



### ***An Idol Without Organs***

My first encounter with the virtual pop-idol, Hatsune Miku<sup>i</sup>, took place within a dimly lit lecture theatre in the backstreets of Tokyo's Shibuya Ward. In 2014, myself and fifty-eight other composers had been drawn there by the tentacles of a multinational energy drink's marketing division. Buried deep inside a modernist vault of steel and concrete, the space was heavily perfumed with the scent of natural fibres and whatever glue had been used when laying down carpet the previous day. As a live studio audience, we were there to serve as human ballast whilst the late composer and recording artist Isao Tomita was interviewed at length about his life's work; a career which had radically tested the possibilities of synthetic voice within the arts.

As Japan's first composer to achieve widespread success within electronic music, Tomita had spent more than half a century conjuring synthetic voices from the ether. Well into his ninth decade, it was his latest project - developing a stage-musical featuring Hatsune Miku - for which he was most enthusiastic. The production was to be based on Kenji Miyazawa's literary masterpiece, *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, a haunting novel in which two children board a cosmic train, venturing into the night sky and touring the Milky Way. Exploring its depths, they undertake a beautiful yet macabre journey, from which only one returns. Miyazawa's meditation on death, reinterpreted by Tomita as a dazzling holographic musical (featuring a virtual idol with knee-long turquoise pigtails) made me wonder to what extent the auditorium's gluey vapours were affecting me. As I strained to match the real-time translation delivered via earpiece with Tomita's animated gesticulations on stage, I became lost inside a blizzard of crisscrossing voices; disembodied, synthetic, translated and encoded.

Before then, the possibility that virtual idols could acquire millions of fans, fill stadiums, perform stage musicals and feature in TV commercials would have struck me as unlikely; a scenario more at home in William Gibson's literary universe than the pop landscape of 2014. However, as Tomita outlined during his interview, the emergence of such idols was incremental. As a soundtrack composer for film and television during his early career, Tomita's pay checks were dependent on his ability to wield the orchestra as a synthetic vocal presence. A presence capable of holding cinema's eye within a sonic cradle of artificial sighs, swoons, gasps and shrieks. This has largely been the role of orchestral music throughout the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema, serving as an elastic voice with which to breathe life into its otherwise mute procession of imagery<sup>ii</sup>. Perhaps the most visceral example we can look to is Bernard Herrmann's scoring of the shower scene in *Psycho*, where the orchestra conjures both screams of terror and the tearing of flesh. As Tomita outlined during his interview, Hatsune Miku's helium-pop voice is hardly a historical aberration but was instead forged in the blistering orchestral heat of cinema's psychotic relationship between sound and image.

It should be emphasised here that all music idols are fake. What listeners encounter in a musical brand such as Taylor Swift is a complex alloy of signification, superheated and moulded as an incandescent outer shell. What is radically different about Vocaloids such as Hatsune Miku is that they abandon any pretence of the *real*. They reduce pop to nothing but the most pristine surfaces. No more interiority, no more soul, no more morality. All of these mythologies are exchanged in an instant for something which is much more icy, metallic and alien.

To understand how Vocaloids such as Hatsune Miku reduce expression to mere surface, we should look beyond their orchestral origins and instead consider their theatrical function. When later interviewed by The Japan Times about his re-interpretation of *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, Tomita identified yet another crucial strand within Miku's DNA: that of Bunraku Theatre. The puppets of Bunraku are three to five feet high with movable hands, feet and mouths. Their bodies are controlled by three operators who remain visible throughout the performance, while the narrative text is voiced from a separate stage. As an audience member, one can experience the richest of human expressions while simultaneously viewing their fabrication. Most importantly, this occurs without conflict. Herein lies the key theatrical device which Vocaloids extend. Expression and its artifice are consumed, not as oppositional forces but as parallel forms<sup>iii</sup>. Whilst it was Crypton Media who initially engineered Hatsune Miku's image in 2007, Miku's ever-expanding online presence is fabricated and maintained almost entirely by dedicated fans (a mode of amateur expression referred to as *doujin*)<sup>iv</sup>. Those who participate in generating Miku's songs, images and music videos are at once immersed in both her production and consumption. An idol, who through their own actions, they understand as being impossible.

In the manufacture and dissemination of Vocaloids such as Hatsune Miku, not only are they energised on the boundary line between real and unreal but - like Bunraku's puppets - they inevitably contaminate our sense of being. Where in these modes of expression does the so-called soul find a nook in which to conceal itself in a system so immaculately empty? Summarized by Roland Barthes in his analysis of Bunraku Theatre as follows, "...the signifier cunningly does nothing but turn itself inside out, like a glove" (Barthes 1983 – p. 49). Flesh is peeled back, never revealing that cherished interiority, but rather festering impersonal circuitries. What medical instruments would be appropriate in dissecting a body such as this? None would be suitable, for Vocaloids highlight the impossibility of stable and clearly bounded individuals altogether. As a turquoise coagulation in the folds of participatory fan culture, Hatsune Miku performs what Donna Haraway once described as bodies which are "*material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction; 'objects' like bodies do not pre-exist as such*" (Haraway – p. 208). Is there a more literal example than that of the virtual idol? A pop-composite whose post-human body emerges as a mesh of collaborative fan fiction. A body for which everything is produced, and nothing is given. An idol without organs.

Unfortunately, much of what has been authored in the English language regarding the emergence of virtual idols has fixated on Hatsune Miku as evidence of a perceived wackiness within Japan's post-war pop. Music journalists are frequently the worst offenders, croaking together from a neo-humanist swap. How could those earnest howls from the soul which have characterised popular Western music for almost a century be reconciled alongside a character who exercises such polite indifference toward these human concerns? To plunge deep into the atmospheric depths of such idols is to fatally compromise accepted norms of stable subjects, clearly bounded bodies, interiority, and individual autonomy. To these previously dominant mythologies, Hatsune Miku impacts upon their surface like corrosive ooze, opening up new modes of shared subjectivity and communal creativity.

## References

---

- Barthes, R. 1983. "Animate / Inanimate". In: *Empire of Signs*. Translated by Richard Howard, 58 – 60. Los Angeles: Hill & Wang.
- Brophy, P. (2004). "The Modern Soundtrack". London, UK: The British Film Institute.
- Deleuze, G. Guattari, F. (1988). "How Do You Make Yourself A Body Without Organs?" In: *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London, UK Athlone Press. pp. 165 – 184.
- Haraway, D. (1991). "Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature". New York, USA: Routledge.
- Kikuchi, D. (2016). "Isao Tomita's Journey from Snowflakes to Holograms." Tokyo, Japan: Japan Times. Accessed online: 03/04/2020 <<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/01/10/music/isao-tomita-journey-snowflakes-holograms/#.XoafUtMzbOQ>>
- Miyazawa, K. (1996). "Night on the Galactic Railroad." Bilingual ed. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo.
- Psycho*. (2008). DVD. Universal Pictures. Sydney, Australia. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
- Tomita, I. (2013). "Symphony Ihatov." [special audio CD]. Tokyo, Japan: Denon.
- RBMA. (2014). "Isao Tomita on Apocalypse Now, Moog and Vocaloid Hatsune Miku." *Red Bull Music Academy* [online video] Accessed: 03/04/2020 < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj1igvo\\_WnQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj1igvo_WnQ)>
- Whiteley, S. Rambarran, S (eds.) (2016). "The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality." Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Yamada, K. (2017). *Supercell Featuring Hatsune Miku*. New York: Bloomsbury.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> Hatsune Miku is a virtual pop-music idol whose image was created and marketed by Crypton Media Corporation and whose voice is a product of Yamaha's Vocaloid music software platform. While initial representations on were produced by Crypton Media, Hatsune Miku continues to evolve primarily through an expansive network of participatory fan culture; whereby imagery, songs, music videos, and fan fiction are produced and consumed by a largely decentralised and anonymous public.

<sup>ii</sup> For a richer analysis of the orchestra as a synthetic voice within the history of cinema, see Philip Brophy's essay on David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, published in the volume - *100 Modern Soundtracks*.

<sup>iii</sup> A comprehensive study of the cultural links between Bunraku Theatre and the participatory fan culture (doujin) of virtual idols can be found within the Oxford Book of Music and Virtuality.

<sup>iv</sup> This mode of expression – doujin, refers to amateur, often self-published content based on enduring characters.