

‘A New Stereophonic Sound Spectacular’: Shibuya-kei as Transnational Soundscape

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Abstract

This essay focuses on Shibuya-kei, a style of independent popular music that emerged in Japan in the late 1980s and that has been influential in the popularisation of J-pop worldwide. Although usually treated as a uniquely Japanese musical genre, Shibuya-kei was from its inception defined by an ostentatious internationalism, fusing jazz, easy listening, and bossa nova, with British, American, and French retro-pop styles. Tracing the international itineraries of Shibuya-kei musicians and the role of Western musicians and labels in promoting it outside Japan, the essay characterises Shibuya-kei not as just another J-pop genre but as a transnational soundscape, a collaborative project produced by a network of musicians circulating between Japan and the U.K., the U.S., France, Germany, Spain, and Brazil. As such, the essay suggests, it requires us to rethink the place of the national in relation to popular music.

In the Japanese popular music industry, where new musical varieties bloom and fade at the speed of a time-lapse movie, the style known as Shibuya-kei has proved surprisingly durable. Having originated in the late 1980s as a loose-knit network of independent musicians, DJs, and labels producing popular music different from that distributed by the major labels, it today occupies a popular stylistic niche within that mainstream, and its founding members are revered and influential figures within the industry at large. Shibuya-kei was also arguably the first form of Japanese pop to gain wide international attention: while certain Japanese underground music genres and artists have enjoyed a cult following among Western avant-garde musicians for decades, Shibuya-kei artists have played a key role in the developing interest in Japanese popular music among youth in the United States and Europe. In addition to a steady stream of compilations and remix releases, the style continues to develop and mutate through pastiche and the stylistic tweakings of a new generation of neo-Shibuya artists.

I am interested in Shibuya-kei for a number of reasons. First, as a case study in subcultural music scenes and the operations of what I call the subculture industry: however mainstream and commercialised it may now have become, at its inception, at least, Shibuya-kei could be seen as a subcultural scene in that it defined itself aesthetically against the more mainstream forms of Japanese pop music being released by the major labels. Secondly, as a site for considering the increasing convergence between the subcultural and the transcultural in a globalized world: that is, the articulation of oppositional identities at the local level through identification with and the reproduction of symbolic practices and production originating in cultures other than one's own. While such transcultural practices may in some cases be considered 'already' subcultural in origin (e.g. graffiti writing, goth music), what is subcultural in one context need not be so in another, as the cult fandom among Euro-American youth for Japanese *manga* and *anime* attests. Similarly, while styles of Japanese popular music such as Shibuya-kei (or more recently Visual-kei) may have developed a cult following among Western youth, they are much closer to the commercial mainstream in Japan, and their appeal is in part related to their perceived exoticism in the mainstream Western pop, rock, or hip-hop context.

Thirdly, I am interested in how Shibuya-kei complicates the place of the national as a reference-point in popular music. Although in the West Shibuya-kei is invariably treated as a *Japanese* genre or scene, in Japan it was most often noted for its ostentatious internationalism; it defined itself against the musical mainstream of its time through an affiliation with certain subcultural genres of Western popular music and other media.¹ In this essay, I aim to dis-locate Shibuya-kei from the local frame of reference within which it is usually discussed and, in a sense, to deterritorialize it. I propose that Shibuya-kei is more productively seen as a transnational soundscape,

an ongoing international co-production involving both Japanese and non-Japanese musics and musicians.² Shibuya-kei originated in Japan, but as we will see, it was from its inception predicated on its eclectic appropriation and transculturation of a variety of Western and other popular musics which were already in transnational circulation; it has over the past decade emerged as an autonomous, hybridized soundscape in its own right, to the extent that today it constitutes what in another context Josh Kun (2005) calls an *audiotopia*, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular. In addition to its spatial diffusion, the concept of *utopia* inscribed within the term audiotopia is particularly appropriate to what might be called the affective register of Shibuya-kei more generally. Before moving to these broader aspects, however, let us begin by considering Shibuya-kei within the local geographical and historical context from which it bloomed.

Retromania

The avant-garde has become an arrière-garde.
—Simon Reynolds, *Retromania* (2011): xx.

Shibuya-kei emerged from the rich culture of music collecting and consumption which had established itself by the late 1980s in the fashionable Shibuya shopping district of south-west Tokyo. At the beginning of the 1990s, the opening of the HMV and Tower Records flagship stores, in addition to others such as Wave and Shinseido, created what David Marx calls an ‘ecosystem’ of record stores which provided outlets not just for Japanese but also imported foreign music.³ As Marx recounts (2010), the term ‘Shibuya-kei’ itself began to be applied to a select group of Japanese indie bands, including Flipper’s Guitar, Pizzicato Five, and Love Tambourines, amongst others, which were promoted at the newly-opened HMV store as being more interesting than the familiar Japanese-language clones of Western pop genres, and which derived the bulk of their

sales from the record stores in the Shibuya district.⁴ It is no coincidence that two of the figures regarded as most influential in Shibuya-kei's emergence, Konishi Yasuharu and Oyamada Keigo, were avid music collectors. As Marx explains,

Shibuya-kei did not just glorify shopping and products in the lyrics—the entire base of the music itself relied on sampling or pastiche of pre-existing media. Konishi Yasuharu of Pizzicato Five was a record collector first and a musician second. Like the DJ Shadow school of hip hop, Shibuya-kei was about finding and buying the most obscure (and therefore, best) records and reintroducing them to the world. *Beikoku Ongaku*'s editor-in-chief Kawasaki Daisuke sees Shibuya-kei as just the '90s progression of rich, urban youth consumer culture, and indeed all our innovators of the scene fit the Hosono Haruomi upper middle class model. Oyamada and [Kenji] Ozawa [Flipper's Guitar's second member] ... went to top-tier private high schools. Supposedly, Konishi was supported by his parents until he turned 30 and spent all of their hard earned money on records. Accordingly, Shibuya-kei has no explicit political message other than delineating the creator and listener from mainstream culture through product choices and taste..... Shibuya-kei exclaimed, you are all consuming the wrong goods! And their fans, who were also upper middle class educated kids, agreed. The market responded by providing those more sophisticated goods and incorporating them into the mainstream 'middle class' lifestyle (Marx 2004).

Konishi's band Pizzicato Five, fronted by the glamorous Nomiya Maki, was to become perhaps the most iconic example of what Shibuya-kei was about. Yet in a very different way, Oyamada's band Flipper's Guitar are also regarded as one of the pioneers of the Shibuya-kei sound, with Oyamada himself subsequently becoming one of its central figures under the moniker Cornelius—a name inspired, in a typical piece of pop-culture eclecticism, by the central character of the 1960s American science fiction movie classic *Planet of the Apes*. Both bands were characterized in different ways by an eclectic internationalism: while Pizzicato Five was a postmodern mélange of jazz, easy listening, Motown, disco, and club music, Flipper's Guitar was heavily in-

debted to more recent British indie-pop and the neo-psychedelia of The Stone Roses and The Happy Mondays. The indie labels founded by Konishi and Oyamada, Readymade and Trattoria, along with others such as Crue-L and Escalator, became the distribution platform for the bands and solo artists who were or became part of the Shibuya-kei scene, including Love Tambourines, Kahimi Karie, Takako Minegawa, Yukari Fresh, Bridge, and numerous others. While Shibuya-kei was primarily a Tokyo-based scene, it also had affinities with the Kyoto-based acid-jazz scene through DJs such as Tanaka Tomoyuki (Fantastic Plastic Machine) and Kyoto Jazz Massive.

If there was one characteristic the diverse group of artists gathered under the Shibuya-kei umbrella shared, in accordance with larger cultural developments within 1980s Japan, it was an ostentatious internationalism.⁵ While Japanese bands had been known for their imitation of Western bands and popular music genres since at least the 1960s, what differentiated the Shibuya-kei bands were their references not just to contemporary but retro popular music genres, including 1960s French and British pop, Brazilian bossa nova, easy listening and exotica, European movie soundtracks, Motown, disco, and 80s UK indie-pop—a phenomenon which Simon Reynolds recently dubbed ‘retromania’.⁶ The references in question were not limited to music alone, but also extended to the styling of bands and artists in album art, promotional media, photo-shoots for magazine articles, music videos, and live performances. An early photograph of Pizzicato Five (1985) poses the band against the background of a movie poster for Jacques Tati’s film *Mon Oncle* (1958), purchased by Konishi Yasuharu while on a trip to Paris. The band’s first single, produced by Hosono Haruomi and released the same year, bore the English title ‘Audrey Hepburn Complex.’ The French *nouvelle vague*, the Italian glamour of Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*

(1960), the Swinging London of Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966), or the 1960s French musicals of Jacques Demy and Michel Legrand are variously invoked in Pizzicato Five music videos, Nomiya Maki's reincarnations of 60s fashion icons Twiggy and Veruschka, or Kahimi Karie's EP *Giapponese a Roma*. Much could be written about Shibuya-kei's French connection, from the ubiquitous French-language samples of Shibuya-kei songs to actual collaborations with French artists such as Philippe Auclair (of whom more later), Raphael Sebbag (of acid-jazz unit United Future Organization) or producer Bertrand Burgalat. Kahimi Karie lived in Paris for a number of years and self-consciously styled herself after 1960s *chanteuses* such as France Gall or Claudine Longet.

The notion of 'internationalism' requires some clarification in this context. The Shibuya-kei artists were of course not alone in their fascination with easy listening and other retro genres; indeed, it was in many ways symptomatic of the larger tendencies in Euro-American music culture of their time, which also involved a postmodern (often camp) nostalgia for retro genres such as exotica and the pastiches and remixes of these which became known as 'lounge music.' From this perspective, Shibuya-kei's internationalism, rather than a direct or 'vertical' reference to Euro-American retro genres, can also be seen as a Japanese response to parallel shifts taking place contemporaneously (or 'horizontally') within the postmodern music culture of the 1990s. The Shibuya-kei sound can thus be seen as tapping into and synthesizing a number of highly cosmopolitan music scenes in cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, New York, or Rio. In what follows, I will explain in more detail Shibuya-kei's connection to some of these scenes, with the goal of disarticulating it from the local context within which it has tended to be discussed.

London—Paris

Mike Alway's diary oh it goes to my head

Mike Alway's diary la si do re mi

Mike Alway's diary c'est un secret d'état

Mike Alway's diary la la...

—Kahimi Karie, 'Mike Alway's Diary' (1992)

It wouldn't have lasted three years, except that somehow the Japanese were listening.

—Mike Alway on él Records (Svenonius, n.d.)

In 1992, Japanese indie label Crue-L Records, founded a year previously by DJ and producer Takimi Kenji (LN-CC, n.d.), released the first album by a then little-known singer known as Kahimi Karie (Hiki Mari). Titled *Mike Alway's Diary* and produced by Karie's boyfriend at the time, Oyamada Keigo, the mini-album included a song of the same title which was an homage to the founder of the short-lived 1980s British art-pop indie label él Records, known for its post-modern pastiches of 1960s British bubblegum pop and neo-baroque stylization of its artists after European nobility (Louis Philippe, The King of Luxemburg). As Alway explained in a recent interview, the label's primary market was not Britain but Japan, with él artists such as the Would-Be-Goods or Bad Dream Fancy Dress stylized specifically to appeal to Japanese youth ('The él Records Story', n.d.). While the British music press remained largely indifferent to él's releases, they enjoyed a cult following in Japan, even meriting a Japanese tour by three of the label's artists organized by Alway in the late 1980s.⁷ The song 'Mike Alway's Diary' itself, as Alway acknowledges, is essentially a pastiche of the él Records signature sound, originating from his acquaintance with the Francophile Karie and Oyamada. The song is an indication of the cult status enjoyed by él Records and its founder in Japanese indie-music culture of the time. While it remains unclear whether the U.K. label was the inspiration for the similar-sounding Crue-L Records founded only a few years later, both Kahimi Karie's early work and that of other Crue-L

artists (such as Love Tambourines) can be attributed to the British label's cult following in Japan. It was, indeed, a Japanese funding offer which persuaded Alway to return to the music industry in 1997 with *Songs For The Jet Set* (1997-2000), a neo-él compilation series, after he had abruptly parted company with the label in 1989. Among the innumerable compilations of él Records artists to have been released over the past decade, one titled simply *All About Mike Alway* was released by Japanese label Rambling Records in 2004.

French musician, arranger, producer, *France Football* journalist, biographer of French football legend Eric Cantona, and diehard Arsenal fan Philippe Auclair (a.k.a. Louis Philippe) has lived in the UK since the 1980s, and along with Simon Fisher-Turner (a.k.a The King of Luxemburg) was one of the mainstays of the él Records catalogue before a later rift with Alway in the 1990s. After the demise of él Records in 1989 he turned to Japan and found the support of Oyamada Keigo, who invited him to executive produce one of the earliest releases of Oyamada's Trattoria label, the compilation *Fab Gear* (1991). Mentioned by British expatriate dandy Nick Currie (a.k.a. Momus) as 'the founding record, some say, of Shibuya-kei' (2008), the compilation includes, in addition to a song co-written by Auclair, four cuts by él-Records alumni The Monochrome Set and Currie himself (as Momus). According to the Louis Philippe website, Trattoria's major-label parent, Polystar, subsequently became Auclair's 'second home', releasing a series of his albums from 1991-98, as well as several compilations, and facilitating licensing deals with labels in France, Spain, the UK, and the US. Trattoria's catalogue until Cornelius's *Point* (2001) included numerous other Western artists (Apples in Stereo, Le Hammond Inferno). Himself based in Japan, Currie was influential in the Shibuya-kei scene throughout the 90s, writing songs and producing records for Kahimi Karie and other artists (Poison Girl Friend). Given the

close involvement of figures such as Alway, Auclair and Currie with the Shibuya-kei group more or less from its inception, one begins to see the problems involved in treating it as an exclusively Japanese phenomenon.

While Japanese indie labels Crue-L and Trattoria served as a bridge between the él Records and Shibuya-kei scenes, outside Japan Shibuya-kei artists were distributed across a network of European and US indie labels and producers, including Paris (Tricatel), London (Cherry Red), Berlin (Bungalow), New York (Matador), Chicago (Minty Fresh), and LA (Emperor Norton). Among these, Matador Records merits particular mention, playing a key role in popularizing Pizzicato Five for American audiences, as well as Germany's Bungalow Records, whose *Sushi 3003* (1996) and *Sushi 4004* (1998) compilations also circulated widely throughout Europe and the US. In their seemingly endless releases of Shibuya-kei labels such as Escalator and Readymade, these labels connect Japanese Shibuya-kei artists with larger currents in Western popular music inspired by a similar nostalgia for 60s retro-pop and exotica, including Paris's Bertrand Burgalat, LA's April March, or European DJs such as Dimitri From Paris and Señor Coconut. Within this transnational arena, the Japaneseness of Shibuya-kei metamorphoses into a transnational soundscape, part of a larger mix that includes many of its own sources, including French retro-pop, the art-pop of él Records, the exotica of Martin Denny and Arthur Lyman, and Brazilian bossa nova.

New York — Tokyo

'Shibuya-kei is dead,' declared Nick Currie with characteristic archness in a 1998 column for the *Glasgow Herald*. Currie's tongue might have seemed to be planted firmly in his cheek: had he not, of all people, recently played a key role in the popularization of Shibuya-kei in the West as the producer of Paris-based Kahimi Karie's first non-Japanese EP (1995)? Had he not also re-

cently collaborated with her in a series of performances in New York called ‘Portable Shibuya’? Yet Currie’s title was also, in a sense, correct: his article provided one of the first English-language introductions to a musical subculture which had been percolating for much of the past decade, but which within Japan itself was already considered to have passed its peak by the time Currie introduced it to his Western readers.

Thanks in part to Currie’s promotion of it, over the subsequent decade Shibuya-kei developed a cult following among American and European youth. Pizzicato Five were the first to arrive, performing for three years at the New York New Music Seminar (1992-94); in his new persona as Cornelius, Oyamada debuted his first domestic US album release, *Fantasma* (1998) at the South-by-Southwest festival in 1998 as part of his first world tour. Distributed by Matador Records in the US, each artist has reportedly sold over 100,000 records for the label (cited in Marx 2004, part 5). Pizzicato Five’s *Happy Sad* EP was featured in Robert Altman’s documentary about Isaac Mizrahi, *Unzipped* (1995), and from the mid-90s onwards their songs became increasingly popular sources for remixes by club DJs in Europe and the United States.

Other than Portable Shibuya, Shibuya-kei’s main New York connection was expatriate Japanese-Korean DJ Towa Tei, formerly of the early 1990s band Deee-Lite, whose acid-jazz début *Future Listening!* (1994) exhibited the Shibuya-kei staples of ironic references to 1960s easy listening (starting with its title), sample-heavy dance mixes, and bossa nova, featuring Pizzicato Five vocalist Nomiya Maki as well as contributions by Arto Lindsay and the then-rising diva of Brazilian lounge music, Bebel Gilberto. Towa Tei’s extensive remix credits include a number of Pizzicato Five songs, while the addition of French (or French-accented) vocalists to his subsequent

albums enhanced their overlap with Shibuya-kei's pop-cosmopolitanism.⁸ Also in New York, Cibo Matto, comprising expatriate Japanese musicians Yuka Honda and Miho Hatori, have often been associated with Shibuya-kei, although they did not to my knowledge collaborate with Shibuya-kei musicians, and their 1995 album *Viva! La Woman* reportedly sold only 20,000 copies in Japan, compared with 74,000 in the US (Bell 1999).

Over the past decade, the emergence of the Web as a mass medium has played a key role in the internationalization of Shibuya-kei: by the late 1990s a network of Pizzicato Five websites produced by North American and European fans had already begun to appear, and a Shibuya-kei Yahoo! group was launched in 2000, although blogs and social networks have since become the preferred sites for fan activity. Today, music by Shibuya-kei artists is readily available via YouTube, CD mail-order companies, digital download services and torrent sites.

Global Shibuya-kei

By 2004, Shibuya-kei fatigue was setting in among some of its Western fans, with David Marx publishing a series of online articles declaring that Shibuya-kei had run its course (Marx 2004), and looking to emerging genres such as the electronics-heavy Akiba-kei or the younger generation exemplified by Tokumaru Shugo as new sources of subcultural capital. In spite of vanguardist proclamations of its demise, however, Shibuya-kei has stubbornly refused to go away either in Japan or worldwide. In recent years, Flipper's Guitar tributes and Shibuya-kei remixes and retrospectives have begun to appear with increasing regularity. While Konishi's latest *protégée*, Nomoto Karia, or girl-duo Vanilla Beans exemplify the style in its more commercial form, a new

generation of neo-Shibuya-kei bands (Qyphone, Capsule, Dahlia, Elektel, Aprils) continues to produce music inspired by the Shibuya-kei sound.

As I indicated earlier, the Shibuya-kei artists were certainly not alone in their fascination with 1960s easy listening and other retro-pop and exotic genres, but rather were symptomatic of a larger, postmodern tendency within popular music that produced similarly retro-inspired bands (often identifiable by their use of the mantra-word of 1960s musical consumption, *stereo*: Stereo-lab, Stereo Total, Apples in Stereo, Humming Urban Stereo). What the Shibuya-kei artists did was to put their own, specifically Japanese mark on these retro-pop genres, which in turn has now become a distinctive style in its own right. The past decade has seen a growing number of Shibuya-inspired projects and artists outside Japan, including the UK's Gentle People, France's Dimitri From Paris and Nouvelle Vague, and in the US, The Flaming Lips or LA retro-pop duo The Bird and The Bee. The Shibuya-kei Yahoo! group lists, in addition to Japanese artists, several dozen 'like-minded acts' from France, the US and UK, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Shibuya itself has been eulogized in songs such as Momus's 'Anthem of Shibuya' (1997) or Glaswegian indie band The Pearlfishers' exquisitely-titled 'The Umbrellas of Shibuya' (2007), and there is even a UK indie band called Shibuya Crossings. In the US, retro-pop duo The Bird and The Bee's song 'Love Letter to Japan' (2009) is an homage to J-pop more generally. South Korean bands Clazziquai Project, Casker, and Humming Urban Stereo are often seen as representing a Korean neo-Shibuya-kei movement.⁹ Spanish indie band La Casa Azul and Argentina's Modular have both produced neo-Shibuya-kei albums, while La Casa Azul's first Japanese release, a compilation called *Cerca de Shibuya* (2011), offers Japanese record collectors the interesting experience of acquiring a Spanish Shibuya-kei CD at Tower Records Shibuya itself. Nei-

ther imitations of or references to Shibuya-kei, this growing catalogue of examples can be seen as contributions to the continuing development of Shibuya-kei as a transnational audiotopia. Moreover, Japanese Shibuya-kei artists are still actively involved in collaborative projects with non-Japanese musicians around the globe, ensuring that the style continues to follow new and intriguing itineraries in the present.

Belo Horizonte—Tokyo

Along with French and British pop, bossa nova is one of the signature styles of the Shibuya-kei sound. Originating in Rio in the late 1950s and early 1960s, after initial success in the United States it quickly globalized and bands such as Sergio Mendes's Brazil '66 became staples of easy-listening music around the globe, inspiring numerous European and other imitators.¹⁰ Bossa nova has long held a special place in Japan, in part because of the historical links between Brazil and Japan through migration (de Carvalho 2002, Masterson 2003, Maeda 2007). Brazilian musicians such as Nara Leão (Cabral 2009) enjoy a cult following there, bossa nova bars with names like Barquinho abound, and as the recent documentary *Bossa Nova Sol Nascente* (2010) attests, a substantial body of bossa nova music has been produced by Japanese-Brazilian as well as Japanese musicians (see also Tartan 2006). It was perhaps inevitable, then, that bossa nova would be part of the Shibuya-kei repertoire, and that Shibuya-kei would find a receptive audience in Brazil, particularly among producers of the increasingly ubiquitous compilations of bossa-based club music such as *Bossacucanova*.

One of the more interesting encounters is the recent collaboration between Nomiya Maki, formerly of Pizzicato Five, and Fernanda Takai, a Brazilian of Japanese descent and lead singer of

indie band Pato Fu. Although Takai's grandmother is Japanese, she reportedly only began studying Japanese as an adult (Mikevis 2008), though she clearly has a longer familiarity with Shibuya-kei: Pato Fu's 1999 EP *Isopor* includes a Shibuya-kei pastiche titled 'Made in Japan,'¹¹ while the band's 2010 album *Música de Brinquedo* includes a cover of the Pizzicato Five song 'Twiggy Twiggy' performed in Japanese by Takai. The Maki-Takai collaboration began with a joint performance of some Pizzicato Five songs in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and during Pato Fu's subsequent Japanese tour in 2008. This was followed by the neo-Shibuya-kei EP *Maki-Takai: No Jetlag* (2009), with each singer performing both in Japanese and Portuguese, and including a Shibuya-esque cover of Roberto Menescal's bossa nova classic 'O Barquinho' sung in Japanese.¹² The duo have since performed together again at a series of 2011 concerts at the Festival de Cinema Japonês in São Paulo.¹³ I mention this encounter not because it is particularly unusual—on the contrary, such encounters between like-minded musicians are an everyday occurrence in today's global music industry—but because it exemplifies both the transnational reach of Shibuya-kei today, and the genre's continuing evolution in an ongoing, transcultural dialogue with other musicians and musics around the globe. Given its own globalization over the past decade the question remains as to whether Shibuya-kei can now be considered as a style of 'world music,' albeit one which challenges that term's received definition.

Saudade do Futuro

Mono no aware / The sadness of things
 Mono no aware / The temptation to see / The world as it ought to be
 Mono no aware / The sadness of things
 Blinded with tears I can still see
 My insignificance in an indifferent universe
 —Momus, 'The Sadness of Things' (1995)

I will conclude with some thoughts about affect, as it is one of the most distinctive aspects of Shibuya-kei and offers a way of talking about the music in terms beyond music-industry economics or transnational flows. In contrast to the darkness, alienation, and rage that characterize much contemporary popular music, Shibuya-kei is mostly of a sunny disposition. In this respect it resembles some of its sources, most notably the perennially cheerful indie-pop of él Records (it comes as little surprise that Louis Philippe's website is named 'Sunshine'). It has been suggested that the sunniness of Shibuya-kei reflects the economic optimism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, before the end of the bubble economy, when consumer spending was still high, especially among Japanese youth. Shibuya-kei songs reflect the affluent, cosmopolitan lifestyles of the artists who produced them, focusing on leisure and play rather than the world of work: shopping, nightlife, watching movies, fashion, favourite sports players, hanging out with friends in coffee-shops, partying, being in love. They are utopian in the same way that commodity culture more generally is utopian, projecting a world of better living through consumption of the 'right' items. It is, of course, all too easy to dismiss such musics as merely frivolous and superficial, in contrast to the high seriousness of angrier musics; fortunately, the picture is more complex than this. Here él Records again provides a useful prototype: while the almost cloying sweetness of some of Louis Philippe's songs, for example, may not be to everyone's taste, they prove on closer examination to be more *bittersweet* or wistful rather than just naively happy. Shibuya-kei could be said to be characterized by a similar emotional ambivalence, with happiness always tinged with sadness, loss, and nostalgia. While the word 'happy' may seem to occur like a mantra in Pizzicato Five songs, for example, it is noteworthy how often it is juxtaposed with an opposite or countervailing term: 'Happy Sad' is the most obvious example, but the title of the band's 1997 album *Happy End of the World* strikes a similarly dissonant note (while also, in a classic piece of

overdetermination, referencing Hosono Haruomi's 1970s pre-Yellow Magic Orchestra band Happy End).

In discussions of Brazilian music, the concept of *saudade* is often cited as defining both the essence and the uniqueness of that music, especially in genres such as bossa nova.¹⁴ *Saudade* is often referenced explicitly in bossa nova in songs such as 'Chega de Saudade,' and given Shibuya-kei's love of bossa nova it is hardly surprising that it is also referenced there, for instance in the Fantastic Plastic Machine song 'Pura Saudade.' The happy-sad ambivalence mentioned above could also be seen as close to the affective register of *saudade*. But what could such yearning be for? I would suggest that it is closely related to the nostalgia of Shibuya-kei musicians for the 1960s and the popular music of that period, and could be characterized more specifically by the Portuguese notion of *saudade do futuro* (best translated as 'nostalgia for the future'). Much of the charm of 1950s and 1960s popular music genres such as easy listening, or what postmodern listeners of the 1990s started to call 'space-age bachelor pad music', arguably lay in its naive optimism about the future, and its cult of modern design and technology—whether in the home or in space—as the basis for human progress.¹⁵ Nowhere is this technological utopianism more evident than in the domain of music production and consumption, with the advent of 'hi-fidelity' recordings, stereophonic record players, and with them the rise of a new genre of recordings designed to demonstrate their new features. Such records are the origin of the 'new stereophonic sound spectacular' sample which recurs in various Pizzicato Five songs, and serves as an auditory symbol of the techno-futurism of its time.¹⁶ Pizzicato Five's artwork is pervaded by such nostalgia-for-the-future imagery, from ultra-modern lounges to Nomiya Maki posing in a space suit for the cover of a remix compilation. This fantasy of an

ultra-modern future, promised by world fairs over the past century, had become an object of ironic nostalgia by the 1990s, for a postmodern generation now living in the much less rosy future. Pizzicato Five's *saudade do futuro*, like that of similar retro-futuristic bands such as Stereolab or the Gentle People, yearns nostalgically for the future as the 1960s imagined it, the future of space-age bachelor pads and supersonic air travel, of moon landings and *Barbarella*.

The concept of *saudade* itself, while difficult to translate and often claimed to be a uniquely Brazilian affect, nevertheless has some similarities to the Japanese expression *mono no aware*, often translated as 'the pathos of things,' which refers to the awareness of the transience of everything and the gentle sadness or wistfulness this brings.¹⁷ And of course, Momus has a song about it, 'The Sadness of Things' (1995), written in the midst of his collaborations with Shibuya-kei artists. Happy-Sad, *saudade, mono no aware: All Things Must Pass*, as George Harrison might put it.

Which brings us, appropriately, to Konishi Yasuharu's latest post-Pizzicato Five project. Released on 25 May 2011, the date of the tenth anniversary of the band's official dissolution, under the melancholy name of Pizzicato One, its cover depicts a black-clad, snow-covered Konishi standing stiffly alone in a wintry landscape, and is described as a collection of 'very sad' cover songs. 'Gathered from around the world regardless of genre,' arranged by Konishi but sung in English by different singers, it includes a cover of perhaps the definitive statement of musical utopianism: John Lennon's 'Imagine.' Among several Brazilian songs, one is a spoken-word performance by bossa legend Marcos Valle of his classic, 'Preciso Aprender a Ser Só' ('I need to learn to be alone,' 1965), in a new translation which accentuates the *saudade* of the Portuguese

original.¹⁸ One could scarcely wish for a more succinct encapsulation of the Shibuya-kei ethos of connoisseurship, internationalism, utopianism, and bittersweet memory. *Saudade/mono no aware* becomes self-reflexive here, a nostalgia for its own passing. While the release of the album in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and in the midst of Japan's nuclear crisis was no doubt coincidental, its melancholy evocation of the transience of things suddenly became a metaphor for the national mood more generally. In post-311 Japan, its *mono no aware* seems as in tune with its time as the music of Pizzicato Five was in the heady days of the bubble economy.

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Notes

¹ From this perspective, the popularity of Shibuya-kei among Euro-American youth can be seen as at least partially narcissistic, the familiar colonialist pleasure of recognising the self refracted in the mimicry of the other. Only on rare occasions has the equation been reversed, as in Hosono Haruomi's extraordinary pastiches of Western orientalist musics in his persona as Harry 'The Crown' Hosono.

² John Connell and Chris Gibson use the term transnational soundscapes in *Sound Tracks* (2003) ('A World of Flows: Music, Mobility and Transnational Soundscapes'), in connection with the musics of post-colonial diasporas such as South Asian *bhangra* or Algerian *rai*. Shibuya-kei is very different to both of these musics, not only stylistically but also because its producers do not belong exclusively to one ethnic group or national community. While some of Shibuya-kei's leading participants have been Japanese musicians living outside of Japan in cities such as Paris or New York, as well as Japanese Koreans and Brazilians, whether they collectively constitute a *diaspora*—a term more frequently used for political communities and musics such as Reggae—is debatable.

³ The series of articles on Shibuya-kei published by American musician and cultural critic W. David Marx on his *Néomarxisme* blog in 2004 (now the excellent online journal *Néojaponisme*) provides the most comprehensive and insightful English-language account to date of its history and legacy. I am indebted to it in what follows, and readers are encouraged to consult it for a more detailed account than I have space for here. David Marx is emerging as one of the most well-informed and insightful critics of contemporary Japanese popular culture: see in particular his five-part series of *Néojaponisme* articles, “The Great Shift in Japanese Pop Culture” (2011). I have two main problems with Marx’s take on the subject, however: the first is his readiness to declare Shibuya-kei as having run its course and therefore ‘over,’ solely on the basis of it having become part of the musical mainstream; the second, more closely related to my argument here, is that his discussion of Shibuya-kei is limited almost entirely to the local, national context of its place within the Japanese music industry at the expense of its transnational dimension, which I seek here to foreground.

⁴ The suffix *kei*—meaning ‘system’ or more accurately in this context, ‘style’—is used in Japanese to identify music genres, with recent examples including *Visual-kei* and *Akiba-kei*.

⁵ On the internationalism movement in 1980s Japan, see Yoshimoto (1989).

⁶ Reynolds (2011) offers a critique of the relentless advance of ‘retromania’ into Western popular culture since the 1980s, which he argues has become a barrier to musical innovation. Reynolds includes a chapter on Shibuya-kei and J-pop generally as anticipating more recent tendencies in Western pop, even going so far as to depict retromania as a process of ‘Turning Japanese’ (2011: 162-179). The characterisation of retro as a ‘virus’ (171f.) contaminating the West, the orientalist trope of Japan as ‘the empire of retro’ (162) and the notion that retromania involves a process of Japanisation evokes what Morley and Robbins call the ‘Japan Panic’ which has a long history in Western cultural representations of Japan (1995). My argument throughout this article is more the opposite, namely that Shibuya-kei artists’ cult of retro was symptomatic of the larger aesthetic shifts usually referred to as postmodernism within Western culture in general and popular music in particular, notably the waning authority of the original and the valorising of retro styles and pastiche; rather than the West ‘turning Japanese,’ J-pop’s retromania is arguably more symptomatic of what might be called, paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai, postmodernity at large.

⁷ Parts of the tour were reportedly filmed on a Super-8 camera by the British avant-garde filmmaker Derek Jarman, a friend of Simon Fisher-Turner who accompanied the group. The film has never been released, and Alway and Ian McNay of Cherry Records speculate that it is probably still lying around under a bed in Fisher-Turner’s house (‘The él Records Story’, n.d.).

⁸ For details, see <http://www.towatei.com/past/>.

⁹ My special thanks to Hyunjoon Shin for sharing information about the impact of Shibuya-kei on current developments in Korean indie music.

¹⁰ On bossa nova, see Treece 1997, McGowan and Pessanha 1998 (chapter 3), Castro 2001. On bossa nova’s globalization, see Keightley 2011.

¹¹ The music video is available on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDEpGk5GJ0I>. Accessed 17 July 2012.

¹² Takai also performs the Japanese version of ‘Kobune’ solo on her live CD/DVD *Luz Negra* (2009).

¹³ For dates and locations of shows, see the concert agenda listed on Fernanda Takai’s blog at <http://fernandatakai.com.br/agenda/>.

¹⁴ ‘In general terms, *saudade* is the Portuguese word used to describe a profound, bittersweet nostalgia for a person, place, time or other memory from which one has been separated’ (Draper 2010: 2).

¹⁵ I am referring to the future here as a historical object of representation rather than the ‘actual’ future. See J. W. Carey (1989) and D. Rosenberg and S. Harding (2006).

¹⁶ Belgian trip-hop band Hooverphonic’s 1996 album *A New Stereophonic Sound Spectacular* is evidently inspired by the same sample, which is taken from the stereo test record *Stereo Sound Spectacular*.

¹⁷ In contemporary Japanese culture, Haruki Murakami’s novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and Takahata Isao’s anime film *Only Yesterday* (1991) provide good examples of the wistful awareness of transience implied by the term *mono no aware*. How far it can also be applied to the sensibility of Shibuya-kei is something I leave the reader to consider.

¹⁸ ‘Ah I wish I could make you understand / without your love I cannot live / without us being together I am left alone / I feel so lonely / and I need to learn to sleep alone / without feeling your love / and to realize that it was just a passing dream.’ The title of the English-language version of the song is ‘If You Went Away,’ and as Valle explains during his performance on Konishi’s album, its lyrics are different from those of the Brazilian original.