

An analysis of “PPAP” by Pikotaro

A Case Study of the World Music in Popular Music

KOZUKI, Tomoko

Faculty of Education, Saitama University

Abstract

This paper will analyze “PPAP,” created and performed by Pikotaro, Japanese musician, and performer, released in 2016. It received worldwide views and listens, revealing its universality, modernity, and problem¹⁾.

The two fundamental concerns of this paper are world music and ethnomusicology²⁾.

This paper contains five sections. Section 1 (“Introduction”) shows the object of this research. Section 2 gives an outline of PPAP and introduces its short history from creation to acceptance. Section 3 (“Analysis”) classifies the piece into seven portions and discusses their constructions and elements. Section 4 (“Consideration”) shows the meaning of the analysis and clarifies the characteristics of the piece. Section 5 (“Conclusion”) examines the universality, modernity, and problem of PPAP.

Keywords: PPAP, Pikotaro, world music, ethnomusicology, Japanese traditional music and dance, European culture, classical music.

1. Introduction

Today we enjoy a variety of music and performances almost all around the world by means of various media. The diversity of the technology or methods of music and performances may be the most comprehensive in the history of man. This situation began at first in the advanced countries in the mid-1990s, when the internet, PC, and portable telephone gradually came into widespread usage. Now some people in developing countries can enjoy the same variety.

We can recognize this situation—the “melting pot of world music”—at the level of acceptance by the listener/spectator, but also at the levels of both creation and diffusion. This is the essence of creation by mankind in general: free selection, its mixing and new, creative production. In this sense, our contemporary situation is universal. However, on the other hand, there is a modern peculiarity: the content and the methods of selection and mixing are much wider. At the same time, this presents a new problem.

We thus consider the situation and the problem in popular music on a commercial basis. The reasons are as follows: this genre has had a larger consumer group than any other, and to date, there has not been much scientific research on this subject.

For this research, we will examine “PPAP,” released in 2016 on the Japanese YouTube site. It

quickly spread globally, which is quite rare, and we will clarify its universality, modernity, and problem via musical and cultural analyses.

2. Outline of “PPAP”

Here is the URL of the piece: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E00Zuayv9Q>.

The short history and process of the creation, diffusion, and acceptance are as follows³⁾.

There is a video in which Pikotaro, a Japanese songwriter and singer (1963–), born in Chiba Prefecture, sings and dances with the melody based on electronic sound “piko-piko.” It has gained attention in the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa, and so forth since its debut on YouTube in August of 2016.

It began at number 77 in the charts of the American magazine *Billboard* and was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the shortest music entered in the charts (the music portion comprises 45 seconds). This video became best in the world three times among YouTube video viewers since September 2016 on the replay ranking per week of the site, and its total replay counts over 4 billion times.

In 2016, it was selected for the several prizes: top ten words of the *Japan Vogue Word of the Year*, gold prize of the *Japan Vogue Word on the Internet of the Year*, the *special topic prize of the 58th Japan Music Records Prize*, and the *topic prize of Japan Cable Broadcasting*.

Pikotaro sings three words: “pen, apple, and pineapple,” stepping lightly with a peculiar costume. He wears all-python clothing and sunglasses and has a kinky permanent hairstyle.

Pikotaro says that the video first became a topic among Japanese high school students and then was featured on the video site 9GAG, which caused a replay number of more than 10 million. In September 2016, Justin Bieber, the world-famous Canadian singer, introduced it on his Twitter as his “favorite video,” which brought worldwide attention and an enormous increase in replay. At the same time, several foreign media outlets, such as CNN and web media, began to pay attention and diffused it in 134 countries.

The reasons of such a worldwide hit may be as follows: the length of the video is shorter, at 1 minute and 8 seconds; the impactful appearance of Pikotaro; and the totally comical atmosphere of the video.

It also has the feature of making imitations and parodies easily; this is why its related video number totals more than 70,000, and the replay number was 500 million in November 2016. An imitating video of the granddaughter of the president of the United States, President Trump, was diffused and became a topic.

3. Analysis

We analyze the composition and characteristic elements to examine the features of the piece. It will be clear by this analysis that it is composed of seven parts, each of which contains different elements of world music. We consider this piece based on a four-four meter. The length of each composition is shown in parentheses.

1. Beginning of the introduction (0'00"–0'12")

Composition

The name of Pikotaro is introduced by the sound, comprised of electronic instruments, and it give us the impression of a child's voice. Then the title of the piece is introduced in English and Japanese.

Elements

Only a high-pitched electronic sound is used. Childishness and cuteness are expressed by this sound, a lively rhythm, and melody.

2. First half of the introduction (0'13"–0'17")

Composition

Pikotaro appears wearing his peculiar costume with an expressionless face. He stands slovenly, saying nothing. Then the music begins with the scale C# – H – G# – F#. Pikotaro begins to dance.

Elements

A scale of descending and ascending figure is shown; each part shares the same notes. The last note, C#, is lain by the whisper of Pikotaro, "PPAP." This scale is based on the one of the traditional Japanese scales. The speed of the second figure of the scale is more than twice as fast as the first one.

The costume and attitude of Pikotaro remind us of a middle-aged male belonging to antisocial forces.

3. Second half of introduction (0'17"–0'24")

Composition

Eighth note measures continue during one-and-a-half measures; then the syncopation appears for the first time. This pattern is repeated once again.

Pikotaro continues to dance on this meter without singing.

Elements

The costume portrays one of the typical and impactful images about Japan, but the dance is moderate and makes us imagine the Japanese traditional dance of Kabuki or Nihon-buyou.

4. Main portion (0'24"–0'53")

Composition

The syncopation of the former part is taken over and used here totally. This part is dominated by this rhythm on the part of accompaniment and/or lyrics.

Here, Pikotaro first begins to sing, but without interval. He rather "talks," emphasizing the English intonation of the lyric on the syncopation.

Elements

This is a "song" without intervals, and it is dominated by the syncopation. Syncopation has been used in classical music since the Baroque era and has been widely diffused in many other

genres since the 20th century.

5. Ending 3–1 (0'53"–0'59")

Composition

Pikotaro raises his face and hands slowly, and then calmly brings them down. The music expresses his motion.

Elements

The electronic sound becomes higher and smaller at random and then fades out. This expresses here the first part of his motion.

6. Ending 3–2 (0'59"–1°03')

Composition

Only the face of Pikotaro is displayed, largely without sound.

Elements

He holds his hands lightly just under his chin, looking up bashfully at the listener.

7. Ending 3–3 (1°03'–1°08')

Composition

The same electronic tones play as the “Introduction,” sound, which pronounces “pi-ko.”

Elements

Like the “Introduction,” only the name of Pikotaro appears, which moves a little with the electronic sound.

4. Consideration

We consider the meaning of the piece according to the analysis above from seven points. The points from 4-1 to 4-3 show the characteristics of European culture; those from 4-4 to 4-6 depend on the Japanese traditional culture. Point 4-7 appeals to the world media situation from the end of the 20th century, which influences “PPAP.”

4.1 Base of twelve equal temperament

This piece relies on the twelve equal temperament. The sounds whose intervals are recognized as C, D, E, and so forth are selected among those of the electronic musical instruments.

This temperament has been widely used in European classical music since the 19th century and also in the many genres of the popular music since the 20th century. “PPAP” is one of them, and that is one of the reasons why this song is widely popular.

However, this “song” has no interval, no temperament. It may be the strategy to emphasize the rhythm of the lyric and accompaniment. It also results in the fact that many can imitate and make parodies easier and thus gain worldwide success.

4.2 Possibility of writing with the five-line staff notation

Pikotaro himself does not use this notation, but several music books are published⁴⁾, and those who are trained in the notation can easily dictate it because this piece uses twelve equal temperament.

There are four merits of this characteristic: 1) this piece can be played alone or together with someone else; 2) arrangements can be made easily and in different manners; 3) the composition and elements can be made clear; 4) the features can be shown clearly.

We point out the influences of these merits: characteristics 1 and 2 can give the listeners many pleasures and joys and the unity of community and extend the possibilities of arrangements; characteristics 3 and 4 indicate the possibility of using this notation for other music than Western and thus of recording and saving, examining, and performing research of them⁵⁾.

4.3 Diversity and unification: Essence of the European culture

This feature is pointed out at the scale part of the first half of introduction. The scale depends on the fourth intervals illustrated below.



Figure 1. The scale of the beginning

This interval is one of the most important of the Japanese traditional music; thus, it feels heterogeneous to most foreigners. However, it also has familiarity; this scale contains the European tradition and the principle of using one material that changes form.

The listeners recognize this part as follows: at the first part of the scale, C# – H – G# – F# descends by an eighth note and then ascends, but by a semiquaver and a glissando—more than twice as fast as the first part.

The core of the two figures are made of the same interval, but the speed is changed. This shows the diversity and unification of European culture and brings coherence, which is the constitution of the Western culture.

Syncopation also assures the unity here, being used in most of the piece.

4.4 Japanese style 3-1: Scale

We consider the words and conception of “Japanese style or things Japanese” as multifaceted and fictitious. With this assumption, we analyze the features of the piece.

As we mentioned in the discussion on “4-3 diversity and unification,” the continuous use of the fourth interval emphasizes the Japanese (East Asian) style which are showed in “Figure 2”⁶⁾. Additionally, its ambiguous tonality adds heterogeneity and impact to those of the European cul-

ture.

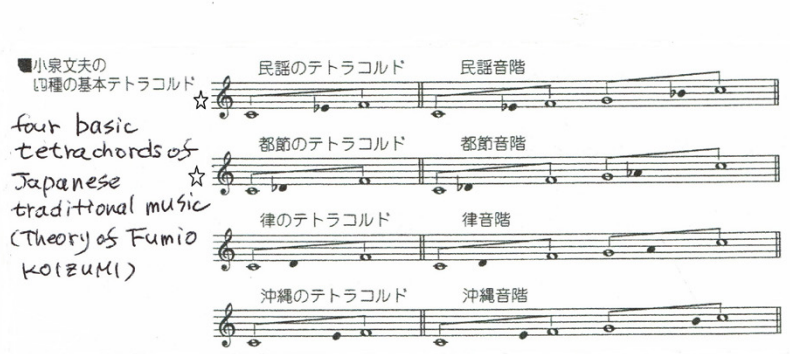


Figure 2. Japanese traditional scale and fourth interval

Pikotaro succeeded in expressing the main features of Japanese and European culture compactly and effectively. This has been the aim of Japanese government since the Meiji era, which aims to form a modern nation in many phases, the models of which are Western world⁷⁾. “PPAP” realizes this aim in the field of the popular music, and we can say that it has been acknowledged worldwide than any other piece.

4.5 Japanese style 3-2: Costume and dance

Costume: Listeners note a significant gap and impact between point 1 (the beginning of the introduction) and point 2 (the first half of the introduction); these two parts are juxtaposed to indicate the opposite expression that occurs within a very short timeframe.

However, these two are easily recognized as Japanese features. It clearly may be a part of Pikotaro’s strategy.

Regarding dance, the movements of arms and legs are consistently minor. People in kimono can dance such movements or choreography without any difficulty—or rather, we can say that such people are more suitable because this dance seems to borrow movements from the Kabuki dance (Nihon-buyou).

4.6 Japanese Style 3-3: Emphasizing infantility, cuteness, and unpleasant cuteness

For a long time, the Japanese culture has estimated infantility and cuteness, mainly indicative of children and young people, by different methods from other cultures. Here, we raise two examples: the adults cherish children, including those who do not belong to them. Some Europeans and Americans who visited Japan around at the beginning of the Meiji Era wrote of this situation with surprise; according to several works of recent research, the tendency of not wanting to become an adult is higher among teenagers in Japan than other countries.

These tendencies are expressed in this piece in two ways. One is the childlike sounds of the electronic instruments, and the other is the gesture of Pikotaro at “Ending 3-2.” Here, we examine

the second tendency. Japanese people treat this gesture as one of childhood, indicating the cuteness of the children and teenagers. When they make these gestures, it is accepted positively; they are permitted because of the age. On the other hand, it is rarely accepted when a middle-aged man does the same.

The reason for making this gesture may not be to simply show childhood but to show unpleasant cuteness, “Kimo-kawaii ” in Japanese, which has been recently expressed and accepted. Pikotaro shows this modern cuteness.

4.7 Creation and diffusion by internet video: Modernity in creation, diffusion, and acceptance

We point out the modern tendency of the activities of expression. “PPAP” was originally produced to be exposed in an internet video (on YouTube), which has increased recently in terms of creation and exposition by the reason of its freedom and convenience. Such features have not been rarely possible in previous types of media⁸⁾.

Regarding creation, anyone can create and expose when they have the appropriate apparatus. The content is freer. We choose one example in the case of “PPAP”: the length of the piece—it is so short that regular media do not fit.

Regarding the receipt, on the other hand, the length depends on each listener; it may even be possible to have infinite receipt. He can receive also with the apparatus, and moreover, can react freely to the video.

In both sides of the expression, activities are realized in a more active and newer way.

5. Conclusion

Here, we show the universality, modernity, and problem among the creation and reception of different cultures.

Universality

“PPAP” created a new expression depending on the universal principle of mixing and unity of different cultures. This principle is the essential feature of creation by man: collision and fusion of different cultures as well as creation based on these two procedures, those of mainly Western and Japanese cultures.

We confirm the universality in another genre of music: in classical music, Bach and Mozart created their original musical works by the collision and fusion of the different trends of European countries of their ages. In tango music, A. Piazzolla (1921–1992) learned composition of classical music with A. Ginastera (1916–1983) and N. Boulanger (1887–1979) at the same time playing actively as a tango musician, to give it new attractions, which led to its revival.

“PPAP” was created in the same way as these musicians above. That is why this piece follows the universal principle: this is no creation from nothing nor imitation of something old. This is an original piece that contains new, strategic expression, using the features and advantages of the world music of our age.

Modernity

We can point out modernity in three phases of creation, diffusion, and reception. In the phase of creation, a fusion of different cultures was realized at the world level. “PPAP” incorporates and combines Japanese traditional culture and Western one, effectively.

In the phase of diffusion, this piece succeeded in making use of the largeness of freedom and region more than before.

Finally, in the phase of reception, people can receive and enjoy the internet video in the world when they are provided with an appropriate apparatus. Not only do the people of the advanced countries but also those in developing and emerging countries, can enjoy and take part in these receptions⁹⁾.

The original point of this piece is that the expressions and strategies outlined above are expressed in a short time. Shortness has big impacts and gains the worldwide listeners.

Problem

The digital divide will be the main problem. This has been taken attention first in the United States in the mid-1990’s; nowadays, its seriousness has become deeper and wider, not only in social and economic points but also in a cultural point. The levels are divided into two: national-regional and individual. The former has the problems of lack of money and human resources and undeveloped infrastructure, the latter of mobile terminal.

Concerning the cultural point, there are people who cannot listen—or have difficulties in listening—to “PPAP” because of this disparity. This is, of course, a wide and deep problem of the world concerning digitalization, which disturbs many cultural activities. This piece has made it clear by its worldwide influence.

The significance of “PPAP” exists in offering an opportunity of clear recognition of creation, diffusion, reception, and problem in popular music in the world concerning digitalization.

Notes

- 1) This article treats the theme with the methods and technical terms being used in musicology, whose subject is the so-called classical music.
- 2) We show the definitions of two fundamental keywords: (1) world music is a conception and situation of our days that contains the music of all ages and countries or areas on the earth; (2) ethnomusicology, one branch of musicology that mainly investigates the “musics” and related performing arts of the world music from the point of the cultural pluralism and relativism.
- 3) “PPAP,” Fumie, Minami, 2016 in “Chiezo.” (Originally written only in Japanese, translated by the author).
- 4) We can confirm four companies and eleven kinds of music books about “PPAP” for the moment in Japan.
- 5) We give two examples: (1) Bela Bartok (1881–1945), composer and ethnomusicologist, who used the European music notation system to investigate the characteristics of the folksong around Hungary, which have been conveyed only by oral tradition. (2) Japanese musicologists since the Meiji Era (1868–). They also used this notation for the Japanese traditional music including scales to record,

clarify, and compare their characteristics.

- 6) Tanaka, “Hitome de wakarū Nihon-ongaku nyuumon.” p.41.
- 7) Shuji Isawa (1851–1917), a Japanese government official and music educator, proposed three musical policies to the Ministry of Education, which was based on his educational and practical experiences and researches in the United States. The object of the policies was the modernization of the nation. We introduce here the first: “to create new music in combination of Japanese and Western style.” Isawa, “Ongaku torisirabe simpousho,” 1884, p. 5 (Originally written only in Japanese, translated by the author).
- 8) Such pieces are very few. We can find, for example, “Sukiyaki Song” (1961) of Kyū Sakamoto, and so forth.
- 9) For example, in the classical music, Esa-Pekka Salonen (1958–) and the Philharmonia Orchestra throw open to the public the several functions and examples of Apple’s iPad to show how to use it in the creation and the education of classical music. There are several videos on the internet of the official site of the Philharmonia Orchestra and YouTube; here, we cite two of them: <https://www.philharmonia.co.uk/explore/projects/digital/applications>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jh2J1fHJQM&list=PLg4Jyik4hZmDQePIRxHQm6MwFx3lf2b_Q
Berliner Philharmoniker has its own site named Digital Concert Hall to mainly provide the paid members with their performances, educational programs, and so forth. We can choose the languages among six: Japanese, English, German, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean. The URL of the English site is as follows: <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/home>

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