

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**This guy needs no introduction:**

CLIP: GODZILLA ROAR

**But the composer does. Until recently, I hadn't thought much about who wrote the music to Godzilla because the music fits so perfectly with the visual.**

**Then I talked to John DeSentis. He's a conductor who specializes in performing the music of Akira Ifukube (AU-kira IF-koo-bay); the man who scored many Godzilla films, including the original one in 1954.**

SCORE FADES OUT

JOHN: Ifukube, his music, especially for Godzilla himself, the monster himself or herself was very visual. Like the theme, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, like that, like it's drawn your eye upwards. The theme is going upwards and like, oh my God, and then your peaks and then it comes back down. It's very visually like you're looking up and you're seeing this, this larger than life horrific, uh, creature.

**I asked John, what is a really unique thing about Ifukube that only a conductor like him or a musician would notice? He said, Ifukube loves to use alternating time signatures. I didn't know what that meant. So he explained it to me.**

JOHN: Most pop songs and stuff you hear are in four, four, four. You can have a mix of that and or something can start and go from three to five, which is one, two and three, one and two and three in four and five, one and two and three. And then, you know, he'll throw in like a three, like one, two, three, one and two and three. Like, like the, like the Godzilla theme, the theme that opens, um, Godzilla 1954 is actually an alternating four, four and five, four beat. So it's like Ba Da Dum, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah.

***It's so funny to hear you do that. I hear the music in my head every time. Every time you do that.***

FADE UP MUSIC

**And the most interesting aspect of Ifukube's collaboration on Godzilla is that he and the director -- Ishirō Honda -- had different ideas about what Godzilla represented. Honda saw Godzilla as a pure monster. Ifukube saw the monster as an anti-hero.**

**Usually in that kind of situation, the director would make the composer comply with his vision, or he'd replace the composer. But the director had so much respect for Ifukube, he let him compose a score that tells a different story musically than what's on screen.**

**There is a rare story of two artists having conversation that takes place within a single work of commercial art, and that artistic conversation adds layers of depth to the movie. And their disagreement wasn't just about Godzilla. It was about Japan and its role during World War II.**

**How that played out in a monster movie is just after the break.**

**BREAK**

**Erik Homenick runs a site about Akira Ifukube. He has immersed himself in studying the composer's work.**

**Erik says you can't separate Ifukube's music from his life experience. Every creative choice that Ifukube made came from a personal place, going back to his childhood.**

**ERIK: As a child when he played outside, he loved collecting reptiles and insects. You'd go out into the forest and collect and capture these things and bring them home. And he was just fascinated studying their anatomy, what they looked like, what their behaviors were like. If you think about it in these monster films, what are these monsters? Well, they're giant reptiles. They're giant insects. These are like blown up super images of the animals that he collected and was so close to and fascinated by as a youth. There was something about these films that in a sense brought out the child in him.**

**Ifukube was raised in a town called Hokkaido, deep into the north of Japan. And Hokkaido was an ancient home of an indigenous people called the Ainu.**

ERIK: And having so many Ainu friends, I think through, through his interactions with them, he was able to develop an even more profound, and dare I say, spiritual connection to nature.

**The Ainu are ethnically distinct from most Japanese. Historically, they've been looked down upon as primitive – which fascinated Ifukube. In fact, he would later call his own style of music, “primitivism.” And he often used Ainu culture as an inspiration.**

CLIP ONO ISLAND MUSIC

**But as a conductor, John DeSantis can see that Ifukube's “primitism” is a trick of ear. He says look at ritual music in the first Godzilla film, when the locals on Odo Island perform a ritual dance about their history with Godzilla. The music feels traditional but Ifukube is using mostly Western instruments.**

JOHN: It sounds like he's using, uh, traditional instruments, but he's not. He has one traditional instrument on there, which is a drum called the peangu. And that's kind of what has like that woodblock like ta ta ta kind of sound to it. So in reality, he, it's deceptively primitive. It's almost like it's advanced and it's tricking your mind into thinking that it's, it's a little bit more primitive than it actually is.

**Reiko Yamada is a composer and musician who studied under Ifukube at the Tokyo College of Music. She was impressed with his work but in the beginning, she didn't get why he was so into ancient Japanese folk music.**

REIKO: I grew up studying Western piano and most of Japanese musician start with German textbook and learning only Western music, so in fact when I encountered Ifukube's piano suite for the first time, a piece that is based on Japanese folk song, it did not interest me and I had no idea how to play it.

**But then many years later, Reiko was living in Chicago and she got into a car accident – a very serious accident.**

REIKO: Yeah, I was in surgical care for 11 days, almost like close to dying, it made it my life change of life, so I had to face the life or think about it was big thing, it was one of the reasons I started to practice his piece.

**Rediscovering Ifukube's work, she could feel his spiritual connection to ancient Japanese culture. And learning to play his music became part of her healing process, physically and emotionally.**

REIKO: Living many years away from Japan in United States, I started thinking more about own culture or identity and I started really need to think about more Japanese culture and I began to reflect again on the teaching of Master Ifukube, so in my quest to find a deeper artistic identity, I was reminded of his remarks of the understanding of one's own cultural identity. I was thinking more seriously what I am, who I am or what should I do in the United States as a Japanese – so many things!

**Back in the 1950s, Ifukube's contemporaries would have been surprised to hear him described as a quintessential Japanese composer.**

REIKO: His music had not accepted for long time in Japan since the Japanese music world was influenced by European style after WWII, and many Japanese blindly appreciate only imported culture and they reject and even despite traditional culture.

**Erik Homenick says Japan's cultural elite at the time looked down on Ifukube as something of a kook.**

ERIK: A good example is a composer called Hikaru Hayashi, who was considered to be a leader in the Japanese music world at the time. He was a very cosmopolitan composer, wanted to promote western music in Japan at the time and referred to Akira Ifukube as an idiot. When Ifukube's a one and only symphony called Symphonia Tapkaara, which is based on Ainu musical aesthetics was written in 1954, Hayashi lambasted the piece, said that we can't even qualify this as symphony, as music based on what we know music to be.

**That same year, 1954, Ifukube was offered the job of composing music for Godzilla. His friends told him don't take that job.**

ERIK: Colleagues of his thought, the film seemed like it would be pulp trash. It was a, it was a monster film, not very serious. Why would you want your name and career to be attached to something so, so silly or juvenile? And despite people very vigorously urging him not to take such an assignment, uh, the composer himself was actually quite excited about it. He, he said that when he

read the screenplay, he got like an electric shock or a, a true rush of excitement over the themes of the film.

**But Ifukube's understanding of the themes of the film was different than how the director understood them. To understand why, we need to go back to his life story again.**

**During the war, Ifukube was very pro Empire. And John says he can feel Ifukube's nostalgia for Imperial Japan in the score to Godzilla.**

JOHN: Mr Ifukube was a nationalist. He's, for most of his life, he still was at the time of Godzilla. It was very, very soon after the war.

CLIP: FRIGATE MARCH

JOHN: In his military march in the film, which is actually has its origins in a classical piece. He wrote called Kishi Mei. It would make sense to me that he would use that march that, uh, began essentially as a, a good fortune dance for the Japanese imperial army. Uh, that was the theme that he repurposed for what became known as the, the frigate March or like the military march for, um, for the original Godzilla.

**But Ifukube never saw combat. During the war, his job was to reverse engineer salvaged U.S. fighter planes. To do so, he used X-Rays without a protective lead suit. And Erik says Ifukube knew radiation was dangerous, but unfortunately lead was too expensive for wartime rations.**

ERIK: And at the very conclusion of the war, he was walking near his laboratory one day and he collapsed and coughed up blood due to the radiation poisoning. And he spent about a year almost bedridden directly after the war, recovering from radiation sickness.

CLIP: MOURNFUL MUSIC

ERIK: So especially in the first Godzilla film, you know, after it Godzilla's rampage in Tokyo, there's this very mournful music that is playing over scenes of people in hospitals, the victim of Godzilla. And there's a very poignant scene where there's a young child and somebody is holding a Geiger counter up to the child. And the Geiger counter is showing that this child has been irradiated, much like the victims who survived of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and this very poignant,

even funeral music by Ifukube is playing over these scenes. I think one of the reasons why this music is so effective is because the composer himself experienced radiation, sickness, radiation poisoning. He himself was irradiated.

**But that doesn't mean he was anti-war or against the atomic bomb itself. After Hiroshima, he was more shocked that the United States had the technology to make an atomic bomb and defeat Japan.**

ERIK: He just couldn't believe that the Japan was so far behind. As it turns out the west, and it was a little bit of a, of a bitterness and a resentment that he never quite got over. I don't think, I mean he, he didn't have animus towards, towards Westerners. I mean, Americans and Europeans would often visit him at his home in Tokyo to interview him about his music, about his film scores, and he was always extremely welcoming to, to all of them. But I really don't think in the more general sense, he got over the immense disappointment that Japan could actually be beaten by the West.

**John says those feeling colored Ifukube's interpretation of Godzilla when he first read the script.**

JOHN: One of the things that fascinated him about the character of Godzilla was that he had said I believe that like Japan was taken down from in World War II. Japan was defeated by more advanced weapons, but he loved the fact that there was this creature that advanced weaponry could not destroy, like, and they ultimately had to come up with something even more advanced, that being the oxygen destroyer to, to destroy Godzilla.

CLIP: GODZILLA'S TOKYO RAID

**Again, Erik Homenick**

ERIK: During Godzilla's Tokyo raid, he doesn't touch any of the ancient sites. He doesn't destroy the Imperial Palace. He doesn't wreck sites like the socks of Buddhist temple. It's all modern western style buildings that he's toppling. So he thought that was very exciting. And Godzilla represents the angry spirit of the pre-westernized Japan, you know, and an ancient life force that is angry that Japan not only lost the war, but is becoming Westernized. So Godzilla rises from the depths, angry at what Japan has become.

**But that was never the intention of the director, Ishirō Honda. He saw Godzilla as a cautionary tale against nuclear power. And that goes back to his experience. Where Ifukube's experience of the war was purely through Japanese media at the time – which was propaganda -- Honda saw the horrors of war up close.**

ERIK: Honda was conscripted no less than three times into the Japanese army during the war and he actually did see action and a towards the end of the war, Honda was taken as a prisoner of war in China and when Honda was at the end of the war, when Honda was being repatriated back to Japan, he actually passed through Hiroshima and saw with his own eyes what the atomic bomb did there.

**So if Honda saw Godzilla as the bomb incarnate, or even war incarnate, then Godzilla was a monster that had to be defeated.**

**But Ifukube since saw Godzilla as the angry spirit of ancient Japan, then his version of Godzilla was an anti-hero. And interestingly, the audience started to see Godzilla that way too. If you look at the later films in the franchise, Godzilla is Japan's protector, even if he's an unstable one. That goes back to the influence his music had on the audience during the very first Godzilla film, especially at the end when we're is supposed to feel relief that Godzilla has been defeated.**

CLIP: PRAYER FOR PEACE

ERIK: After Godzilla is dead. Ifukube repeats the same music, this prayer for peace to represent the tragedy of Godzilla's death that he uses earlier in the film, after the scenes of destruction in Tokyo, there is a television broadcast of an all girls choir singing this very mournful melody called the prayer for peace morning, the victims of Godzilla. I think what the composer is doing; he's equating the death of Godzilla directly to the death of his victims.

**Of course the first Godzilla film was a huge hit, so they figured out a way to bring the monster back for a sequel – or dozens of sequels.**

**And as the years went on, Ifukube continued scoring Godzilla and other monster movies or kaiju films, as they're called. And he continued using his approach of being an ethnomusicologist. For instance, in King Kong vs. Godzilla, he used island folk music that was specific to where the scenes took place.**

**Meanwhile, he kept working on classical pieces for concert halls. But his reputation as a composer of kaiju films was like a monster he couldn't escape.**

ERIK: In fact, there was something that he said one time where he said, you know the, the film score that I worked on for maybe a month or two, everybody knows that, but the concert work that I worked for on two years, nobody knows.

**So he went into teaching, where he encouraged his students to find their own voice, no matter what the world tells them. I asked Reiko Yamada if her former teacher ever talked about his film experiences.**

REIKO: He talked about film directors or movie in his class a lot. It really depends on the director but I believe that he didn't take the job when the director's ideas about the music about the music were too strict. And Japanese film composers also often have less time to write the music than in the U.S. This would often be frustrating for him.

**In the end, it was his students who got him the respect he deserved. And they accomplished this by staging a concert performance of his Godzilla scores. Erik says at first, Ifukube was didn't like this idea. He told his students that music is for movies. It doesn't belong in a concert hall.**

ERIK: But people pressed him. We want to hear this music in the concert hall. This is music that deserves to be heard in the concert hall. So he finally relented and said, okay.

CLIP: SYMPHONIC FANTASIA

ERIK: So in 1983 he wrote three pieces of music called the symphonic Fantasia's and these are three concerts, suites of music from his monster scores, the three symphonic Fantasia's were premiered in Tokyo in 1983 to rave reviews, rave reviews.

**In fact, some of those reviews were the very people who had dismissed him earlier – including the composer who once called him an idiot.**

**But John DeSantis thinks Ifukube needs more recognition in the West. That's why he's so passionate about conducting the Godzilla scores.**

JOHN: My goal is simply for people to enjoy hearing music that they'd never thought they'd get to hear live in that kind of setting in North America because nobody else in North America was, was doing it at the time or still is.

***Do you find that, I mean, what kind of reactions do you, do you get from people in that regard? I mean, do people come up to you and just say, uh, or what did they say?***

JOHN: Anything from, I can't believe, uh, I've, I've ever got to hear that. Thank you so much to you made a grown man cry. And I'm usually, you know, I just kind of say thank, I thank our musicians, you know, cause the musicians who are really, who make that authentic sound come forth, especially the a, the brass players and the, uh, the trumpet players, this music's very hard to play sometimes.

**And John is excited that in the 2019 movie *Godzilla King of the Monsters*, the composer Bear McCreary adapted Ifukube's scores throughout the film – which is the first time a Hollywood *Godzilla* movie has paid tribute to Ifukube.**

JOHN: The use of his music in that new movie is probably one of the most significant mainstream representations that he's had. I mean at least as far as eyeballs and ears on his film or on his scores probably since the 1960s

**Reiko Yamada is also dedicated to spreading awareness of Ifukube's work, although she focuses on his classical pieces, like the *Ritmica Ostinata* (rit-Me-ka OS-ti-nata).**

REIKO: When I play, when I start learning *Ritmica Ostinata*, it was so very difficult and actually I gave up a long time ago.

***Really? You gave up?!***

REIKO: Yeah, because I love that piece so much because that piece got me the chance to meet Ifukube, maestro Ifukube and I asked him so many questions about that piece, and I watch the music and I thought, it's impossible!

**I asked Reiko if she can hear a difference between the music he wrote for concert halls and the music he wrote kaiju films.**

REIKO: In my mind I never feel like kaiju. So he totally stay with his way of the style, the style of the composition. So that is amazing.

**Although not surprising. He put his heart and soul into everything he wrote.**

**In some ways, Ifukube's story is similar to many artists. They put their blood, sweat and tears into their work, but how that work is received and what part of it is valued -- or remembered -- is out of their control. And that can be maddening, especially for artists that are perfectionists and want to have full creative control of their work.**

**Ifukube may have wished he was better known for his classical pieces, but he created something that went far beyond his life -- something that is part of global culture.**

**He may have seen Godzilla as the spirit of ancient Japan, but in a way, he became the spirit that guided the monster into our homes. And he's the spirit that keeps bringing Godzilla back from the ocean, again and again and again.**

**SFX: ROAR + MUSIC FROM 2019 GODZILLA**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Reiko Yamada, Erik Homenick and John DeSentis. And special thanks to Joe Muszynski, a listener who suggested this episode.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**

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