The Spirit of a Composer:
An analysis of the works of Joe Hisaishi

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**Abstract**

Joe Hisaishi is one of the most prominent and popular composers in modern Japan. Whether he writes European inspired Waltzes, Jazz inspired piano pieces, or airy music box pieces, Hisaishi’s music remains utterly unmistakable in all its forms. This characteristic sound inspired my research. I set out to analyse several of Joe Hisaishi’s most well known pieces to understand the building blocks of his trademark musical style. But analysis could only take me so far. I also wrote a pair of pieces drawing directly from the techniques I observed in Hisaishi’s work to have a deeper understanding of how and why he uses the techniques he does. My findings changed the way I viewed Hisaishi’s music. Hisaishi’s musical sensibility synthesizes classical tonal techniques of counterpoint and more modern techniques, particularly the superimposition of relative major and minor tonalities.

Keywords: Music, Joe Hisaishi, Schenkerian Analysis, composition, superimposition
With a career spanning more than forty years, over twenty feature films and numerous video games and television shows, Joe Hisaishi is one of the most prominent and popular composers in modern Japan.\footnote{“Joe Hisaishi,” IMDb. Accessed May 1, 2020.} While he worked with many studios, writers and directors, no collaboration has brought him more recognition than his work alongside the animator Hayao Miyazaki. Although any music featuring in three decades worth of films as popular as Miyazaki’s will get some recognition, Hisaishi’s compositions have achieved an iconic status that rivals the animation they accompany. Much of this has to do with Hisaishi’s distinctive musical style. Whether he writes European inspired Waltzes, Jazz inspired piano pieces, or airy music box pieces, Hisaishi’s music remains utterly unmistakable in all its forms. This characteristic sound inspired my research. I set out to analyse several of Joe Hisaishi’s most well known pieces to understand the building blocks of his trademark musical style. But analysis could only take me so far. I also wrote a pair of pieces drawing directly from the techniques I observed in Hisaishi’s work to have a deeper understanding of how and why he uses the techniques he does. I have included both my analyses and my compositions at the end of the paper. My findings changed the way I viewed Hisaishi’s music. Hisaishi’s musical sensibility synthesizes classical tonal techniques of counterpoint and more modern techniques, particularly the superimposition of relative major and minor tonalities.

I. Technique

The analytical foundation for my research comes from Allan Forte and Steven Gilbert’s book, Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis. This style of analysis relies on the work of music
theorist Heinrich Schenker who developed this method to understand the structure of a musical composition. To do this, Schenker divided musical structure into three parts: foreground, middleground and background. The foreground concerns the minutiae of a composition. The middleground searches within that minutiae for the structural layout of musical moments. Finally, the background analysis provides the skeleton on which the rest of the composition hangs.\(^2\) During the writing process, the composer tends to work from the base up, starting with a structure and then filling it in. The analyst must do the opposite, forced to work from the outside in. Shenkerian analysis therefore requires making written reductions of a musical score that look at progressively larger scales. Firstly, one must isolate the bassline of a piece because the baseline lays the harmonic bedrock upon which the rest of the piece is built. Secondly, the analyst searches for the fundamental melodic line or \textit{Urline}, of a piece. The unison of these two forms is the \textit{Ursatz}, or fundamental structure, of a piece.\(^3\)

The technique for this reduction, called stem and slur analysis, presents a simplified melody and bassline by removing excess notes and most rhythmic variety. Each note must either be a structural note, identified by a stem, or a connecting note which are stemless. The middleground structural flow of a melodic line is shown by a slur that links the endpoints of the line. For example, a melody that descends stepwise G F E D C, where G and C are the structural start and end points would be look as follows; the G and the C would both be stemmed notes while the F E D would all be unstemmed and a slur would link the G to the C displaying the structural melodic unit.


\(^3\) Forte and Gilbert, \textit{Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis}. 133
In traditional Schenkerian analysis, the Urline will always boil down to a melodic descent from the primary tone of a scale, typically the third, fifth, or eight degree, through a series of melodic diminutions, down to the tonic at the piece’s close. While useful, this format works best for pieces based largely in common practice principles of harmony. With more modern music, this highly tonal system does not necessarily work as well. Jeremy Day O’Connell in his paper “Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition” presented a modified system for using Schenkerian analysis for less tonally inclined pieces. In it, he analyses Debussy’s “La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin” with an inverted interpretation of the tonal Urline that fits with Debussy’s use of pentatonicism. Rather than seeing the melodic structure as a stepwise descent of scale degrees from the fifth, O’Connell analyses the structural line as scale degree five ascending through six before a final leap to eight. O’Connell makes a compelling argument that his analysis does not contradict Schenkerian tradition, but simply expands the definition of tonality to observe how Debussy used a “remarkable and previously unexplored ‘flexibility’ in the diatonic system.”

My analysis does not use the pentatonic expansion of tonality as described by O’Connell, but his insights certainly helped broaden my use of Schenekrian methods when analysing the works of Joe Hisaishi.

II. Analysis

The first pair of pieces I analysed were “The Sixth Station” from Spirited Away and “Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind” from the movie of the same name. These pieces both feature a similarly ambient, tonally ambiguous solo piano, so analysing them together made

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sense. Both pieces open with a rising left hand arpeggiation that outlines an extended chord, Cmin9 in “Nausicaa” and Emaj9 in “Sixth Station.” As with any extended harmony, the chords are not one simple triad but actually two or more triads superimposed on one another. “Sixth Station” features this particularly prominently as Hisaishi ascends the left hand in only E major triadic harmony, but descends in the extension tones. “Nausicaa” achieves a similar effect by vamping between two variants of an extended C minor chord. Even as the pieces open up harmonically by moving to new chords, all the chords use extensions to maintain the ambiguity in the sound. Hisaishi includes both triad and extension in the same left hand sweep, and so they sound inextricably linked.

One could argue for analysing the extended chords in these pieces as just two different harmonies. In particular, Hisaishi’s use of the melody to reify the harmony suggests a more complex use of harmony. In a phrase in “Sixth Station” for example, Hisaishi places the first melody note of B in a measure to match up with the triadic harmony forming a B over E major triad. When the descending extensions of seventh and ninth come in, the melody also descends to an A which implies a D major harmony. Then the left hand falls silent as the melody descends to resolve back to triadic harmony. This interlocking of melody and harmony makes the extension sound neither like an independent chord, nor a simple coloristic choice. Instead, the distinct but ephemeral and flowing quality of the harmonies is more reminiscent of passing chords in Baroque counterpoint than anything else. However, to totally view the harmonies as just passing chords over simplifies it as well. By choosing extensions to build the passing chords, Hisaishi draws the harmonic context away from a traditionally classical sound and into a more modal and almost jazzy character. By merging this modern harmony with classical techniques, Hisaishi
achieves the airiness of good counterpoint as well as the mysterious tension embedded in extended harmonies.

The next two pieces I analysed were “One Summer’s Day,” also from Spirited Away, and “The Girl Who Fell From The Sky” from Castle in the Sky. Though these pieces vary their instrumentation and color, they both use one of Hisaishi’s favorite progressions. This progression of vi - V (or iii) - IV - I features in many more of Hisaishi’s compositions than just these two and it stands out as an auditory “signature” of his music. In both “One Summer’s Day” and “The Girl Who Fell From The Sky,” Hisaishi pairs this progression with a stepwise descent from scale degree 1 to 5 in the melody and degree 6 to 3 in the bass forming a series of parallel tenths. The melody forms two distinct melodic phrases over each pair of chords in a classical call and response. He often continues descending the sequence through another three or four chord set as he does in several variations in “The Girl Who Fell From The Sky.” Other times, he will end the sequence and initiate a “turn” where the piece returns to the top of the sequence or progresses to a different section like in “One Summer’s Day.” Robert Rusli has noted that all the films that feature this progression have a youthful protagonist, and has suggested that the progression may signal Hisaishi’s harmonic interpretation of lost youth. The progression evokes a warm but forlorn feeling like slightly forgotten nostalgia. Much of this is down to the harmonic ambiguity. Unlike most chord progressions which begin the I chord, this progression starts on the vi. Because the vi chord shares so many notes with the I chord, it does not change the tonal center. But because the vi chord is minor, it obscures the modality of the phrase. This haziness around the precise modality of the piece is particularly prominent in the next piece I analysed.

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5 Rusli, Robert O., “Hisaishi’d Away: An Analysis of Joe Hisaishi’s Film Scoring Technique,” Honors Thesis, Wesleyan University, April, 2010. 19
6 Rusli, “Hisaishi’d Away,” April, 2010. 21
An upbeat and airy waltz, “Merry-Go-Round” from Howl’s Moving Castle has an ineffable joy about it. So I must admit my surprise when I got the score for this piece and saw it was in G minor. Composers tend to reserve minor keys for heavy or sad music, so to have this bright waltz set in a minor key seemed unorthodox. In my analysis though, this choice of key became less and less unusual and actually helped point to an important feature of Hisaishi’s music. Although “Merry-Go-Round” is nominally in G minor, Hisaishi slips fairly seamlessly back and forth between G minor and its relative major, B-flat. He alternates the harmony with almost every other phrase and only until the piece reaches cadences can one reliably discern what key it is in. He also uses the extended harmonies trick like in “Nausicaa” and “Sixth Station” to further obscure the tonality of the piece. Finally, and I think most importantly, Hisaishi superimposes the relative key in the melody. For example, in the opening moments when the harmony is clearly G minor, the melody outlines a B-flat major chord. When the left hand harmony switches to B-flat major, the melody tends to emphasize aspects of a G minor tonality. This blending of major and minor is a hallmark of Hisaishi’s writing. As I mentioned before, Hisaishi typical vi - V(iii) - IV - I used in “One Summer’s Day” and “The Girl Who Fell From The Sky” obscures mode by starting in one mode and ending in another. The melodies, especially the phrase from “One Summer’s Day,” have a childlike quality which, when overlaid onto a modally ambiguous progression, creates this sense of lost innocence. Aiming to emulate Hisaishi’s blending of modality and flowing melodic lines, I began to write my pieces.

III. Composition
My piano piece I titled “Moonlit Waltz” drew mostly from “Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind” and “Merry-Go-Round.” For the intro of the piece, I aimed to emulate the harmonic landscape of “Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind” with its mysterious extended chords. However, Hisaishi’s music tends to have an expansive sound and the wide sweeping arpeggios of “Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind” are no exception. I wanted my piece to have the same mysteriousness but with a tighter sound. To do this, I used the chordal extensions as passing tones in falling arpeggios rather than have them as wide intervallic skips and leaps. This still has the same tension of an extension but makes the sound closer and less airy. I also kept the range fairly narrow to enhance the sense of closeness.

The second half of “Moonlit Waltz” pulls heavily from “Merry-Go-Round.” I loved the waltz rhythms of “Merry-Go-Round” and wanted to have that in my piece. The harmonies follow a similar bassline to “Merry-Go-Round,” but I changed the character of some of the chords. In particular, “Merry-Go-Round” uses altered chords to make chromatic inner lines, a feature that gives the piece its swooning romantic sound. Instead, I wanted to continue the more mysterious sound I had started in the intro. As such, I paired back the left hand accompaniment to have a less rich and more floating texture. Also, I used the altered harmonies less for their chromatic leading qualities and more for their modal implications. For example, “Merry-Go-Round” uses the raised sixth degree to make secondary dominant. In my piece, I use the same raised sixth, but it adds a modal mixture effect.

The last aspect I tried to emulate from “Merry-Go-Round” was its use of melodies written in the relative key. This certainly proved the most challenging feature to replicate. At first, everything I wrote felt square and did not have the flowing nature of Hisaishi’s melodies.
When I started, I tried to maintain many of the intervallic sequences of “Merry-Go-Round.” This was likely the consequence of analysing this piece using a Schenkerian method. Schenkerian analysis tends to emphasize linear intervallic analysis. While this helped to break down a piece, sticking closely to that same intervallic thought process made music that felt forced and tight. Eventually I found that by simplifying the process, I got better results. I found that using superimposed chords like a jazz musician led to a better outcome. For example, thinking about a motif as an outline of E flat major over an outline of C minor yielded far more productive results than focusing on a particular series of intervals.

My next piece, “By My Side” compounded on my challenges in writing melodies like Hisaishi. I based this piece on “One Summer’s Day.” The only major change was that I chose to write this piece for guitar as I thought the texture would fit nicely with the warmth of the guitar. This meant I had to make some harmonic alterations to deal with the limitations of the instrument. Other than that, I kept the melody and bass outline similar because I wanted to focus on creating my own melodies over a typical Hisaishi format. “One Summer’s Day” has a characteristically “Hisaishi” sound and is probably the piece that best defines his style. If I could understand “One Summer’s Day” then, I would understand much of Hisaishi technique. In this piece, Hisaishi manages to achieve hazy impressionism and yet still have flowing and highly singable melodies. However, I quickly encountered difficulties in writing any melodies over the form. Although distinctly Hisaishi in character, “Merry-Go-Round” is a pastiche of a European Waltz and its melodies fit that style. That means it fits a relatively typical western structure I was already familiar with. “One Summer’s Day” on the other hand did not fit immediately into any neat structure I knew of and it made writing in that style all the more difficult. The struggle I had
with my melodies sounding stodgy and wooden in my waltz only doubled in writing this one. That signature Hisashi vi - V(iii) - IV - I progression proved particularly sticky. Only when I started to understand how Hisaishi’s music flowed did my writing begin to fall into place.

Hisaishi’s melody writing distinctly resembles Baroque counterpoint. I had mentioned this before in the context of “Nausicaa” and “Sixth Station,” but I did not realize how integral this point would prove. Counterpoint functions differently from much common practice analysis which relies on roman numerals and blocked chords. Contrapuntal harmony builds on the combination of bassline and melodic motion rather than triadic tension. This is actually similar to Schenkerian analysis, but traditional Schenkerian analysis still relies on chords and roman numerals to define harmony. Instead, I found Baroque counterpoint with its use of sequencing the most enlightening to Hisaishi’s music. Most western music uses a chordal loop, often the much maligned four chords, as the basis for melody writing. The chords start on the tonic, venture to the dominant or a substitution with similar tension, and return to the tonic. Sequences function differently. This technique relies on repeating a melodic phrase over a progressing bassline. The bassline can have a strict roman numeral implication, but some progressions, like a circle progression, do not need to.

When I looked back at Hisaishi’s music, I saw he uses bassline sequences to drive most of his harmonies rather than a tonic-dominant-tonic loop. For example, the important part of Hisaishi’s classic vi - V(iii) - IV - I is not actually the roman numerals but the descending bassline from scale degrees 6 to 3. This descent begins and ends on the first and the fifth of the vi chord. The melodies he writes over this then always outline the I chord. This is the same idea of superimposition that I found in his other works, only here it is in a larger, horizontal scale rather
than the typically narrower vertical application. I started to think of these progressions as “harmonic spaces” where many chords might occur, but only one harmony dominates. This accounts for much of how Hisaishi balances a flowing harmony with a catchy melody. Although Hisaishi’s harmonic rhythm seems quick—each chord rarely occupies more than half a measure—the progression of linear outlines is rather slow. This is what permits him to have grace and flow to his music while still maintaining a simple and song-like melody. I found that once I simplified my thinking from chords and intervallic sequences to these larger scale “harmonic spaces,” I started to write melodies with more grace. While I do not think my melodies match up to Hisaishi, thinking this way allowed me to get closer to that flowing yet singable melody he is so well known for.

IV. Conclusion

Hisaishi’s music has many reasons for its appeal. His harmonic choices certainly have an appealing mystery. Also, being part of some of the most successful children’s movies helps any composer. However, one cannot diminish the role melodies play in making his music so popular. His tunes manage to balance flow and memorability perfectly. My analysis revealed two reasons for this. Firstly, Hisaishi has supreme command of contrapuntal writing and traditional western classical form. Much of what I noticed about Hisaishi’s use of counterpoint is nothing revolutionary, but simply excellent compositional craftsmanship. Secondly, Hisaishi’s use of modal mixture, especially when it comes to the superimposition of relative majors and minors, defines much of his sound. The constant blending of major and minor modes helps make Hisaishi’s simple melodies feel both happy and sad in a way that evokes nostalgia. As with any
great composer’s works, Hisaishi’s oeuvre has many more layers and complexities than I have uncovered here. Other depths to plumb include his use of pentatonics and the influence of traditional Japanese music on his style. However, I do think I have found one small aspect as to why Hisaishi’s music has captivated so many.
Bibliography


One Summer Day Reduction

Background

Middle ground [A+B] Theme

E Theme

D Theme
Moonlit Waltz

Mark Laaninen
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sfpp

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sfpp

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sfpp

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sfpp

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sfpp

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sfpp
ancora meno mosso...

piu poco...

ancora meno mosso...

Molto Ritardando
By My Side

Mark Laaninen

\[ J = 60 \]

\[ J = 90 \]