

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

Musicology and Ethnomusicology: Student
Scholarship

Musicology and Ethnomusicology

11-2023

A Comparative Analysis of Music and Sound in J-Horror Films and Their American Remakes

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/musicology_student



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Musicology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

University of Denver, "A Comparative Analysis of Music and Sound in J-Horror Films and Their American Remakes" (2023). *Musicology and Ethnomusicology: Student Scholarship*. 155.

https://digitalcommons.du.edu/musicology_student/155



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

This Bibliography is brought to you for free and open access by the Musicology and Ethnomusicology at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Musicology and Ethnomusicology: Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

A Comparative Analysis of Music and Sound in J-Horror Films and Their American Remakes

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

**A Comparative Analysis of Music and Sound in
J-Horror Films and Their American Remakes
Annotated Bibliography**

Abstract

It has been long established that music has the potential to influence a listener's emotions. Likewise, visual stimulation can influence our emotions. Horror movies rely heavily on the combination of these two systems working together to create tension and fear. This essay will analyze the use of sound, music, and silence in Japanese horror films as compared to their American remakes. I will explore the instrumentation and compositional methods through the lens of traditional Japanese *kabuki* theatre conventions as well as classical American film scoring to compare my perceived scariness of each film's most stressful scenes.

1. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "Startle Reaction." Accessed October 29, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/science/startle-reaction>.

This is a short entry explaining the startle response in plain language. The startle reaction is defined in this source as "an extremely rapid psychophysiological response of an organism to a sudden and unexpected stimulus such as a loud sound or a blinding flash of light" This reaction is referred to in many sources regarding horror movies and their soundtracks, as there are jump-scares present in many movies of this genre. Such a short encyclopedia entry does not necessarily interact with any ongoing conversation, but a simple definition of the human reaction to a visual or auditory scare is helpful in explaining why the use of sound contributes or detracts from a scene. Studies on the effects of different sounds in a scary scene will use this response of heightened heart rate, increased respiration, and uncontrolled limb movements to measure how scary the action really was. An additional reaction, skin conductance, measures how well a person's skin can conduct electricity. Skin conductance is heightened when a person is aroused, especially in a stressful manner. Encyclopædia Britannica is widely regarded as an authority on information on countless topics and is the oldest continuously published encyclopedia.

2. Fichera, J. Blake. *Scored to Death 2: More Conversations with Some of Horror's Greatest Composers*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2020.

In this book, Blake interviews several successful composers of the horror genre, including Japanese composer Koji Endo, who scored the original *Chakushin ari* [*One Missed*

Call] film and Kenji Kawai. The composers are asked what influenced their musical choices such as the script, director's requests, or other composers' works. In his interview, Endo talks about how he scored *Chakushin ari* using several different synthesizers and avoiding melody except for the notable ringtone. Blake acknowledges that the language barrier might have affected the length of Endo's responses. Each composer's responses give insight to how horror films are scored and how the audience can interpret the sounds and instruments used. By speaking with contemporary composers and those which have not worked in many years, Blake's interviews show how methods of horror composition have changed. Similarly, by interviewing American and Japanese composers he allows the reader to see the differences in western and eastern film composition styles. J. Blake Fichera is a longtime member of the film industry. He has written for several film-related publications and has taught film studies.

3. Gorbman, Claudia. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Gorbman's book is considered an authority on the theory of film music. It is cited in numerous writings on the use of sound in film and can be credited with popularizing terms such as "diegetic," "nondiegetic," and "metadiegetic" when referring to film sounds. Gorbman asserts that music has a job within a film and writes to answer why music is there in the first place. Her answers center around enhancing the narrative of a film whether to suggest the viewer feels a certain way or to develop a more immersive setting. She spends the latter portion of the book analyzing three films by using score incipits and stills from specific scenes to further her argument on the functionality of music within films of different genres and eras. Her analysis provides a method of analysis that can be applied to many genres of movies and soundtracks. This book builds upon writings from the early and mid-twentieth century when film scores were much more classical and Romantic in nature. Gorbman's writings provided an updated view at the time of its publication but lack exploration of more contemporary film composition practices. She was recently working to publish an updated edition, but it has yet to be released. Claudia Gorbman holds a Ph.D. in Romance Languages in Literature but has been a longtime author and professor of film studies. *Unheard Melodies* was one of the first academic publications to tackle the concept of music's function and purpose in film.

4. Kulezic-Wilson, Danijela. "The Music of Film Silence." *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 1-10.

Like the many uses for sound in a film, there are several applications for silence within a film score. Kulezic-Wilson's paper explores a few of the uses for diegetic and nondiegetic silence within a score and how they can add to the narrative. She argues that silence functions as a compositional device that engages with a film's elements in the same manner as music and sound. Béla Balázs is referenced as an early theorist in the use of silence in film, but she disagrees with his argument that only sound films can employ silence as a dramatic tool. Kulezic-Wilson believes that silence is useful in all forms of music as a sort of foil to sound. Throughout her paper she analyzes films' use of extended and rhythmic silence using her own theories. She features stills from *Atonement*, *Babel*, and *The Matrix* to support her theory that specific moments are deepened with silence. She mentions the wider use of silence in European and Asian films and the reluctance of American producers to fully commit to its effectiveness. Horror movies, especially those produced in Japan, often use silence to enhance the perceived scariness of a scene and create an unsettled feeling in the audience. Dr. Danijela Kulezic-Wilson was a film and score scholar who published many groundbreaking works in her field. She was a professor and musicologist at University College Cork.

5. Meinel, Larina Sue, and Claudia Bullerjahn. "More Horror Due to Specific Music Placement? Effects of Film Music on Psychophysiological Responses to a Horror Film." *Psychology of Music* 50, no. 6 (2022): 1837-52.

In this study of 39 participants, Meinel and Bullerjahn sought to find a link between the impact of music on the perceived emotion of a film scene and the impact of placement of music in a film scene. They make several references to past studies, including one performed by Bullerjahn, that looked at these individual topics and built upon their respective findings. These previous studies all found there to be a correlation between the type of music underscoring a scene and a heightened physical or emotional response in the viewer. Meinel and Bullerjahn measured heartrate and skin conductance to find the differing effects of a horror movie scene on the viewer dependent on the music accompanying the action. Three groups were studied under the following conditions: no music underscore, a synchronous underscore (the shocking moments of the music lined up with the shocking moments in the scene), or asynchronous underscore (the shocking moments in the music did not line up with the jump scares in the scene). In their findings, the authors recognize that heartrate measurements did not yield any significant results between the groups, as was apparent in previous studies. Their hypothesis stating that placing climactic musical moments before the visual shock was not fully conclusive, though they did see an increase in skin conductance in this group compared to the others. The

highest skin conductance levels were reached at the third shock of the scene, which was deceptive, meaning the music indicated an impending shock but a visual shock was not delivered. This study gives some scientific insight into how our bodies react to musical stimuli while watching horror movies. Varying uses of sound and music between Japanese and American horror movies can be analyzed through this lens, as the latter tend to feature silent moments in scarier scenes. Dr. Claudia Bullerjahn has been a professor and researcher of musicology since the early 1990s and currently serves as the Head of the Institute for Musicology and Music Education at Justus Liebig University Giessen in Germany. Larina Sue Meinel is a doctoral candidate studying under Dr. Bullerjahn at Justus Liebig University Giessen.

6. Miike, Takashi, director. *Chakushin ari [One Missed Call]*. Kadokawa-Daiei Eiga, 2003. 1 hr., 52 min. DVD.

This film is part of the J-horror movement that took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It features a *yūrei*, or vengeful female ghost, of a young girl who was murdered. The ghost haunts her victims by leaving them a voicemail of their own future death days before it happens. They die at the time the voicemail appears to have been left and are found with a small candy in their mouth, like the ghost who haunts them was found. The score features a ringtone that occurs both in the movie action and in the nondiegetic music of the soundtrack to indicate the presence of the *yūrei*. This J-horror film can be compared to its American counterpart in composition and score to see the differences in instrumentation and placement of music. Takashi Miike is a prolific contemporary director, producer, and screenwriter of Japanese film and television known for his shocking depictions of violence.

7. Perez, Jennifer. "Tension and Horror: The Relationship between Music and the Scene." MA thesis, Boston University College of Fine Arts, 2023. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Perez's thesis is a study of the effects of musical tension, film tension, and a combination of the two on the viewer. She acknowledges the works of contemporary film musicologists and works to fill in the gaps they have left in their research. Perez chose nine different scenes in three horror subgenres with three distinctive styles of scores – traditional, ambient, and soundtrack. Her movie choices range from classic slasher film *Carrie* to recent supernatural thriller *Smile*. The scores were measured using spectrograms, which allowed Perez to show a visual of the tension arc within the film scores against which she compares her subject's reactions. Perez's study also aims to show whether filmmakers and composers

choose techniques based on the tension they will cause and whether these techniques vary across horror subgenres. For example, she hypothesizes that music featuring dissonance creates a higher sense of perceived tension in the viewer. Like Gorbman and Kulezic-Wilson, she uses sets of movie stills to show correlations between notable moments in the soundtrack and in the scene along with the spectrograms of their scores. While her analysis does shed light on a field of film music not widely researched, her method of gathering experiment results through an online self-assessment completed by the participants is not highly conclusive. Jennifer Perez received her master's in music theory from the University of Boston

8. Pratt, Fletcher. "Abstract Terror." MA thesis, Mills College, 2017. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Pratt's thesis explores the importance of music and sound in horror films and argues that the abstract nature of many horror scores contributes to the perception of the audience. By analyzing the scores of popular horror films, Pratt shows how the use of elements such as abstract sounds, both acoustic and electronic, and experimental music contribute to a horror film score's effectiveness. He also writes about the use of silence to enhance the effect of these sounds. This paper is successful in showing the use of sounds in a score as opposed to what is considered traditional music to create unsettling atmospheres in horror films. Throughout these sections Pratt refers to biographies and interviews with composers and directors like Hitchcock, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Brian Reitzell who gave direct accounts of their backgrounds, influences, and inspiration for some of their greatest works. He also refers to a study by Daniel Blumstein on nonlinear sounds in movies, which concluded that horror movies contain the most nonlinear sounds of all genres studied. The second half of the thesis is about Pratt's own compositional works and less relevant to the discussion of music used in film. Fletcher Pratt is an experimental composer with an interest in abstract and horror music.

9. Reay, Pauline. "Textual Functions of Film Music." In *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy*, 31-55. London: Wallflower, 2004.

In her book *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy*, Pauline Reay gives a history of film soundtracks and their purpose as a form of storytelling. This chapter discusses the function of music in a film, both in the classical soundtrack and popular music forms. Reay draws on the writings of other experts in the field, including Claudia Gorbman, who outlines a set of principles that successful classical film scores follow. She covers the nondiegetic use of popular music soundtracks in contrast with nondiegetic original scores and how they function differently within

a story's context. The second half of the chapter is a study on the music in films of European directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Pedro Almodóvar focusing on how their soundtracks either follow or diverge from Gorbman's principles to enhance storytelling. Reay mentions an article by Annahid Kassabian, and admits that the subject matter is worth discussing but outside the book's coverage (32). Reay's writing gives a larger context for score composition and its role within a film. This book is part of a series of textbooks for undergraduate film studies. Pauline Reay has a background in music and is a freelance lecturer and author of film related works.

10. Valette, Éric, director. *One Missed Call*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008. 1 hr., 27 min. DVD.

In this version of the *Chakushin ari* story, a plot much like the Japanese original is now set in the US. The characters' names are now common American names, and the means of death are changed. This version features a different ringtone from the original, but in both versions the ringtone is not one that any of the characters have heard before the curse begins to torment them. By watching an American remake of a J-horror film, the viewer can see what plot points and scares are maintained as well as which scoring conventions are kept. Scenes that use silence building up to a shock in one film might have climactic musical moments in the other. While the American remake featured a French director, Éric Valette, it also developed under an American and two Japanese writers. One of these writers, Minako Daira, also worked on *Chakushin ari*. This is informative on the ways film and composition techniques vary and mirror each other between the diverse cultures.

11. Wee, Valerie. *Japanese Horror Films and their American Remakes*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Wee's book covers the history of horror as a literary and performance genre in Japan and America. It discusses the origins of ghost stories, the emergence of film, and the social anxieties that have contributed to horror themes in both cultures. The book features a chapter on *Chakushin ari* and its American remake, *One Missed Call*. This book directly interacts with other experts in the field and builds upon their writings on horror movies and the general film composition. Having a reference point for the composition of horror movies within Japanese and American cultures creates a contextual backdrop against which one can compare an individual Japanese horror movie and its American remake while analyzing their respective use of music and sound. Valerie Wee received her PhD in radio, television, and film from the University of Texas at Austin. She serves as a professor of film and media at the National University of Singapore and has written several published works on film music, specifically horror.

12. Wierzbicki, James. "The Ghostly Noise of J-Horror: Roots and Ramifications." In *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, edited by Philip Hayward, 249-67. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2009.

In this essay, Wierzbicki gives an in-depth history of *kabuki* theatre and the traditional instruments used to create specific sound effects in ghost stories. He explains *yūrei*, the vengeful ghosts often seen in popular Japanese Horror (J-horror) films and their origins in *kabuki* theatre as well as traditional sounds, such as rasping, extended silences, and extradiegetic noises used to tell *yūrei* stories. Then he explains how these sounds are transformed in modern J-Horror films to create the same effects. Wierzbicki uses outside sources to expand his historical context. In the latter half of the essay, Wierzbicki gives a comparative analysis of *Ju-On/The Grudge* and *Ringu/The Ring* scene timelines and score incipits. He argues that while the American remakes stay true to several traditional Japanese sounds, the western ear is not as sensitive to specific instrumentation and sonorities that originate in *kabuki* performances. James Wierzbicki has taught musicology for many years at several different institutions including the University of Sydney, the University of Michigan, and the University of California at Irvine. He has authored many books and essays on the effective use of sound and music in film.