only the information that he or she is interested in

---

[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence,* 64.
[228] Zhang Youdai, "Time Will Tell," 87.

[…] people with similar interests gather and form a group. Then groups with similar interests exchange views with one other […] to narrow the conversation down to ever more specific views [...] Different interests barely communicate with each other [..]; they tend to dismiss the views of the other".[229]

Like the myriad sounds that co-exist in the album *async*, Sakamoto believed that asynchronism reminds society that every human being is different — "that each person has their own unique tempo."[230] Like the soundscapes in *async,* every human being is equally important and represents a distinct voice in society: "if there are two-thousand people in this world, I think it is alright to see things two-thousand different ways… there is no need for everyone to be the same."[231]

---

[229] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.

Chapter 6. *async*: Emptiness/Nothingness

6.1 A Preview

In an interview with *52 Insights,* Sakamoto mentioned that he was inspired by the Zen concept of "emptiness/nothingness" and was curious about portraying "emptiness/nothingness" in soundscape.[232] Sakamoto's approach to illustrating "emptiness/nothingness" in soundscape closely relates to a *wabi-sabi* concept known as *insufficiency* — a metaphysical aspect of imperfection achieved by arranging material and space in a sparse manner that results in a formless and incomplete state.

This chapter will first provide background about "emptiness/nothingness." *Wabi-sabi* will then be used to examine how *insufficiency* illustrates "emptiness/nothingness" in Japanese art, notably the Japanese rock garden. These illustrations will finally be used to observe how *wabi-sabi*'s use of *insufficiency* to portray "emptiness/nothingness" finds parallels and amicable kinships with Sakamoto's illustration of "emptiness/nothingness" in *async*.

6.2 Emptiness/Nothingness

In Zen, "emptiness" and "nothingness" is described as a state of enlightenment.[233] This enlightenment in "emptiness/nothingness" is reached when an individual "breaks down all learned ideas" and removes the ego from the body.[234] The removal of the ego from the body is where: "the true self is selfless, not only in the sense of compassionate but also in the sense of

---

[232] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "We are destroying the world."
[233] Bret. W Davis, "Forms of Emptiness in Zen," in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel (New York: John Wiley & Songs, 2013), 190-200.
[234] Ibid., 24.

empty… true self is thus a non-self that awakens to its formlessness."[235] Zen refers to this process as *unlearning*. *Unlearning* is integral to Zen because the ego filters an individual's perceptions and separates one from the environment/world.[236]

In Zen, the ego is viewed as a symptom of intellectual entanglement where "experiencing the world from a particular centrist position will prevent us from seeing into the reality…"[237] Only when one unlearns is a state of enlightenment known as "emptiness/nothingness" reached. Scholars describe "emptiness/nothingness" as a state of selflessness and openness to the world. Despite Zen's nebulous nature, many scholars have tried to formulate a definition to describe "emptiness/nothingness:" "the mysterious wonder of natural action,"[238] as described by Kazuto Sayama; "opposites reconciled, thoughts suspended" by Magda Rittenhouse;[239] "a notion both beside and beyond the experience of our physical world" by Gunter Nitschke.[240]

6.3 Insufficiency: Illustrating Emptiness/Nothingness

Wabi-sabi uses an aspect of imperfection known as *insufficiency* to illustrate "emptiness/nothingness" in the arts and architecture. Saito states that *insufficiency* uses objects and elements that "fall short or deteriorate from the optimal condition" to create a sense of incompleteness for "emptiness/nothingness" to emerge.[241]

---

[235] Davis, "Forms of Emptiness in Zen," 190.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Yuriko Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 382, https://doi.org/10.2307/430925.
[238] Mike Kazuto Sayama, "The Highest State of Consciousness in Zen Buddhism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1982), 1.
[239] Magda Rittenhouse, "Moments of Silence and Stillness," *Kyoto Journal 98* (December 2020): 64.
[240] Gunter Nitschke, "Ma — Place, Space, Void," *Kyoto Journal 98* (December 2020): 23.
[241] Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," 377.

A common example where *insufficiency* is applied to illustrate emptiness/nothingness is through the materials and landscapes expressed in various Japanese gardens (fig. 11) — notably, the rock garden (karensansui), moss garden (koke), hill and pond garden (tsukiyama), and tea garden (chaniwa). Saito illustrates *insufficiency* in the different Japanese gardens by juxtaposing the landscape's *insufficient* materials with *sufficient* ones: 1) a moon obscured by a fog versus a full moon, 2) cherry blossoms with fallen flowers versus cherry blossoms in full bloom, 3) half spherical rocks versus perfectly polished rocks.[242] Fowler reinforces that because many Japanese gardens' materials refrain from optimal conditions: "they are inward-looking,

Figure 11. A visual example *insufficiency* in a Japanese garden. (Stephen Mansfield, *Shigemori Mirei Garden Museum,* November 14, 2020, photograph, The Kyoto Journal.)

the white raked gravel bed suggesting a blank canvas blank while the solitary rocks drawing associations to mountaintops peaking through low clouds."[243] As Fowler suggested, *insufficient* materials evade optimal conditions by hiding, obscuring, or revealing less of the condition's complete and perfect form.[244] This is how the Japanese garden illustrates the preliminary aspects of barrenness, vacancy, and voidness. *Insufficiency* achieves incompleteness by hiding and

---

[242] Ibid.

[243] Michael. D. Fowler, *Sound Worlds of Japanese Gardens: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spatial Thinking* (New Rockford: Transcript Publishing, 2015), 22.

[244] Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," 377.

obscuring an optimal condition, which serves as an aesthetic invitation for

"emptiness/nothingness" to emerge in a landscape or piece of art.[245]

Another point worth noting is how the feeling of "emptiness/nothingness" is heightened

by arranging *insufficient* materials such as gravel, trees, and rocks sparsely and distantly. In this

sparse and distant arrangement, each element plays either an active or passive presence within

the landscape's visual depth.[246] Through an interplay with depth, active and passive elements

form an artful collaboration to magnify the intensity of emptiness/nothingness across a larger

surface area or environmental landscape. For example, in Japanese gardens, certain rocks appear

more in the backdrop — blending into the barrenness and passivity of the gravel. Meanwhile,

certain shades, rocks, or waterfalls may emerge from the gravel's horizon while other rocks

blend in and appear fully camouflaged. By focusing on the sparse and vacant interplay of

insufficient objects, *insufficiency* allows incompleteness to be illustrated in space where

"emptiness/nothingness" can emerge. In Japanese gardens, this cumulative collaboration

between the sparse and vacant interplay of *insufficient* objects expresses the tradition of

"miegakure," where the overall shape and landscape of the garden becomes deliberately

concealed and *insufficient* itself.[247]

6.4 Realizing Emptiness/Nothingness through Insufficiency in *async*

In *async*, Sakamoto's soundscape, "Garden," illustrates the concept of

"emptiness/nothingness" by applying *wabi-sabi*'s use of *insufficiency* in material and spatial

aspects towards sonic contexts. Regarding material aspects of *insufficiency* used in sonic

---

[245] Ibid., 378.
[246] Ibid., 377.
[247] Fowler, *Sound Worlds of Japanese Gardens: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spatial Thinking*, 13.

contexts*,* Starnes and Taketa mention how the sounds found in "Garden" are always deliberate in diverging from optimal conditions.[248] Many of the sounds perused in "Garden" carry an incomplete feeling because the original intentions of rhythm, harmony, and melody have been timbrally subdued. In numerous interviews, Sakamoto often alluded "Garden's" subdued timbre of sounds to the imagery of a "formless cloud…as if it were a fog."[249] Like *wabi-sabi*, which obscures certain aspects of objects in a Japanese garden to create *insufficiency* in objects, Sakamoto achieves *insufficiency* in sonic materials through the process of deviation and concealment.[250]

Deviation in "Garden" mainly involves alterations to musical timing in different sonic materials. This is achieved by an electroacoustic process known as "time-stretching," where Sakamoto can digitally change the duration of an audio signal.[251] By "time-stretching," the sounds discard their original and optimal conditions and are instead imbued with a suspended feeling and stillness. Examples of deviation with timing in sonic material include sustained melodies whose notes are held for so long that they lack intervallic relationships and static harmonies whose contour refrains from any goal-oriented direction.

Concealment would refer to Sakamoto's use of audio effects, which are applied on top of the time-stretched sonic materials like a fog to conceal the melodies and harmonies further from their optimal conditions. These audio effects would include reverberation as well as echo-like audio effects that saturate, delay, and muffle "Garden's" sonic materials. Through the process of deviation and concealment, "Garden" achieves a sense of imperceptibility in the listener because

---

[248] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "Music for a Divided World."
[249] Ryuichi Sakamoto, "async, A Complete Interview," 111-112.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Ibid.

the sonic materials are either never heard enough or in their entirety. Sakamoto's treatment of sonic materials, like Saito's depictions of insufficiency found in Japanese garden objects, is mimetic of insufficiency's visual depictions of obscurity, ambiguity, and incompleteness — allowing for the favorable conditions of "emptiness/nothingness" to flourish.

To further heighten the atmosphere and sensation of "emptiness/nothingness" in "Garden," it appears that each *insufficient* melody and harmony is also fully brought to life through the "placement" of sonic materials that mimic the placement of different objects inspired by Japanese gardens. Sakamoto prescribes these insufficient materials/objects of melody and harmony in the soundscape's landscape with varying levels of auditory presence. These varied levels of auditory presence are articulated by prescribing different sonic materials with different levels of dynamic volume and textural intensity, which are then placed distantly across opposing extremities in the orchestral range and register. Playing with auditory presence and opposing extremities in the musical register brings out a vast and vacant atmosphere in the soundscape's sonic landscape. According to Fowler, this interplay of dynamics and textural intensity in sonic materials across different musical registers relates to the Japanese garden's interplay of pictorial recession, namely, "the relationship between objects which appear to lie near to the observer and those which seem further away, and thus recede into space." — where the interplay of *insufficient* sonic materials results in an incomplete and ephemeral feeling.[252]

For example, the harmonies' placement in "Garden" carries a more docile presence that suggests the imagery of gravel lying passively in the distance of the Japanese garden's landscape. This imagery of gravel derives from Sakamoto's process of "time stretching," which

---

[252] Fowler, *Sound Worlds of Japanese Gardens: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spatial Thinking*, 25.

has obscured the harmonies' optimal conditions — resulting in a suspended feeling or stillness.

From a pictorial perspective, Toshihiko Izutsu notes that this passivity correlates to pliant

depictions of stillness as seen in the gravel's: "immense distances of the background, beyond

veils of mist, craggy pillars of mountains looms against the sky, vague and obscure, like

phantoms."[253] As such, the harmonies' *insufficiency* signifies a flatter auditory presence and is

more placed near the backdrop in the low registers of the soundscape.

On the other hand, a three-note ostinato figure with the pitches E, D, and C-sharp appears

more "in front" of the sonic landscape. Unlike the harmonies, the ostinato's dynamics are more

active and vary in intensity with each occurrence — perhaps alluding to the placement of a

waterfall in the Japanese garden affected by changing weather. The ostinato's dynamics tend to

fluctuate, emulating the ebb and flow of a waterfall, and is theorized to carry a more pronounced

sonic presence in "Garden's" sonic landscape. This notion is speculated by Fowler, who states

that the architecture of waterfalls in Japanese gardens provides a "rhythmic foil" — naturally

creating a more focused tone within the acoustic landscape.[254] This theoretical speculation can be

traced to an eleventh-century passage from Genji Monogatari (Tale of Genji), which describes

the waterfall's acoustic presence: "Clear spring water went singing off into the distance…

designed to enhance the music, there was a waterfall, and the whole expanse was a wild

profusion of autumn flowers and leaves."[255] According to Fowler, this quote can be a semiotic

and interpretive example for relating "Garden's" ostinatos with the waterfall's focused topology.

---

[253] Toshihiko Izutsu, "Tokyo-Montreal: The Elimination of Color in Far-Eastern Art and Philosophy" in *The Realms of Color*, ed. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1974), 438.

[254] Michael D. Fowler, "Mapping sound-space: the Japanese garden as auditory model," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (March 2010): 64-65, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135510000588.

[255] Michael Fowler, "Hearing a Shakkei: The Semiotics of the Audible in a Japanese Stroll Garden," *Semiotica* 2013, no. 197 (January 2013): 103, https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-6512.

A melody with D-sharp, C, B, and G pitches is placed above the ostinato. This melody is more pronounced and pierces away from the passivity of the harmonies but appears to be audibly adjacent to the ostinato, possibly depicting a tree beside the pond. Both the ostinato and melody are juxtaposed by allocating varying levels of reverberation and delay to differentiate their *insufficient* characters. Momentarily, another melody appears containing the pitches B, A, B, and C. This time the melody deviates from the higher register and is placed in the extremely low ranges of the soundscape — underscoring the harmonic passivity outlined throughout "Garden's" sonic geography.

By constantly arranging "Garden's" *insufficient* materials of melody and harmony across various dynamic and auditory registers in the sonic landscape, these sonic materials cumulate towards a vacant atmosphere. In this vacancy, the interactive placement of sonic materials across different registers can be described as feeling ephemeral — oscillating between a sensation of impermanence and incompleteness in the listener. As discussed, this perceptible impermanence and incompleteness through the placement of *insufficient* materials across auditory registers in a sonic landscape echoes the Japanese gardening tradition of "miegakure" — where the overall shape/landscape of the garden becomes deliberately concealed and obscured because of "Garden's" timbrally subdued changes and qualities — where the cumulative *insufficient* transiency of objects cannot be pinned down or denoted by a single sonic moment or image — allowing for the desired outcome of "emptiness/nothingness" in "Garden" to be sensed and felt.[256]

---

[256] Prusinski, "Wabi-sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics," 28.

Conclusion

The soundscapes in the *async* album present the concept of imperfection as an ontological and intuitive area of philosophical study. Sakamoto proposed a theoretical inquiry throughout *async* — the notion that imperfection can become a creative catalyst for appreciating sounds considered untraditional, unexpected, or "not beautiful." Sakamoto's appreciation for imperfection expanded on a spiritually inclined and metaphysical territory of sonic representation. Moreover, the different perspectives of imperfection embodied in *async* invite theoretical interpretations involving a particular aesthetic positioning and ontological examination. A multi-dimensionally holistic consideration of *wabi-sabi* and its philosophical inquiries — based on research from scholars who practice *wabi-sabi* in historiography, architecture, visual arts, and urban design — tangibly consolidates these different intuitive aspects of imperfection faithfully across various musical contexts in *async*.

The aesthetic philosophy of *wabi-sabi* may be used to shed light on the variety of abstract ideas on imperfection by Sakamoto. This is because the *wabi-sabi* framework applied throughout the study of *async* serves as groundwork to allow for the ontology of imperfection to be approached with added clarity. The three fundamental aspects of *wabi-sabi* — Natural Imperfection, Asymmetry, and Emptiness/Nothingness — serve as the underlying aesthetic framework to elucidate *async*'s imperfect ontology through aesthetic interpolations and kinships. Natural Imperfection functions as a concept for illustrating sounds that mimic rustic and aged imperfections in the natural environment — flawed sounds that personify nature as a spiritual force, refrain from anthropogenic intervention, and seek organic states of sonic expression. For Sakamoto, the Tsunami Piano serves as the organic basis for expressing his reverence for natural

67

imperfection's beauty. The *wabi-sabi* concept of asymmetry serves as an aesthetic aimed at imbuing Sakamoto's ideas of "asynchronism" with metaphorical prominence. Asynchronism's metaphorical prominence is echoed by the notion of co-existence in asymmetry, where different, contrasting, and disjunct sonic elements in *async*'s soundscapes come together without prejudice to express beauty found in seemingly random and chaotic impressions. Emptiness/Nothingness, the third integral aspect of *wabi-sabi* in *async*, relates to *insufficient* domains of sound, where sonic materials and elements fall short of optimal conditions to illustrate sonic characteristics related to incompleteness, vacancy, and voidness.

The three aspects of *wabi-sabi* outlined in my theoretical framework wholeheartedly invite a continued aesthetic elaboration and analysis of imperfection across the remaining pieces in *async*, which deserves attention and further study. Imperfection's interpretative potential examined through the holistic lens of *wabi-sabi* also serves as an ongoing framework for a more elaborate investigation across other works in soundscape composition. Likewise, the aesthetic principles outlined in this project predicate an important first step for *wabi-sabi* to progress into what I believe will be a definitive foundation of topic theory across myriad musical genres and styles. By consolidating *wabi-sabi*'s aesthetic aspects outlined in this paper and transferring them to other musical domains, imperfection's ontology can be translated into semiotic representations for future performance practice or even be used to create musical signifiers that reflect the intentions of *wabi-sabi*'s imperfectness.

Bibliography

Anesaki, Masaharu. *Art, Life, and Nature in Japan.* Boston: Marshall Jones, 1933.

Averill, Mary. *Japanese Flower Arrangement [Ike-bana]: Applied to Western Needs.* New York, John Lane Company, 2013.

Awad, Gamall. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Performs New async Album At New York's Park Avenue Armory." *Self Titled*, April 18, 2017. https://www.self-titledmag.com/live-review-ryuichi-sakamoto-park-avenue-armory/.

Bambarger, Bradley. Liner notes for *Cinemage*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto. Sony Classical, 1999, CD.

Blair, Gavin. *Zen in Japanese Culture*. New York: Abbeville Press, 2019.

Brailey, Louise. "Ryuichi Sakamoto talks us through async Remodels track by track." *Crack Magazine*, February 22, 2018. https://crackmagazine.net/article/lists/ryuichi-sakamoto-talks-us-async-remodels-track-track/.

Bromfield, Daniel. "Ryuichi Sakamoto: async." *Spectrum Culture*, May 15, 2018. https://spectrumculture.com/2017/05/15/ryuichi-sakamoto-async/.

Bye, Jeremy. "Goldmund Occasus." *A Closer Listen*, May 27, 2018. https://acloserlisten.com/2018/05/27/goldmund-occasus/.

Crowley, James, and Sandra Crowley. *Wabi Sabi Style*. Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2005.

Dalton, Stephen. "'Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Live at the Park Avenue Armory': Film Review | Berlin 2018." *The Hollywood Reporter,* February 22, 2018. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-live-at-park-avenue-armory-review-1087336/.

Davis, Bret W. "Forms of Emptiness in Zen." In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, 190-213. New York: John Wiley & Songs, 2013.

Deng, Zhiyong, Jian Kang, and Daiwei Wang. "Soundscape Composition as a Distinct Music Genre." In *Proceedings of ICMEM 2015*, edited by Renee Timmers, Nicola Dibben, Zohar Eitan, Roni Granot, Tim Metcalfe, Andrea Schiavio, and Victoria Williamson, 4-8. Sheffield: The Digital Humanities Institute, 2015.

Eede, Christian. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Reveals He Has Stage Four Cancer." *The Quietus*, June 9, 2022. https://thequietus.com/articles/31649-ryuichi-sakamoto-reveals-he-has-stage-4-cancer.

Fowler, Michael. D. *Sound Worlds of Japanese Gardens: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spatial Thinking*. New Rockford: Transcript Publishing, 2015.

Fowler, Michael. "Hearing a Shakkei: The Semiotics of the Audible in a Japanese Stroll Garden." *Semiotica* 2013, no. 197 (January 2013): 101-117. https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-6512.

Fowler, Michael. "Mapping sound-space: the Japanese garden as auditory model." *Architectural Research Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (March 2010): 63-70. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135510000588.

Grinfeder, Elie, Christian Lorenzi, Sylvain Haupert, and Jérôme Sueur. "What Do We Mean by Soundscape? A Functional Description." *Hypothesis and Theory*, no. 10 (Spring 2022): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2022.894232.

Ham, Robert. "Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Review." *Paste Magazine*, May 9, 2017. https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/ryuichi-sakamoto/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-review/.

Hammond, James. "An introduction to Ryuichi Sakamoto in 10 records." *The Vinyl Factory*, October 9, 2015. https://thevinylfactory.com/features/the-many-faces-of-ryuichi-sakamoto-an-introduction/.

Hatakeyama, Chihei. "Self-Portrit: Chihei Hatakeyama." Interview by Hani Hanball, *Stamp the Wax*, January 7, 2021. https://www.stampthewax.com/2021/07/01/self-portrait-chihei-hatakeyama.

Helfet, Gabriela. "Discovering Japanese Wabi Wabi soun with Meitei." *The Vinyl Factory*, March 21, 2019. https://thevinylfactory.com/features/discovering-japanese-wabi-sabi-sound-with-meitei/.

Hioe, Brian. "A Haunting Meditation on Fukushima: Ryuichi Sakamoto's Is Your Time." *Electric Soul*, September 28, 2021. https://www.electricsoul.com/magazine/a-haunting-meditation-on-fukushima-ryuichi-sakamoto-s-is-your-time.

Holm, Brooke. *The Beautifully Flawed Work of Emerging Ceramists*. May 12, 2017. Photograph. The New York Times. https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/05/12/t-magazine/potters-slide-WBLK/potters-slide-WBLK-superJumbo.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp.

Hosoda, Narushi. "Chihei Hatakeyama talks about the Intersection of Ambient and Jazz or Improvisation. Part 1: The Reticulated Relationship Between Ambient and Jazz in Late Spring." *Tokion*, June 4, 2021. https://tokion.jp/en/2021/06/04/ambient-and-jazz-or-improvisation-part1/.

Hosokawa, Shuhei. "Soy Sauce Music." In *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music*, edited by Philip Hayward, 114-144. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

IMDb. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Coda (2017) Awards." Accessed December 27, 2022. https://m.imdb.com/title/tt6578572/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.

Inaba, Minoru. "Computer Rock Music Gaining Fans." *Sarasota Journal* (August 1980): 11.

Ismael, Matthew Ruiz. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Announces New Album 12." *Pitchfork*, November 12, 2022. https://pitchfork.com/news/ryuichi-sakamoto-announces-new-album-12/.

Izutsu, Toshihiko. "Tokyo-Montreal: The Elimination of Color in Far-Eastern Art and Philosophy." In *The Realms of Color*, edited by Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema, 438 (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1974), 438-500.

Jones, Mikey IQ. "The Essential… Yellow Magic Orchestra." *Fact Magazine*, January 22, 2015. https://www.factmag.com/2015/01/22/the-essential-yellow-magic-orchestra/.

Juniper, Andrew. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2003.

Kelly, Spence, director. *Moog One: A Meditation on Listening.* Ashville: Moog Music, 2018. Film.

Kenniff, Keith. "Duologue: A conversation with Keith Kenniff." Interview by Stationary Travels, *Stationary Travels,* October 6, 2020. https://stationarytravels.wordpress.com/2020/10/06/duologue-a-converskeition-with-keith-kenniff/.

Kenniff, Keith. "Interview: Keith Kenniff." Interview by Jack Chuter, *ATTN Magazine*, February 9, 2019. https://www.attnmagazine.co.uk/keith-kenniff-interview/.

Kenniff, Keith. "Keith Kenniff of Mint Julep on His Solo Projects Helios and Goldmund." Interview by Paul Parreira. *Ravelin*, 2016. https://www.ravelinmagazine.com/posts/keith-kenniff-of-mint-julep-on-his-solo-projects-helios-and-goldmund/.

Kenniff, Keith. Liner notes for *Occasus*, by Keith Kenniff. Western Vinyl, 2018, CD.

Kondo, Dorinne. "The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis." *New Series* 20, no. 2 (June 1985): 287-306. https://doi.org/10.2307/2802386.

Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. California: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.

Lennard, Elizabeth, director. *Tokyo Melody: Un Film sur Ryuichi Sakamoto*. Paris, France: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), 1985. DVD.

Lewis, Leo. "Ryuichi Sakamoto: To Create Something is a Strange Thing to Do." *Financial Times*, July 3, 2020. https://www.ft.com/content/166c867f-5b6b-4e7f-8be1-5f7036552c46.

Lewis, John. "Back to the Future." *The Guardian*, July 4, 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/jul/04/electronicmusic.filmandmusic11.

Manabe, Noriko. *The Revolution will not be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Mansfield, Stephen. *Shigemori Mirei Garden Museum*. November 14, 2020. Photograph. The Kyoto Journal.

Maruo, Ryuichi. Ryuichi Sakamoto + Shiro Takatani, IS YOUR TIME. 2017. Photograph. NTT Inter Communication Center ICC. https://www.mwoods.org/Ryuichi-Sakamoto-seeing-sound-hearing-time.

Maruyama, Magoroh. "Symbiotization of Cultural Heterogeneity: Scientific, Epistemological, and Aesthetic Bases." In *Cultures of the Future*, edited by Magoroh Maruyama, and Arthur M Harkins, 455-474. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978.

Namba, Sachiko, Victor Wang, Zhang Youdai, eds. *Ryuichi Sakamoto Seeing Sound Hearing Time*. Beijing United Publishing, 2021.

New, David, director. *R. Murray Schafer: Listen*. Ottawa, CA: The National Film Board of Canada, 2009. DVD.

Nitschke, Gunter. "Ma — Place, Space, Void." *Kyoto Journal 98* (December 2020): 8-23.

Oganesson. "async by Ryuichi Sakamoto: Appreciating Differences in the Face of Death." *The Vault*, November 10, 2020. https://thevaultpublication.com/2020/11/10/async-by-ryuichi-sakamoto-appreciating-differences-in-the-face-of-death/.

Pedersen, Jordan Ryan. "What's Past is Epilogue: The Thousand Knives of Ryuichi Sakamoto." *Passion of the Weiss*, November 21, 2019. https://www.passionweiss.com/2019/11/21/whats-past-is-epilogue-the-thousand-knives-of-ryuichi-sakamoto/.

Philharmonie de Paris. "Jocelyn Mienniel & Chassol Dress Code / Asynchrone "Hommage à Ryūichi Sakamoto." Accessed December 26, 2022. https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/activity/concert/23892-jazz-la-villette.

Prendergast, Mark. "Ryuchi Sakamoto Japanese Artist: World Musician." *Sound on Sound* 5, no. 11 (Sept 1990): 58-52.

Press, Kevin. "Adrian Dziewanski – The Trail Loops Back." *The Moderns*, April 3, 2018. https://themoderns.blog/2018/04/03/adrian-dziewanski-the-trail-loops-back/.

Prusinski, Lauren. "Wabi-sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics." *Studies on Asia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 25-49.

Rittenhouse, Magda. "Moments of Silence and Stillness." *Kyoto Journal* 98 (December 2020): 64-69.

Rittenhouse, Magda. "Moments of Silence and Stillness." *Kyoto Journal* 98 (December 2020): 64-69.

Saito, Yuriko. "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 25, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 239-251. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/25.3.239.

Saito, Yuriko. "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 377-385. https://doi.org/10.2307/430925.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. Liner notes for *async*, by Ryuichi Sakamoto. Commmons Records, 2017, CD.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. *Out of Noise*, Commmons Records, 2009, CD.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "On How Your Work Changes As You Get Older." Interview by Brandon Stosuy, *The Creative Independent*, January 15, 2021. https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/ryuichi-sakamoto-on-how-your-work-changes-as-you-get-older/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto : entretien fleuve avec le maître." Interview by Azzedine Fall, *Les Inrockuptibles,* July 18, 2019. https://www.lesinrocks.com/musique/ryuichi-sakamoto-linterview-son-vs-melodie-324369-18-07-2019/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "After battling cancer, Ryuichi Sakamoto learns about its cause." Interview by Yamauchi Misako, *Asahi*, February 11, 2019. https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13054202.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "We are destroying the world." Interview by Ari Stein, *52 Insights,* January 15, 2019. https://www.52-insights.com/ryuichi-sakamoto-we-are-destroying-the-world-interview-music/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto, Vol. 19 Archive – A Conversation with Ryuichi Sakamoto." Interview by Yumiko Sakuma, *The New Order,* July 25, 2018. http://thenewordermag.com/tno/vol19-archive-ryuichi-sakamoto.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Themes and Variations: An Interview with Ryuichi Sakamoto." Interview by Kevin Nguyen, *GQ*, July 18, 2018. https://www.gq.com/story/ryuichi-sakamoto-interview.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Composer Ryuichi Sakamoto Reflects on His Life, Work, and Battle with Cancer." Interview by Craig Hubert, *Hyperallergic*, July 16, 2018. https://hyperallergic.com/451093/ryuichi-sakamoto-coda-interview/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto with Sadie Rebecca Starnes." Interview by Sadie Rebecca Starnes, *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2018. https://brooklynrail.org/2018/06/film/RYUICHI-SAKAMOTO-with-Sadie-Rebecca-Starnes.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "40 Years On, Ryuichi Sakamoto is Still Searching for Parts Unknown." Interview by Josh Baines, *Vice*, February 16, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en/article/3k7v78/ryuichi-sakamoto-interview-async-remodels-2018.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Interview: Ryuichi Sakamoto." Interview by Kunihiro Miki, *Time Out*, December 29, 2017. https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/music/interview-ryuichi-sakamoto.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "async, A Complete Interview." Interview by Susumu Kunisaki, *Sound and Recording Magazine*, issue 6 (2017): 108-123.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Interview." Interview by Andy Beta, June 12, 2017. Ryuichi Sakamoto Interview https://andybetacom.wordpress.com/2017/06/12/ryuichi-sakamoto-interview/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Sonic Memories: A Conversation with Ryuichi Sakamoto." Interview by Hillary Weston, *The Criterion*, June 1, 2017. https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4625-sonic-memories-a-conversation-with-ryuichi-sakamoto.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Survived Cancer and an Earthquake to Make the Most Personal Album of His Career." Interview by Corinne Przybyslawski, *Vice*, April 28, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en/article/5377en/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-interview/.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Music for a Divided World." Interview by Shinichi Taketa, *NHK World Television*, April 21, 2017. https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/3963/index.html.

Sakamoto, Ryuichi. "Ryuichi Sakamoto interview." Interview by Nolen Gasser, *The Classical Archives*, October 1, 2010. https://www.classicalarchives.com/feature/sakamoto_interview2.html.

Sayama, Mike Kazuto. "The Highest State of Consciousness in Zen Buddhism." PhD diss., University of Michigan. 1982.

Schible, Stephen Nomura director. *Coda: A Portrait of Ryuichi Sakamoto*. London, UK: Modern Films, 2018. DVD.

Schible, Stephen Nomura director. *Ryuichi Sakamoto: async Live at the Park Avenue Armory*. New York: Borderland Media, 2018. DVD.

Senoue, Toshiki. *Bonsai plant by Masahiko Kimura*. November 14, 2022. Photograph. The New Yorker. https://media.newyorker.com/photos/636ecae4372f10b0a4a041b0/master/w_1600,c_limit/221121_r41396.jpg.

Smith, Karl. "Karl Smith on Ryuichi Sakamoto's async." *The Quietus*, April 27, 2017. https://thequietus.com/articles/22297-ryuichi-sakamoto-async-album-review-tarkovsky-mortality-soundtracks.

Steinberg, Charles. "Ryuichi Sakamoto async." *Under the Radar Magazine*, March 16, 2017. https://www.undertheradarmag.com/reviews/ryuichi_sakamoto_async.

Sterngold, James. "A Building by Wright Incites Debate in Tokyo." *New York Times,* March 18, 1992. https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/18/arts/a-building-by-wright-incites-debate-in-tokyo.html.

Stout, Andrew. "Yellow Magic Orchestra on Kraftwerk and How to Write a Melody During a Cultural Revolution." *San Francisco Weekly*, June 24, 2011. https://www.sfweekly.com/music/yellow-magic-orchestra-on-kraftwerk-and-how-to-write-a-melody-during-a-cultural-revolution/.

Sukita, Masayoshi. *The Yellow Magic Orchestra*. 1979. Photograph. Center for Contemporary Art Tokyo. https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/p8-tokyo-artscouncil-a-20151111.jpg.

Suzuki, Daisetsu Teitaro, *Zen and Japanese Cuture*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1959.

Suzuki, Nobuo. *Wabi-sabi The Widsom of Imperfection*. Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2021.

Takatani, Shiro. *Async main cover,* 2017. *Artwork Design. Milan Records.* https://milanrecords.com/ryuichi-sakamoto-async-out-today/.

Toop, David. "A-Z Of Electro." *The Wire*, March 2011. https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/a-z-of-electro.

Toop, David. "Ryuichi Sakamoto." *Site Sakamoto Archives* (March 2010): 1-2.

Tran, John L. "Ryuichi Sakamoto Provides a Soundtrack to Life at 'async' Exhibition." *The Japan Times*. May 2, 2017. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/05/02/arts/ryuichi-sakamoto-provides-soundtrack-life-async-exhibition/#.WsDn7tPwY6h.

Traux, Barry. "Soundscape Studies: An Introduction to the World Soundscape Project." *Numus West*, no. 5 (1974): 36-39.

Traux, Barry. "Soundscape Composition as Global Music: Electroacoustic Music as Soundscape." *Organized Sound* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 103-109. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771808000149.

Westerkamp, Hildegard. "Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology." *Organized Sound* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 51-56. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771802001085.

Zakkubalan. *Ryuichi Sakamoto*. January 1, 2021. Photograph. M Woods Museum, Beijing. https://www.mwoods.org/Ryuichi-Sakamoto-seeing-sound-hearing-time-1.