

Visiting Scholar Series

University of Pittsburgh Department of Music

Visiting Scholar Kunio Hara, University of South Carolina “Music, Sound, and Nostalgia in *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Grave of the Fireflies*”



Abstract: In this presentation, Kunio Hara explores the essential role of sound and music in how we experience two classics of Japanese animation: Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* and Isao Takahata’s *Grave of the Fireflies*.

Although developed and released simultaneously as a double feature by Studio Ghibli in 1988, the worlds that the two films depict could not be more different. Similarly, Miyazaki and Takahata established differing working relationships with their musical collaborators. Miyazaki, on the one hand, turned to his trusted musical partner Joe Hisaishi early in the production. For the soundtrack of this project, Hisaishi suggested fashioning a collection of newly composed children’s songs as a starting point. On the other hand, Takahata took a more conventional path, using his keen directorial ear to interleave Michio Mamiya’s emotionally restrained underscoring with diegetic music that, at times, creates harrowing and devastating effects.

As a result, the two composers’ contributions to the films interact with their narratives in dissimilar ways, accentuating the gulf between the bucolic fantasy of Miyazaki’s *Totoro* and the stark realism of Takahata’s *Fireflies*.

At the same time, the two soundtracks highlight the directors’ shared ideas about the ability of sound and music to conjure powerful memories in surprising and unexpected ways.

Kunio Hara is Associate Professor of Music History at the University of South Carolina. His main area of research is 19th-century Italian opera, particularly the works of Giacomo Puccini. Kunio’s initial interest in Puccini’s musical representation of Japanese people and culture in *Madama Butterfly* developed into the exploration of the careers of Japanese opera singers, such as Tamaki Miura and Yoshie Fujiwara, who actively engaged with the opera. His article on Miura’s final performance of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* in Japan under U.S. occupation appeared in the journal *Music and Politics*. Later this fall at the national meeting of the American Musicological Society, Kunio will present a paper on Fujiwara Opera Company’s U.S. tour in the 1950s.

Kunio’s research also focuses on how the idea of nostalgia operates in Puccini’s operas and how the operas’ engagement with nostalgia contributes to their continuous popularity into the twenty-first century. Kunio’s article in the *Journal of the Society for American Music* studies the role that nostalgia played in the reception of the premiere of Puccini’s *La fanciulla del West* in New York City’s Italian American newspapers. Examination of nostalgia in other musical settings has resulted in an article on Tōru Takemitsu’s *Nostalgia*, a memorial composition for Andrei Tarkovsky named after his eponymous film, as well as his recent book *Joe Hisaishi’s Soundtrack for “My Neighbor Totoro,”* published as part of Bloomsbury’s 33 1/3 Japan series.

Kunio also serves as the chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee of the AMS Pedagogy Study Group and is currently on the editorial board of the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*.

Co-hosted by the Department of Music and the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures (Japan Studies) at the University of Pittsburgh, in collaboration with Department of Modern Languages at Carnegie Mellon University.

Generous support from the Japan Iron and Steel Federation and Mitsubishi endowments at the University of Pittsburgh.

Thursday, October 29, 2020, 4 p.m.

Livestreamed on the [Music at Pitt YouTube Page](#)

For more information visit music.pitt.edu or e-mail concerts@pitt.edu



University of
Pittsburgh

Department of Music
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences