

Jazzing in the Tokyo Slum: Music, Influence, and Censorship in Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel*

by MICHAEL W. HARRIS

Abstract: Akira Kurosawa's 1948 film *Drunken Angel* was his first collaboration with composer Fumio Hayasaka, with whom the director would work until Hayasaka's death. This article examines two elements that shaped the final product but have rarely been discussed: similarities between G. W. Pabst's *The Threepenny Opera* (1931) and music's function in structuring the film's narrative. These are connected through Kurosawa's desire to have used "The Ballad of Mack the Knife" in the film's score.

“Die Moritat von Mackie Messer,” better known in the United States as “The Ballad of Mack the Knife,” was made famous by musicians like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Bobby Darin. But in 1947, the song had yet to become a jazz standard and was known only by those familiar with its origins in Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s 1928 stage musical *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) or G. W. Pabst’s 1931 film adaptation. It was this song, along with other parts of the Brecht and Weill musical, that Akira Kurosawa (1910–1995) had in mind when he began meeting with his new composer, Fumio Hayasaka (1914–1955), about the score for his seventh feature film, *Drunken Angel* (1948).

In an interview with Donald Richie, Kurosawa said: “In this picture I finally discovered myself. It was *my* picture: I was doing it and no one else.”¹ Stephen Prince echoes Kurosawa’s statement, saying that *Drunken Angel* was the film in which Kurosawa “came into his own as a director,” and Donald Richie, echoing many other critics, says that it “marks the major ‘breakthrough’ of a major directorial talent who has finally ‘realized’ himself.”² Lars-Martin Sorensen, however, looks at

1 Bert Cardullo, ed., *Akira Kurosawa Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 8.

2 Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 78; Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 47.

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the film through the lens of the many revisions inflicted upon it by Allied occupation censors and concludes that “the film is not the work of Kurosawa alone. An adequate description of the existing film must reckon with the influence of Kurosawa as well as a number of co-authors. . . . *Drunken Angel* can be more aptly described as a tug-of-war between several parties than as the work of Kurosawa ‘and no one else.’”³

Musically speaking, the film initiated Kurosawa’s important relationship with composer Fumio Hayasaka. With the exception of *The Quiet Duel* (1949), the two would work together on all of Kurosawa’s subsequent films until Hayasaka’s death from tuberculosis in 1955; their collaboration would include such seminal films as *Rashomon* (1950), *Ikiru* (1952), and *Seven Samurai* (1954). For Kurosawa, working with Hayasaka was a “turning point” in his handling of music for his films, which suggests that previously he had been “too casual” about how he used music.⁴ Although Kurosawa’s first six films had demonstrated a musical and aural awareness, it was with Hayasaka that he would craft an aural landscape more complex than in any of his previous features. The Tokyo slum of *Drunken Angel* bursts with jazz blaring from loudspeakers, as music spills into the trash-littered streets from the No. 1 Cabaret Club. The aural density of the score was almost entirely new and original.

Using jazz music to represent the gangsters who inhabit the slum should have posed a problem to the American censors during the Allied occupation (1945–1952) after the end of World War II. The music, a symbol of Western freedom, is associated with criminals who also dress in Western clothes—the very image of 1940s gangsters, known in Japan as yakuza. As Sorensen discusses in his book *Censorship of Japanese Films during the US Occupation of Japan*, the byzantine nature of the Allied censorship system might have allowed Kurosawa and Hayasaka to get away with such violations.⁵ But where Sorensen and others have focused on the influences of Allied censors on the script, I demonstrate the ways in which both Fumio Hayasaka and G. W. Pabst’s 1931 film version of *The Threepenny Opera*, along with the censors, contributed to the finished product.

To achieve this, I first offer a brief summary of censorship during the Allied occupation, which is followed by an overview of Japanese film music before *Drunken Angel* and then a discussion of music in Kurosawa’s two previous films to demonstrate the director’s growing awareness of music’s cinematic function. With this background in place, I present my investigation of connections between Pabst’s 1931 *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Drunken Angel*, and I conclude with a specific analysis of *Drunken Angel*’s music.

Censorship during the Occupation (or Why Don’t You Put a Baseball Scene In?). Following Japan’s capitulation in World War II, the Allied occupation of the defeated nation imposed many reforms—political, economic, and cultural—designed to change the militarist government to a Western-style democracy. Directives were routinely handed down by the General Headquarters (GHQ) and the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP)—the office of General Douglas

3 Lars-Martin Sorensen, *Censorship of Japanese Films during the US Occupation of Japan: The Case of Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 236.

4 Quoted in Stuart Galbraith IV, *The Emperor and the Wolf* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001), 96.

5 Sorensen, *Censorship*, 271.

MacArthur—which would create the various agencies and regulations intended to guide the nation along this path. Two specific agencies within the American administration, sometimes at odds with each other, oversaw the censorship and production of Japanese films: the Motion Picture Unit of the Motion Picture and Theatrical Branch of the Civil Information and Education Section (CI&E) and the Press, Pictorial, and Broadcasting Division of the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD), a division of US Army Intelligence.⁶ From this alphabet soup of acronyms came the regulations that would be used to make sure that films produced during the occupation reflected the values of a modern, Westernized society.

On November 19, 1945, CI&E released a statement that listed thirteen criteria under which a film would be banned or censored:

1. Infused with militarism
2. Showing revenge as a legitimate motive
3. Nationalistic
4. Chauvinistic or anti-foreign
5. Distorting historical facts
6. Favoring racial or religious discrimination
7. Portraying feudal loyalty or contempt of life as desirable and honorable
8. Approving suicide either directly or indirectly
9. Dealing with or approving the subjugation or degradation of women
10. Depicting brutality, violence or evil as triumphant
11. Anti-democratic
12. Condoning the exploitation of children
13. At variance with the spirit or letter of the Potsdam Declaration or any SCAP directive⁷

These declarations echoed the reasons many films had been confiscated, only three days earlier, on the orders of another SCAP directive:

In the past, Japanese motion pictures have been utilized to propagate nationalistic, militaristic and feudalistic concepts; i.e., conformity to a feudal code, contempt for life, creation of the “Warrior Spirit,” the uniqueness and superiority of the “Yamato” (Japanese race), the “special role of Japan in Asia,” etc. Many such motion pictures are still being distributed and exhibited.⁸

6 Ibid., 86.

7 Quoted in Kyoko Hirano, *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema under the American Occupation, 1945–1952* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 44–45.

8 “Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers,” SCAP Directives to the Imperial Japanese Government, 1945–1952, SCAPIN 287, Tokyo, GHQ, SCAP (hereafter referred to only by the SCAPIN number).

Following these instructions was an eight-page list of films that were to be banned by the directive, listed according to studio. All the films Kurosawa had already made—four in all—were on the list.

The CI&E, though, was interested in more than just telling the Japanese studios what they could not depict in their films. As part of the democratization and Westernization of Japanese society, it sought to encourage filmmakers to depict qualities and subjects that would assist the occupation's goals. Kyoko Hirano quotes ten subjects that SCAP believed would help this process:

1. Showing Japanese in all walks of life cooperating to build a peaceful nation.
2. Dealing with the resettlement of Japanese soldiers into civilian life.
3. Showing Japanese prisoners of war formerly in our hands being restored to favor in the community.
4. Demonstrating individual initiative and enterprise solving the post-war problems of Japan in industry, agriculture, and all phases of the national life.
5. Encouraging the peaceful and constructive organization of labor unions.
6. Developing political consciousness and responsibility among the people.
7. Approval of free discussion of political issues.
8. Encouraging respect for the rights of men as individuals.
9. Promoting tolerance and respect among all races and classes.
10. Dramatizing figures in Japanese history who stood for freedom and representative government.⁹

How this actually played out in films, however, was a completely different matter. One of the more notorious ways in which Western freedoms manifested was in the sudden appearance of kissing and sexual expression in film, because previously “the slightest amorous expressions had been condemned as a symbol of Western decadence.”¹⁰ Another was the increase in scenes involving baseball. Before the war, baseball had been quite popular in Japan, and after the war ended, the sport regained its status.¹¹ Depictions of team sports were encouraged because baseball was viewed as promoting Western democratic values of fair play, teamwork, and the promotion of individual accomplishment.

The CI&E and CCD, though both ostensibly trying to achieve the same goal, were frequently at odds, partially because the two agencies had two different primary functions: one positive and one negative.¹² On the one hand, the CI&E wanted to promote

9 Quoted in Hirano, *Mr. Smith*, 38.

10 Hirano, *Mr. Smith*, 154.

11 *Ibid.*, 175.

12 This is not to say, though, that the CI&E did not occasionally request cuts, or the CCD recommend additions. This was another source of frequent frustrations between the two agencies.

Allied policies and agendas and would encourage filmmakers, usually during the script phase, to add in content along those lines. The CCD, on the other hand, would review both scripts and finished films and would order cuts made before they could be released.¹³ Sorensen details the often-contentious relationship between the two agencies in his book on censorship and summarizes: “[I]f some of the films of the occupation era at times appear slightly muddled and contradictory, it is no coincidence—at times an unusual number of cooks contributed to the preparations of what was served up to audiences.”¹⁴ He hypothesizes that the conflict between agencies allowed Kurosawa and other directors a chance to slip in content that might otherwise be banned by one agency but not the other.¹⁵

Japanese Film Music before *Drunken Angel* (or *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Shamisen*). Kurosawa writes that he was trying to create a new standard for Japanese film music with Hayasaka and that “music was considered during the writing stage, mapped out, and tied to the images and what kind of role it would play.”¹⁶ While the two films Kurosawa made immediately before *Drunken Angel* show some growing awareness of music’s ability to function as more than mood setter, it is with *Drunken Angel* that music begins to play a larger structural role, which would find its most overt expression in *Ran* (1985). In this later film, Kurosawa and composer Toru Takemitsu create a structural framework for the audio (and visual) space, building a network of symbols that are reflective of the Nō aesthetics grafted onto Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.¹⁷

Kurosawa’s six previous films demonstrate that, though he may have been “careless” about music, he was aware of and constantly manipulating the aural track to refine his narrative techniques. This is demonstrated impressively in his first film *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), in which the film’s final duel features the two combatants battling among tall grass reeds as the sound of wind obliterates almost everything else on the audio track, raising the stakes of the fight to a more mythological level. In fact, the ominous quality of the wind enters at the end of the previous scene, when the challenge is issued, and long before the viewer actually arrives at the dueling grounds.

But if *Drunken Angel* was intended as a musical “turning point,” then it is important to distinguish what it was turning from. Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie describe most film music in Japan (until the late 1950s) as having the quality of “general

13 From CCD memo quoted in Sorensen, *Censorship*, 86.

14 Sorensen, *Censorship*, 101–102.

15 *Ibid.*, 96.

16 Quoted in Galbraith, *Emperor and the Wolf*, 96.

17 While almost all of Kurosawa’s films following *Drunken Angel* show a continued, sophisticated use of music and sound—the careful manipulations of the audio track in *Ikiru* (1952) and music and sound cues in *Dodes’ka-den* (1970) come to mind—*Ran* represents the culmination of his manipulations and experimentations. For more on this film, see Tomoko Deguchi, “Forms of Temporal Experience in the Music of Toru Takemitsu” (PhD diss., University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 2005); Tomoko Deguchi, “Gaze from the Heavens, Ghost from the Past: Symbolic Meanings in Toru Takemitsu’s Music for Akira Kurosawa’s Film, *Ran* (1985),” *Journal of Film Music* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 51–64.