

Developing bi-musicality through immersion in J-pop

Composition and performing processes

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Abstract

This Global Music master's thesis explores bi-musicality, an ability to better understand and perform another musical style, through immersion in J-pop. Through this thesis I investigated the musical elements and culture behind J-pop hoping to raise awareness and appreciation of the genre, and to give musicians tools to develop bi-musicality with J-pop as an example.

I studied the musical elements and the culture of J-pop using artistic research methods such as musical immersion, song analysis, academic texts as well as field trips. I compared J-pop songs to Western pop songs to see the differences between the two genres, and found out that J-pop can have complex musical elements from a Western musician's point of view, such as jazz harmony and progressive arrangements. During my field trips to Japan I learned more about some of the cultural and societal aspects of Japanese culture and how they might affect the sound of the genre, such as the working culture, education system and history. It seems that J-pop is a combination of Japanese traditionalism mixed with the country's vast influences from Western musical traditions that have become integrated in the unique culture of Japan. With the knowledge and experiences that I got from these processes I did experimentation with my own songwriting processes being influenced by J-pop.

As a musician with a background in different kinds of musical genres and traditions, I feel that it is essential to understand or at least to appreciate and be aware of different musical cultures. In this thesis I argue that through bi-musicality we can not only break the language barrier in music, but to engage in musical practices with more people and create new kinds of exciting music in an ethical way.

Keywords

J-pop, popular music, global music, Japanese culture, bi-musicality, composing, performing

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1 Introduction

This Global Music master's thesis explores my development of bi-musicality through immersion in J-pop. Bi-musicality (Hood, 1960) is a concept through which a musician can gain an insider view on another musical culture by engaging in the music making process with the people who represent it, and this way get a real grasp on the music and develop skills on how to go about performing it. In this study I will explore the concept of bi-musicality through J-pop as well as my own music making process being influenced by it. As a Finnish musician with a background in Western music tradition, my relationship with J-pop did not start as love at first sight. Having been exposed to mostly Finnish and other Western pop and rock music, the sound of J-pop sounded very new and exciting to me when I first heard it in high-school at the age of 16. In fact, the sound was so new and unique that I could not quite put my finger on it. I started playing pop/rock drums at the age of 10 and later on it became my main job. However, I have always been fascinated about other genres and music practices as well. And as my path with the drums progressed, I fell in love with many different kinds of genres such as jazz, progressive rock, modern classical music, electronic music, global music, etc. Through the concept of bi-musicality I have been able to broaden my own musical identity or 'musical home' with all of the genres that I have gotten interested in. My journey through different kinds of genres and music traditions has led me to go deeper into pop songwriting, and J-pop has become one of my main influences.

1.1 J-pop

J-pop is a general term for Japanese pop music, coined in the early 1990's by Komuro Tetsuya (Wai-Ming, 2004). This study is mainly focused on the modern Japanese pop music, J-pop, which to me is a specific genre of music that started in the 1990's and that is still being produced today. Although J-pop seems to be highly influenced by Western pop music, I can not help but to think that it has its own style, which does not seem to get enough recognition especially when compared to the globally known pop music from the West. The sonic language of J-pop interests me as I have not been able to quite figure out what is behind its distinct sound. Like in other styles of popular music, the musical elements of J-pop have evolved through time, but I believe that there are some key elements that seem to have been there since the beginning of the history of Japanese pop music. J-pop seems to generally be a

combination of Western harmony and Japanese traditionalism blended in a pop music context. I will go into more detail about the musical elements of J-pop later in this study.

1.2 My relationship with J-pop and Japanese culture

My first recollection of hearing J-pop was in high-school, when my classmates did a presentation about J-pop and K-pop (Korean pop music). At the time, these two genres seemed similar to me, and I even found them a bit funny at first. Not knowing the language and the culture played a part in this. I had heard other Japanese music before but the modern pop music of Japan was still unknown to me. It was so new and different from anything that I had heard before that I was not sure what to think about it. A few years later in 2016 I started learning Japanese and got more engaged with the music and culture of Japan. And as I have always been curious about new genres, I wanted to find out how to better understand J-pop. Studying the culture and language of Japan eventually got me really into J-pop, and I started to understand its difference from other Asian countries' pop music.

As a musician who has been exposed to a lot of Western pop music all my life, I felt like I had found something really unique and interesting when I started to listen to J-pop seriously. In the words of Tokita (2014) "it is not easy for European people to appreciate Japanese music without a certain amount of exposure and study of this different musical system" (p. 160). This applied to me as well since when I started to learn more about the language and culture of Japan, the music started to appeal to me more. I had gotten into Japanese culture already as a kid when I encountered a Japanese "manga" (Japanese comic book) called "Dragon Ball". This comic book got me more aware of the culture of Japan and its differences from other Asian countries. From there on I started to get curious about Japanese music, film, food, etc. But it was not until ten years later when I rediscovered some of the films and music that got me into Japanese culture in the first place that I started studying the language and really dive deep into the culture of Japan and J-pop.

1.3 Ways to define pop music

So now we might ask the question: "what *is* pop music in the first place?". To me pop music means music that happens to be popular in a certain place at a certain time. But this is very broad, as it suggests that pop music is not necessarily a sound but rather a concept. In his book *Pop Music, Pop Culture* Rojek (2011) talks about pop music as a genre, describing a pop song as "three-minute song formula structured around narrative typifications, basic chord

structures, harnessed to powerful commercial interests” (p.1). This might apply to most Western pop, but in my experience this does not seem to be the case with J-pop. Rojek also talks about pop music being “people’s music” which musical texts reflect on the people’s concerns, practices, traditions and aspirations. The way I interpret this is that for example pop lyrics deal with everyday life subjects and common things that are easily related in the society, and that is why a lot of pop music lyrics talk about love. However, when we are no longer in a Western context, I believe that the subjects of the songs can differ, as in the case of J-pop. In the foreword of Hatch and Millward’s (1987) *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* Mellers and Martin (1987) say that “music does not create or realise itself, but is always a result of people doing things together in particular places and times. To understand music is to understand the men and women who make it, and vice versa” (p. ix). This is why I think that culture and society play a big role in how pop music sounds like and what can become popular in a certain country.

And because pop music seems to be so dependent on the time and place, it means to me that the actual sound of the music can vary a lot, although nowadays in the West there seems to be some sort of a set of musical elements that define pop music as we saw from Rojek’s (2011) definition. I feel that as culture and technology evolves, pop music evolves with it. I have noticed this through listening to different kinds of pop music all my life. As a Westerner, if I think of older classic pop music, bands such as The Beatles and The Bee Gees come to mind. Now let us think about the sound of these bands. Originally The Beatles seemed to have been based in rock n’ roll in the early 1960’s. And a few years later The Bee Gees came to popularity with melancholy ballads that were considered orchestral pop with psychedelic-rock influences (O’Grady, 2024). But as time went on even these bands’ sound evolved. The Beatles experimented with a lot of different recording techniques and songwriting which evolved their sound, and their music even became an influence for the progressive rock genre (Martin, 1998, p. 17). And The Bee Gees’ long career went on through many different kinds of pop music movements and styles: Beatlemania, disco fever, synth revolution, digital recording, and adult contemporary (O’Grady, 2024). Yet still these bands were and are to this day considered pop music. But if we compare their sound to recent pop artists, they sound very little alike in my opinion. A more recent example of a highly popular Western pop artist would be the British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, who according to a study is a “globally renowned artist known for his diverse music, blending pop, acoustic,

and electronic elements” (Harshitha, et. al. p. 11, 2025), or the American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift who has become one of the most successful artists of all time (Junes, 2023). I could imagine that both artists were inspired by The Beatles but their sound is not similar. In his 2002 study Wald (2002) talks about the popularity of artists such as Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys in the 1990’s. But again, when listening to these artists, they do not sound like Ed Sheeran or Taylor Swift, nor The Beatles or The Bee Gees. So the sound of pop music seems to evolve through time. Right now in 2025 I feel that some Western pop music has started to purposefully sound like some of the past popular music genres. This shows that pop music does not have to necessarily progress forward but rather just change and have some novelty to it in order to remain its popularity. Pop music can be anything really that happens to become popular for whatever reason. For example one could say that even composers like Schubert and Mozart were the pop music of the day during their time. And nowadays social media like TikTok has made it possible for any song to become popular whether it is a new song from a different country, or an old classic like “Here Comes The Sun” by The Beatles (1969).

Still, I feel that there are at least some similarities in the musical elements that can be heard in a lot of popular music around the world. In my opinion some of the main elements are a simple melody with a catchy lyric that is easy to remember and sing along, and the groove of the song is usually easy to join to (depending on your musical background and culture). But again, I have found that even these elements do not necessarily apply in the case of J-pop.

1.4 J-pop’s reputation in the world

Unlike Western pop music which seems to be highly popular all over the world, J-pop has only very recently become a more known phenomenon in the West. However J-pop has not yet reached the same level of global popularity as Western pop music. Nowadays many people will know about K-pop (Korean popular music) in the West, which seems to have become a highly popular genre all over the world. It has not yet reached Finland to the extent yet that it has reached other Western countries, but I have noticed it becoming more and more popular in Finland. For example, the Netflix movie *Kpop Demon Hunters* (2025) is at the time of writing this thesis in the top 5 most watched movies in Finland. The songs in this movie have become very popular all over the world as well. I have heard some people finding it difficult to distinguish K-pop from J-pop as some tend to use the two genre names interchangeably. This is problematic for me since I believe that there is a distinct difference

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between the two, and that is why I think that there are some gaps in information that through this study I would like to be able to fill. Probably the main difference between the two is the language, but musically speaking, for me K-pop seems to be going more towards the Western pop music sound and image as opposed to J-pop. And this might be one of the main factors in K-pop becoming so popular even in the West. While K-pop is mostly sung in Korean, there seems to be more usage of English words in the lyrics and song titles and even whole songs sung in English than in J-pop (Dal Yong, 2020). One could say that K-pop is sometimes even targeted towards Western audiences but J-pop is still very much targeted towards the Japanese audience (Parc, Kawashima, 2018). Some K-pop artists have even collaborated with popular Western artists which has probably raised global awareness about K-pop.

Although this study is focused on J-pop, eventually it seems to be the “Western style pop-music” of Japan. And as Tokita (2014) says: “Japan’s contemporary music culture is overwhelmingly Western” (p. 164), we are dealing with a music culture that can be talked about in Western music terms. So in this thesis I will be talking about music theory and concepts like ‘groove’, ‘catchiness’ and ‘complexity’ from a Western musician’s perspective.

1.5 My own musical position

In the environment that I live in now in Finland, I feel that I am not able to fully express my musical ideas in a pop context without my music being marginal. However, in my experience studying J-pop, some of my musical ideas and goals could potentially happen in a J-pop song in theory. So I wonder what is it that makes certain pop music popular in one country and unpopular in another. I enjoy both Western and Japanese pop music, as well as pop music from all around the world if it happens to resonate with me. I have noticed that the musical elements of J-pop that appeal to me do not seem to appeal to the average Finnish listener. This has led me to feel marginal when it comes to my musical expression even though my lifelong dream is to become successful with my own music. I am by no means saying that I would not identify myself as a Finnish person, but perhaps my musical taste has developed (or ‘expanded’ like I prefer to say) to different directions than other Finnish people. But I still want to emphasize that even when composing songs that would fit the category of pop music in a certain country, does not mean that the music will automatically become popular. There are a lot more factors in becoming popular that would make another interesting study.

1.6 Research aim and questions

The aim of this artistic research is to explore bi-musicality through immersion in J-pop in order to better understand and appreciate its musical elements and culture, and to inspire my own artistic songwriting practices during my musical career.

The overarching research question of this thesis is:

-”How can I as a composer and performer of pop music develop bi-musicality through J-pop?”

This question can be broken down into a few procedural questions that have also guided me during this research:

- “What are the musical elements of J-pop and why does it differ from Western pop?”
- “How does the culture and society of Japan affect the sound of J-pop?”
- “Why is Japanese pop music not so popular in the West?”

1.7 Structure of the written work

I will begin by introducing some of the literature and previous studies that have been done relating to the different aspects of this research in chapter 2. Chapter 3 will go through some theoretical concepts that I have used during this research. In chapter 4 I will introduce the different research methods that I have used as well as explain how I gathered and managed the data. I will also talk about ethics and my position as a researcher. In chapter 5 I will reflect on my own experiences in and outside Japan listening and studying the music and culture of Japan as well as go into more in depth analysis of J-pop songs and compare them to Western pop songs hoping to see their differences clearly. I will also share some of my own song writing processes being influenced by J-pop as well. Chapter 6 will be a discussion between my findings and the theory and literature that I explained earlier. And finally in chapter 7 I will go through the conclusions and summarize my findings of this research.

2 Literature review/Previous Studies

This chapter will go through some of the key concepts and literature relating to the core topics of this research. Although I have not been able to find academic texts directly relating to my research questions, I have found some relevant material to help me with this research. For this chapter I chose to look at the different areas of my research as their own study. I will begin by giving an overview on the culture of Japan, including the working culture. Then I will go a bit more into detail about the history and qualities of J-pop, and lastly touch upon the topic of music education in Japan.

2.1 Japanese culture

“No one to my knowledge has ever identified the Rosetta stone of Japan’s distinctive culture”

(De Mente, 2011)

Japan is an island country in east Asia pretty much isolated from the rest of the world and I believe that this is one of the reasons Japan has such deep and unique culture and traditions that are still being practiced today. Some of the culture of Japan came from China a long time ago (Bellah, 2003, p. 8), for example some aspects of the language and the traditional music. Although there seems to have been influences from other countries for a long time, I believe that compared to other countries it is not until quite recently that Japan has had a better access to the West. In his book De Mente (2011) talks about the concepts of “kata” (“way”), “shikata” (“way of doing things”), and “wa” (“harmony”) in the early history of Japan as being some sort of a way of thinking about life and doing things. “Shikata” or the way of doing things meant a correct way in which things should be done, which would result in societal harmony or “wa”. I can see this in the modern culture of Japan as well, as in my experience the Japanese seem to behave according to the rules in order to accomplish a “harmony” or a conflict-free environment. According to De Mente (2011) the concept of “kata” led Japan to have certain traits in their culture such as a compulsion to work together, loyalty to groups and Japan, the feel and need for precision and correctness, and working especially well on small things. Some of the “kata”-based traditional practices and skills that are still being practiced in modern Japan include: tea ceremony, flower arrangement, kendo, judo and sumo (De Mente, 2011, p. 13). Another claim about the “kata” concept by De Mente was that “kata” also led the Japanese to have a desire to excel in everything that they

do and try to be better than anyone else. However, in a group situation they would have to downplay their abilities in order to maintain internal harmony (p. 14). This I think is one of the key elements of Japanese culture as I have found that the Japanese do not like to brag or show that they are better than others, even if they really are. This results in a humble and from a Westerner's point of view a polite atmosphere, which I often hear about when talking about Japanese culture with other Westerners. This atmosphere can also be considered as 'fake' or 'toxic' as we are going to see in the next paragraph about the Japanese work culture.

2.2 Working culture in Japan

“Japanese first life priority is work”

(28 year old Japanese worker in Widarahhesty, 2020)

The working culture of Japan is a relevant topic in my study as I believe that it might have an effect on how J-pop is being produced. Japan is known for its hard working culture which can be even considered 'toxic' as expressed in an article by Widarahhesty (2020). The average Japanese company will have long and punctual working days, which may include staying in the office until the others have finished their work even though you are done with your own work, because it is considered rude to leave before the others (Widarahhesty, 2020). Here we can see that group work is highly valued in the Japanese working culture, which is confirmed in another study by Wolf (2013) who says that as opposed to the Western mindset about individualism, the Japanese value a pleasant atmosphere and a sense of belonging in a group (p. 117). The word “頑張る” (“ganbaru”=to do one's best) reflects the working culture in Japan as the workers are always expected to do their best and give their everything. As mentioned, the working culture of Japan can also be considered toxic as there has also been many unfortunate cases of workers even committing suicide due to work related stress. Widarahhesty says that “Japan's work culture encapsulated as its national value has had an impact on its growth and economic progress. Japanese products are recognised worldwide due to their quality” (p. 38, 2020). This suggests that the Japanese seem to value their work ethics and want to continue maintaining it.

2.3 Brief history and the qualities of J-pop

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, J-pop is a general term that has been used for Japanese pop music from the early 1990's (Wai-Ming, 2004). But Japanese pop has been around for much longer than that; the origins of J-pop date back to the 1930's-1940's

(Wai-Ming, 2004). In his book “Traditional folk song in modern Japan” Hughes says that in older Japanese pop songs called Kayoukyoku “two musical modes dominate, both hybrids of traditional pentatonicism with a Western harmonic orientation” (2008, p. 43). And in my experience these are in fact the main musical elements in almost all of Japanese pop music from the 1960’s until the present day. This seems to be a big part of the whole genre since I have found out that Japanese pop has a lot of influences from Western music which is then blended with more traditional Japanese musical elements. I have found elements from both Western music as well as more traditional music in almost all Japanese pop music from as early as the 1960’s to the present day. One early example of this in my opinion is the classic Japanese folk song ”上を向いて歩こう” (“Ue Wo Muite Arukou”, also known as ”Sukiyaki”) by Kyu Sakamoto (1961). This song uses a lot of pentatonicism in its melody lines, yet it has a harmonic language that sounds very familiar to me as a Westerner. The song is in the key of G major, and the verse goes through a G, Em, G, Em, G, Bm, Em, D7 chord progression. I have heard this kind of a progression in many Western popular songs throughout history. The instrumentation of the song is also very Western influenced: orchestral instruments like the string section and a marimba, and a rhythm section playing a kind of a swing groove. Funnily enough this song also became a hit in the West and there are even Finnish versions of it. I have not heard about a Japanese pop song becoming so popular in Finland after that. However at this time popular music in Japan was not yet called J-pop. A more modern example of Japanese pop which can be called “J-pop” would be Yoasobi’s (2021) song “怪物” (“Kaibutsu”). There are a lot of harmonic ideas borrowed from the West, for example the 2-5-1 chord progression that is characteristic to American jazz music and that has become a very characteristic J-pop element in my opinion. I got a confirmation on this when talking to my colleague about his experience as a co-writer in a J-pop label. There is also a sudden modulation in the song when entering the first chorus. All of this is combined with busy vocal lines that are characteristic to J-pop. And again, the melody is oftentimes revolving around the pentatonic scale. I will go more into details about the musical elements of J-pop in a later chapter.

2.4 Music education in Japan

“The Japanese education seemingly has more focus on group oriented activities”
(Granström, 2015)

Because it seems to me that the average Japanese pop song contains more complex musical ideas than the average Western pop song, I believe that the music education in Japan might influence this. According to Granström (2015), under the Japanese curriculum's music section it is said that the purpose of music classes is to "to cultivate an interest in and respect for sound and music, and to foster an attitude of brightening and enriching one's life through music, by experiencing the joy of musical activities" (Chūgakkō gakushū shidō yōryō, 2011). The group working ideal of Japan seems to follow even in education as Granström (2015) says that the music education in Japan seems to "encourage using music as a communicative tool on a group level" (p. 19). This can be seen in the outside school musical club activities. I have often heard about an after school band club activity in Japan, and having talked to many non-musicians in Japan as well, they have mentioned that they used to play some band instruments at an after school club activity. In Finland this is not so common as we do not really have after school club activities, but rather hobbies, which are usually sports. I have noticed a lot more young girls and boys in Japan walking around with a guitar or other instrument cases than in Finland. I believe that music as a hobby seems to be quite popular among Japanese students. According to Imada (2018) the modern Japanese music education system is highly focused on Western classical music and its theory, which is another example of Japan's Westernization. According to Pecore (1991), in 1872 the Japanese government established an education system that would be focusing on both Western and Japanese culture. As a result the music classes in Japanese schools began to utilize songs that were based on Western music theory but had Japanese lyrics and themes which later on made some Japanese people think that it was the traditional music of Japan. From there on the traditional music of Japan became a marginal subject in Japanese schools music education system as it was almost fully taken over by European conceptions of music (Pecore, 1991, p. 8). This suggests that the Western music notation and tendencies became a norm to the average Japanese person through music education. In fact I have come across several Japanese non-musicians who know how to read music and who have previously played piano or a recorder for example. In my experience, in Finland only the ones who were serious about music could read music in school. No one was expected to learn how to read music, but just to engage in the music lessons.

3 Theoretical/conceptual framework

3.1 The concept of a musical home

Although Japanese culture seems to draw a lot of influences from the West, I can not help but to feel that the Japanese have their own way of doing things, and I think this has to do with Japan's strong roots in its traditions and culture. I have noticed a phenomenon in Japanese arts especially where a Japanese artist takes influences from a different country and interprets it in their own way. This can be due to the lack of sources that have been available in order to study these art forms in Japan, or perhaps the effect of the Japanese deep roots in their traditions. In music this phenomenon can be called a 'musical home', which according to Odendaal (2021) can be among other things "a lineage within a musician receives their training and finds their musical belonging". This to me is similar to the same way we learn new languages. When we are rooted in a certain language that is very different from others, it can affect how we acquire a new language. I have often heard that children can learn languages better than adults, and I think that this is because they are not as rooted in their native language yet and they still have a lot of capacity in their brain. Adults tend to have a highly dominant native language that is difficult to turn off when processing a second language (Linck et al., 2009). This is why I believe there are different kinds of accents in spoken language. And I feel that the same happens in music, especially in Japanese music. To me this is a beautiful phenomenon that has possibly resolved into many new genres around the world, including J-pop. And I have tried to renovate and 'expand' my musical home by immersing myself in different genres, which I am hoping will create a sound that is unique to me. For this study I started to immerse myself in J-pop hoping to get closer to being 'bi-lingual' in the language of the genre and making it my new musical home.

3.2 Bi-musicality

Another theoretical concept that is relevant in this research is the concept of bi-musicality. Originally coined by Mantle Hood (1960), the term was intended to encourage ethnomusicologists who were studying other music cultures than their own to actually learn to perform the music (Tokita, 2014, p. 163). Deschênes' (2018) mentions that according to Hood, ethnomusicologists started to realize that in order to get an "insider-view" on the music that they were studying, just observing passively was not simply enough. This becomes relevant in my research as I am not only trying to learn and get a stronger grasp on

J-pop by just listening and analyzing it, but also as I will be trying to compose and perform the music with Japanese musicians in Japan as well as make my own version of it in Finland. I was happy to get to compose pop music in Japan as well as perform it with the locals during a gig. As J-pop seems to have been influenced by Western pop music and Jazz it was already dealing with bi-musicality in the way of trying to play the music from another culture. And in my case I will be analyzing and trying to play J-pop, and later on making my own version of it. This creates an interesting loop which in my opinion makes it possible for new kinds of exciting music to emerge. Tokita (2018) also talks about the relation of bi-musicality to language which makes sense because in my opinion music is in fact a form of communication, and different languages to me function as different genres and music traditions. Translation is also relevant in music as when we learn a musical genre that is not our 'native' genre, we are sort of interpreting it in our own way. In my opinion Odendaal's (2021) concept of a musical home can be equivalent to our mother tongue. And that 'musical mother tongue' affects the way we acquire new genres (languages). The word 'translation' to me implies that there can be something missing in the process of the translation too. In the case of a lot of Western influenced Japanese music like J-pop, this seems to be a reoccurring phenomena. As with their spoken language, it is not until quite recently that I have noticed that more and more Japanese people speak English more fluently than before as I have mostly heard Japanese having a heavy accent when speaking English. And the same applies with music; I think that the Japanese are so much rooted in their own music practices that it can be heard when they are playing the music of another culture. This is all just my opinion of a general image that I have gotten when observing the music of Japan. And again, to me it is a beautiful phenomenon that enables new kinds of exciting music to emerge, such as J-pop. Another way in which Tokita (2018) talks about the word 'translation' in music is when Western music got 'translated' into Japanese culture in the late 19th century, which made it easier for Japanese to learn the music of the West without learning English for example. On the contrary, Tokita claims that in order for a Westerner to learn Japanese music, one has to become fluent in Japanese language. This means that the terminology of Western music was also translated into Japanese, making it possible for everyone to deeper understand the Western music without having to learn English. Also, perhaps the Western music became something that the Japanese wanted to integrate into their culture for reasons that I will be trying to find out later in this thesis. And as I have not been able to find so many sources on how to learn J-pop, I found it very useful to have learned the Japanese language as I got to

meet more locals and discuss with them in depth about J-pop, their opinions and the culture of Japan in general. Since Japanese culture is so different from mine, I think that it is almost impossible to deeply learn about the culture and society of Japan without knowing the language and going to Japan to actually experience it. In the Japanese language there are even terms that feel impossible to translate to another language as some other cultures simply do not have those concepts or expressions. And I strongly believe that the same happens when trying to learn the music traditions of Japan.

4 Research design/Implementation of the research project

4.1 Methodology

This study is an artistic research study. In artistic research an artist creates an artistic outcome and researches the creative process, and this way develops new knowledge (Hannula, Suoranta & Vadén, 2005, p. 5). The artistic processes in artistic research are treated equally as valuable data as the outcomes themselves. This research style served me in the best way possible in my research which is trying to answer the question: “How can I as a composer and performer of pop music develop bi-musicality through J-pop?”. Studying a musical genre or a phenomenon is not as straightforward of a process as perhaps other academic studies as many times there is not one correct answer. Artistic research methods allowed me to not only learn more about the musical elements of J-pop in theory, but also to go through a process where I actually engage and play with the people who make and consume the music in the environment where it is originally from as well as do my own musical experimentation.

4.1.1 Artistic research

In his 2021 text *Resonance* Thomson describes artistic research as an evolving approach to research that questions ways in which knowledge is created and understood. Doing research on a music genre that has an evolving sound forces the researcher to be creative especially when trying to replicate its sound. A genre like J-pop does not feel easy to grasp at first as it seems to have many influences already by default, and pinpointing them seems difficult. Through the processes of artistic research, which utilize multiple artistic processes and outcomes in combination with text to construct research and develop new knowledge (Thomson, 2021), I was able to get closer to answering my research questions.

Some of the approaches characteristic to artistic research used in this study include:

- Interviews and conversations
- Listening and analysing songs
- Experimenting with the elements of J-pop in my own songwriting practice
- Recording the songs (demos)
- Going to Japan and engaging with local musicians

Thomson's (2021) artistic research design consisted of a few parts which included some main themes like intercultural immersion, co-creation, experimentation, and artistic components. In my study I would consider my immersion in the language and music of Japan as intercultural immersion. I did a lot of this just by myself but also with Japanese people when going on field trips to Japan.

4.2 Artistic process

Throughout my studies at the Global Music department I got to do different kinds of data gathering for this research. I divide the data into three overlapping processes of artistic engagement and data generation including interviewing and talking to people who had been involved in the making or consumption of J-pop, transcribing and analysing songs, and doing field trips to Japan. In addition I studied the culture and language of Japan which helped me especially during the field trips in Japan.

I started working on this project in the beginning of 2022 by doing interviews with people who had been involved in the making of J-pop. I recorded the interviews or wrote down my main observations. The topic of these interviews revolved around the musical elements of J-pop and the working style in Japan. Throughout this study I also did my own transcriptions and analysis of J-pop songs either just in my head or on paper, and tried to then play and sing the songs. I transcribed some of the main musical elements such as chord progressions, song structures, ambitus, and the rhythmic and melodic language of the vocals. I also went to Japan three times: in late 2022 - early 2023, beginning of 2024 and finally in the end of 2024 until the beginning of 2025. I stayed mainly in Tokyo but also went to cities like Osaka and Nagoya. I got to do some songwriting with local musicians as well as do small performances. I kept a diary on my observations related to J-pop and the culture during and after these trips. Sometimes I would get observations back home in Finland as well when listening to a song or an interview or talking to people who knew about J-pop. The performances that I did in Japan were also filmed for the most part. Although I did not analyze the videos that much, they work as a reminder about the times that I performed in Japan and they might help me refresh my memories from those events and the little details about the culture that I got to experience. And lastly, starting from the fall of 2023 I wrote a lot of songs to try to get better at songwriting and incorporate elements of J-pop in my own songs. I did demos of these songs and finally got to perform them in a concert in Helsinki in May 2025.

4.2.1 Song analysis and transcription

One of the most important processes during this research study was the actual immersion in the music of J-pop. Throughout my studies at the Global Music department I listened to a lot of J-pop, including artists such as Hoshino Gen, producer Nakata Yasutaka's music (Perfume, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, Capsule), and Yoasobi to name a few. In addition I tried to listen to whatever was popular in Japan. For this thesis I chose two J-pop songs and two Finnish pop songs in order to understand their musical elements and to highlight the differences between the two genres. For the most part I learned them by ear by playing guitar, and writing a chord chart. If the chords seemed beyond my capability to transcribe, I searched for interpretations of them on YouTube. I also wrote down the structure, length and the number of sections of each song. By trying to learn to sing these songs I was also able to understand the range of the vocal melody, and I marked down the ambitus of each song.

4.2.2 Field trips to Japan

Although I had been to Japan several times before this research project, it made sense for me to revisit the country specifically for the purpose of this research. First I went to Japan for two weeks from the end of December 2022 until the beginning of January 2023. I met up with many local musicians and even got to jam with them during a New Year's party.

I also played my first ever public performance in Japan in January 2023 and got a taste of the Japanese music and working culture. Although I mostly stayed in Tokyo, the performance took place in Takasaki, Gunma prefecture, as my percussion teacher with whom I played the concert with as a duo lived there. Before the concert we had percussion lessons with my teacher which focused on the Japanese way of playing and the traditions behind it. I also had many conversations about Japanese music with my local musician colleagues and non musician friends.

I did another two week trip in January 2024, and got another two opportunities to play a concert. The first one was an acoustic one song performance in an event in Kitakyushu, the south of Japan. I played cajon while my friend played guitar, and his friend sang. The song was the singer's original pop composition. Because the event had other musicians as well, I was able to connect and have conversations about the Japanese music scene with them.

The other concert happened in Tokyo with three other musicians; a pianist, a trumpet player and an Erhu player. The setlist consisted of a lot of Japanese traditional and popular songs as well as songs from other countries like China and America. The rehearsals for this concert were a new kind of an experience for me as I got to rehearse in a typical rehearsal studio in Tokyo and talk in musical terms in Japanese for the first time. This became interesting data for my thesis as well.

During this trip I also went to two jam sessions in Tokyo where I met and played with new musicians as well as connected with my old friends.

My final field trip was a three week trip mostly in Tokyo from late December 2024 until mid January 2025. I was happy to get to play another concert with the Erhu player from the last trip together with another new percussionist friend. This time I was mostly singing and playing guitar while during the last trips I mainly played drums/percussion. The concert took place in Tokyo at the end of December 2024 in a cafe.

This time I went to three different jam sessions which kept me updated on the musicians' scene in Tokyo. During this trip I was trying to be very active in getting opportunities to play with local musicians, so I got yet another opportunity to play a gig abruptly, this time in Osaka. I played a few songs together with the trumpet player who also played at the gig in Tokyo during my last trip. We were also joined by a local guitar player from Osaka. I also got to try some of my own Finnish pop songs for the first time in front of an audience during the gigs on this trip.

I also had many informal conversations about J-pop and the culture of Japan with my local friends during this trip as well. If there was something remarkable said during these conversations, I would write it down in my diary afterwards. I will describe this process more in the next section. Most of the performances that I did in Japan were filmed as well. I would also hear many J-pop songs during my field trips in public spaces and I used a smartphone app to get the song information. I would then listen to the song later and add it to my playlist.

4.2.3 Interviews and participant observation

I started working on this research project already during my bachelor studies at the global music department. Apart from just listening to J-pop, I did an interview and had many conversations with my colleagues and friends both in Finland and in Japan. In February 2022

I interviewed a Finnish colleague of mine who had some experience working in Japan as a co-writer in a J-pop label. I thought that this would be a good opportunity for me to learn about the musical elements of J-pop as well as the working style that was going on behind the genre. I prepared questions that I thought were relevant to my research. We talked about the working style in the studio while composing in a J-pop label as well as the musical elements. I was curious to know about the working hours and work ethics, as I thought it might be similar to other office work in Japan. The interview took place in a restaurant for about an hour and it was done in a casual way since we knew each other from before. I recorded the interview in order to revisit the answers later for this study. Although I do not personally know other people who have been involved in a J-pop label, I know musicians who are interested in the genre with whom I have been able to share observations about J-pop with. Most of them are like me; musicians who work in different musical settings and who enjoy different kinds of music. These conversations happened very casually and in the spur of the moment for example at the backstage before or after a gig in Finland. We mostly talked about the musical elements of J-pop, the wild arrangements, synth sounds and the visual aspects of the music as well. The conversations that I had in Japan with my Japanese colleagues and friends were also quite unplanned and casual, but later on they generated some very useful data for my thesis. I would describe the process of learning from these conversations as participant observation, which is a method that allows the researcher to participate in the daily activities, interactions and events of a group of people in order to learn about their life and culture (Musante, 2020). I used a lot of the key elements of participant observation in Japan including living in the context for a long period of time, learning and using the local language, participating in daily activities and hanging out with the locals, and taking field notes in my diary (Musante, 2020, p. 5). Most of the conversations were held between the players that I got to play the concerts with but I was also able to discuss J-pop with non musician friends, both men and women in different ages. One more concentrated conversation setting happened with a Japanese colleague of mine at his place in January 2024 while we were writing a song together. The session lasted for a few hours and we talked and exchanged ideas while composing. We shared our knowledge about pop music and how it differs from each other's countries. The main themes that we talked about were the song structures, song hooks, and the lyrics of the song.

4.2.4 Artistic outcomes

Some of the artistic component outcomes of Thomson's (2021) artistic research was in the form of three concerts as well as an album and a documentary film. I also included concerts both as an artistic research process as well as the outcome of my research. During the trips that I did to Japan I was able to play a few small concerts with the local musicians. The process towards these concerts included rehearsing and arranging songs together with local musicians, which I would compare to Thomson's process of intercultural co-creation. The music that was being played during these concerts would also work as the outcome. Apart from the concerts that I did in Japan, I was also able to perform my own songs with my band in a concert which took place in May 2025 in Musiikkitalo, Helsinki in the form of a master's concert. This was the outcome of a songwriting process that I did during my master studies. I actually consider the process for this concert as a lifelong process, as I believe that my immersion in different genres throughout my life affected the sound of these songs. However, I did specifically write the songs for this concert, hoping to include influences from both Western and Japanese pop music. So I did musical experimentation through my own songwriting practices, and made demos of the songs that came out of this process. I also did a couple of songwriting sessions with my local musician friends during my trips to Japan, but these sessions did not result in fully finalized songs that we could have been able to perform. I consider this part of the process as intercultural collaboration and co-creation as well.

4.3 Researcher/artistic position

Although I am a Finnish musician who grew up exposed to the Western pop music tradition in Finland, I have always been very curious about different genres and music cultures and my favorite music comes from elsewhere than Finland. Throughout the years I have been trying to make original music that does not sound too much like anyone else. In the year 2025 that I am writing this thesis, making original sounding music can be very difficult as there is so much music in this world already by now. But that has been my main mission for a long time. And as my musical journey has led me to writing pop songs, I naturally wanted to try to write pop music that would specifically sound like me and that would appeal to me as well. Although I will be using elements of J-pop in my own music, I by no means claim myself to be a J-pop artist who represents the genre. I feel that naturally having musical elements of J-pop or any other genre in my music is only a tribute to the genre that I like and that I have acquired naturally as my musical expression.

As a white man from Finland, I am in a different position when going on trips to Japan. For me I do not think about the power relations that much as I feel that everyone should be treated equally. For example I do not think I am in any way higher position than the people in Japan. However when I see situations where the power relations might occur, I usually try to even out the situation by trying to put myself on the same level as everyone else involved if not lower. In Japan the power relations within the society are already present, and as someone from a more equal country this feels odd at first. So when visiting Japan, I make sure I have done my homework on their culture and manners and I try to be aware of any cultural clashes that might occur because of my background. After all, I am their guest trying to learn from them without causing them trouble. Fortunately I have been able to mostly work with people that I can also call my friends, so even if there have been situations where there are cultural differences, we have been able to calmly or even jokingly discuss it and feel comfortable with the situation afterwards.

4.4 Ethics

When doing research about a different culture than my own, I am responsible to carry the research in an ethical manner. As a researcher who is interacting with people from different cultures and backgrounds, I need to do my homework to make sure everyone involved feels comfortable participating in this study. So I will not be naming the participants in this study or use the data from them. As I mentioned earlier, I was fortunate enough to mostly be able to work with my friends during this project. So I got verbal consent from them, and they acted more like mentors rather than research participants. Before going to Japan I would always tell all of the people that I was going to meet about my research and that I would like to learn about the music culture of Japan. I asked them whether it would be ok if I used some of the observations that I might get by working and spending time with them in my thesis, and everyone felt comfortable with that. I also let them know that they could drop out of the project if they at any point felt like doing so for whatever reason.

During my studies at the Global Music department, I was given a lot of valuable information about ethical research. I was introduced to the TENK guidelines, which talk about the basic principles of research integrity being: “reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability” (TENK, 2023). In my research I ensured these in the following ways: reliability - through keeping a diary, honesty - reporting on the whole experience without leaving anything out, respect - learning about the culture and manners as well as the language, and treating my

colleagues as artists, accountability - having a supervisor mentor who guided me throughout the process and helped me with decision making. As mentioned before, I will not be mentioning the participants by their name and I will try to minimize all information that might help in identifying them. I also want to emphasize that the observations that I have gotten from my time with Japanese people are solely based on my own experiences and point of views. The people represent only a very small percentage of Japanese people, so my observations do not necessarily apply to the majority of the population. Doing research about a specific culture has its risks as we can easily fall into generalization and stereotypes. I want to make sure I do not generalize all Japanese people or even a smaller group like Japanese musicians when making statements based on my observations.

5 Results/Findings

5.1 Song analysis

In this section I am going to analyse two recent pop songs that I have been listening to from both Japan and Finland, and see what are the main musical differences between these two styles. I am going to take a look at elements like chord progressions, melody, song structures and production. I will also briefly mention other songs as well as talk about some reoccurring phenomena that I have noticed while listening to these styles of music. Hopefully the songs that I picked will showcase the two genres of pop music as widely as possible.

5.1.1 Chord progressions

The first Finnish pop song that I am going to analyze is “Tulipalo” by the highly popular pop-group Kuumaa (2023). Having played and talked about this song with many of my musician friends in Finland, I have noticed that it has a much busier chord progression than the average Western pop song. The song is in 4/4 like most pop songs, and the intro is a common 3 chord progression. However, the chorus introduces different chords played more frequently, almost every half note. Here is a chart of the chorus’ chord progression:

Gm // Eb F // Bb Eb // Cm F

In my experience, the average Western pop song’s chord progression would look something like this:

F#m // D // A // E

This chord progression can be heard in Ed Sheeran’s song “Perfect” (2017) for example. The song is in 6/8 but the chord progression is very typical to a Western pop song. I feel like this kind of a progression has almost become a standard basis in pop music that songwriters use creatively.

Next up I am going to analyze a J-pop song as a reference. The song I chose was “恋” (“Koi”) by Hoshino Gen (2016). This song was and still is a big hit in Japan, loved by all ages and people. It was playing constantly in Japan during my trip there in 2017. At the time

it sounded kind of funny to me and it seemed odd that such a wild song would become so popular. Later on I came to really like this song when I noticed all of the nuances and the quality of the production.

The song is also in 4/4 and its intro has a descending chord progression of 4 chords. So far it does not differ from a Western pop song that much in terms of the amount of chords. But the A-part of the song introduces a lot more chords:

A C#7 // F#m7 A#dim7 // Dmaj7 C#m7// Bm7 E7sus4

As we can see, there are two chords per bar. The chords themselves are ‘richer’ too with the usage of 7ths and a diminished chord, which seems to be quite characteristic to a J-pop song. The song is also quite fast compared to the previous examples, which makes the song sound a bit hasty in a way that might seem odd for someone who is not familiar with J-pop. The rhythm in which the chords are played is very syncopated as well. In most Western pop songs the chords usually change on the beat. This kind of chord progression is not something completely new however, as it could be heard in a Jazz tune years before already. But I feel that using it in a pop context like this is very innovative and interesting.

Another more recent highly popular Finnish pop song would be “Timanttei” by Mirella (2024). The A-part of the song technically only uses two chords and at the last bar there is a chord leading back to the 1st chord:

Dm // Dm // Dm // Dm // Gm // Gm // Gm // Gm C

The chorus utilizes a very traditional chord progression for a Western pop song:

Dm // Bb // Gm // C

Again there are 4 chords changing on the 1 on each bar of the chorus.

And in comparison, one more recent example from Japan: “ライラック” (“Lilac”) by Mrs. Green Apple (2024). The A-part of the song focuses mainly on a few chords but there are

additional cadences that eventually modulate the song to the pre-chorus of the song. And finally the chorus which uses a wide selection of chords (Sol Writes, 2024):

Bb Eb // F7sus4 Bb // Gm7 Bb7/D // Ebmaj7 Edim7 F7 F#dim7

Bb Eb // F7sus4 D7/F# // Gm7 Bb/F // C/E Ebdim7 // etc.

As we can see from the analysis above, J-pop tends to have more chords and trickier chord progressions than the Western pop-songs.

5.1.2 Vocals and language

As the target audience for J-pop seems to be mostly Japanese people, the language in which the lyrics are sung in Japanese play a role in the sound of the genre. Another aspect in the vocals that seems to differentiate J-pop from Western pop apart from the obvious language aspect is the melody lines and their rhythm.

I have found that J-pop songs have a larger ambitus than the Western pop songs. This can however be dependent on the singers' vocal range too. For a Finnish song "Tulipalo" has a relatively large ambitus of Bb2-G4 as opposed to "Timanttei", which is A3-C5. In contrast, the J-pop song "Koi" has an ambitus of E3-A4 and "Lilac" F3-C5. I have personally found it quite difficult to sing some J-pop songs as they very often have a large ambitus with for example a sudden leap to a high pitch. So the ambitus of the J-pop songs that I analyzed seems to be wider than the Finnish or other Western pop songs that I talked about. An exception to this would be in the case of some "idol" groups. During an interview I did with a colleague who had worked in Japan as a co-writer in J-pop sessions, I found out that some of the idol style J-pop artists' songs had to have a more narrow ambitus due to the vocal range of the singers. These so-called "idols" are not necessarily singers originally, but people who attract the wider public with other skills or qualities. In J-pop and pop music in general, the ability to sing is not necessarily the main requirement to become a pop star. As Wai-Ming (2004) claims, the J-pop 'idols' do not only sell their music, but also their images.

Apart from the range of the melody, the rhythm or the speed of the melody is a big factor in distinguishing the two different styles of pop music. I feel that the Japanese language is a very rhythmical and percussive sounding language. This makes the J-pop songs' melodies sound very rhythmical and busy as well which creates the sound of J-pop to me. In English

for example the language sounds more round and groovy to me and the average pop song seems to have more spaces to breathe. I recently noticed this when singing a J-pop song called “Butter-Fly” (1999) from a Japanese animation “Digimon”. There is a Finnish version of this song for the Finnish audiences, which many including me had heard many times as a kid. When I learned the Japanese version, I noticed that there are differences in the melody’s rhythm in the two different versions. I feel like in the Finnish version there are more spaces as opposed to the Japanese version. In the Japanese version there are a lot of continuous 8-note melody lines which is characteristic to J-pop. I believe that this has to do because of the natural sound of the two languages. I personally feel that the way Japanese letters are constructed makes it sound a certain way in spoken language as well as in a song. In Western terms, the Japanese language has only 5 different vowels. And oftentimes in context these vowels are attached to a consonant, which in my opinion creates the characteristic rhythmical sound of the Japanese language. Manabe (2009) explains that the rhythmic unit of the Japanese language is based on the “mora” instead of the syllable like in many European languages. As each mora that is represented by a single Japanese character is pronounced with the same duration, it creates a very rhythmical sound in my opinion. And this sound enables the melodies in Japanese music to be more busy and rhythmical as opposed to most Western music. Manabe (2009) gave a good example of this in her text when she mentioned how Japanese rappers found it hard to ‘flow’ in a hip-hop beat in Japanese as the language lacked rhythmical variation.

5.1.3 Song structures and the length of the song

The song structure seems to play a big role in pop music. I have heard many times that because of the shortening attention span of people, the chorus of a pop song should start before the first 30 seconds of the song, or that the song has to be less than 3 minutes. This has most likely to do with streaming services like Spotify that seek for clicks (streams). Also with social media apps like TikTok, the information has to be squeezed in a short video clip, which tends to shorten people’s attention span (Zahra et al., 2025). This forces the pop song to fit into these platforms in order to become popular. However, when talking to my colleague about his experience writing J-pop in Japan, he said that there is a much longer narrative to the song. In the case of the songs analyzed, the build up to the chorus seems to be longer in Japan than in the West. This to me suggests that perhaps the culture of Japan is more patient

than in the West. However I feel that it is somehow contradictory in the environment of a hectic city like Tokyo, where things happen really fast.

Here are the song structures and the length of the songs that I analyzed previously.

“Tulipalo” - 03:04 (Finland):

Intro / Short chorus / A / Chorus / A / Chorus / Outro
(4 different sections)

“Koi” - 04:12 (Japan):

Intro / A / Pre-chorus / Chorus / Intro riff / A / Pre-chorus / Chorus / Instrumental break / C / Chorus / Outro
(7 different sections)

“Timanttei” - 03:30 (Finland):

Intro / A / Pre-chorus / Chorus / Post-chorus / A / Pre-chorus / Chorus / Post-chorus / C / Chorus / Post-chorus
(6 different sections)

“Lilac” - 04:50 (Japan):

Intro / A / Pre-chorus / Chorus / Post-chorus / Intro riff / A / Pre-chorus / Instrumental break / C / D / Chorus / Post-chorus / D / Outro
(9 different sections)

From the chart above we can see that these J-pop songs have more song parts than the Finnish pop songs and they tend to be longer. In summary, a J-pop song will have more information than the average Western pop song.

5.2 Wild musical elements in J-pop from my own point of view

One of the most interesting aspects in J-pop in my opinion is its wild musical choices. I call these elements ‘wild’ as to me, a Western musician, they seem quite complex and unusual for a pop song. In a Western context I have often heard phrases like “simple is good”, “less is more”, and “do not overplay”. This might be valid in a lot of music, but as a fan of more complex genres like progressive rock and jazz fusion, this has not always made so much sense to me. I think some of the most intriguing and fun sounding songs to me have included different kinds of musical ideas blended together creating a unique sound. And this phenomenon can be heard in a lot of J-pop songs. Some of the musical ideas in these next examples could barely happen in a Western pop song. My mission is to change this and challenge the listener.

One of my early encounters with J-pop was the girl trio Perfume, whose long time producer Yasutaka Nakata has made some wild musical choices in highly popular songs in Japan. In their song “ポリリズム” (“Polyrhythm”) (2007), Yasutaka uses a 5 over 4 polymetre in the hook or the “sabi” of the song. And below that the bass is playing a dotted 8th note figure which creates yet another polymetre. I have seen a Japanese non-musician sing this song’s 5 over 4 polymetre in a karaoke box and I was amazed by this since in my experience, in a Finnish karaoke this could never happen unless the performer was a musician who has been exposed to other musical styles than just Finnish pop music. In my experience, in Finnish pop music culture the songs are supposed to be very clear and rhythmically simple so that anyone can clap along even if they were drunk. The idea of simple however can vary from country to country.

Mrs. Green Apple’s song “Lilac” (2024) utilizes complex musical concepts like fast guitar “tapping” techniques, sudden modulations, progressive song structures and even time signature changes. From a Western musician’s point of view these elements sound more like the elements of a jazz fusion or progressive rock song. And in fact I have not heard anything similar happen in a pop song in the West. Yet in Japan these elements almost seem to be the key to the popularity. The non musician listener probably is not aware of all of these musical elements but they can still enjoy the song. In my trip to Japan in 2024-2025 I was watching a very popular Japanese New Year’s TV show called “Kouhaku”. Mrs. Green Apple performed this song in the show and the (non musician) family that I was watching the show with expressed that it was their favorite song of the evening. This to me was very interesting since

when playing this song to my friends in Finland, they were mostly just stunned by the complexity, the musicianship and the production of the song.

Above I talked about examples of Japanese non musicians enjoying J-pop songs that incorporate what to a Western musician are considered more complex elements in a pop song. Rojek (2011) claims that pop music audiences do not require schooling or immersion in elite circles or such. To me this is true as in my opinion pop music is aimed for as many people as possible by trying to make the songs as easy to relate to as possible for the average listener. So again I wonder why the average Japanese consumer of J-pop is able to enjoy something that to a Westerner sounds musically quite complex. In my experience I have not met that many people in Finland who would genuinely enjoy J-pop. They might think of it as a funny phenomena from somewhere in Asia that they do not understand. But I personally feel that by learning even a little bit of other cultures and their musical practices we might be able to at least understand and appreciate different countries' pop music better.

5.3 Field trip experiences

In this section I will talk about my experiences and observations during the field trips that I did to Japan for this research. Some of my observations are a sum of all of the 9 times I have been to Japan in my life, but my main focus is on the three times that I went there specifically for this research.

5.3.1 Song writing in Japan

In my series of trips that I did to Japan for this study, I got opportunities to do some song writing with my local musician friends. These sessions were fun but challenging as well, as I noticed that the basis for our pop music styles were so different. It was interesting to share songs that we liked from each other's cultures. I found out that the average pop song in the West has fewer parts in the song than the average J-pop song. I came across Japanese words for different song parts and it was interesting to see how the average J-pop song was "supposed" to have these parts. I played Sting's "Fields Of Gold" (1993) to my musician friend during one of the sessions, and he was amazed how the song only technically had two parts. According to my friend, a J-pop song usually has an intro, which is also called intro (or "イントロ"- "intoro" in Japanese), borrowed from English. The verse or A-part is usually called "Aメロ" ("A-melo") which is an abbreviation of the English word "A-melody". Then there is a "Bメロ" ("B-melody"), which is not necessarily the chorus (high point) of the song,

but rather what in the West we would call a “pre-chorus”, and then there is the climax of the song called “サビ” (“sabi”), which I would refer to the chorus or even a “post-chorus”. I have also come across the Japanese word “間奏” (“kansou”), which represents an interlude or an instrumental break, which is characteristic to a J-pop song.

5.3.2 Japan's obsession with foreign countries

As mentioned earlier, some Western culture seems to have been integrated into Japanese culture some time ago already. And even a music genre like J-pop that to me sounds very distinct and Japanese, is the Western influenced pop music of Japan. Since Japan was a very isolated country for a long time, I believe that when it started to learn more about foreign countries and their impact in the world globally, perhaps Japan wanted to follow them to get more global recognition. I personally feel that some Japanese might view foreign countries as superior to Japan. I have noticed this myself in the context of music, for example in jam sessions in Japan. On average, the young musician in a jam session in Tokyo admires American musicians and their music. Many musicians try to replicate “the American way” of playing. The tunes that were played were mostly American funk, jazz, fusion, pop, etc. The Japanese who are interested in foreign countries tend to think of them as superior to Japan and this way try to somehow integrate the foreign cultures in their lives. Or in the case of music, in their music and playing. These kinds of people do not usually like Japanese music as much, as they tend to think that foreign music is “cooler”. As a Finn I was also surprised that in Japan there seems to be a huge fanbase for Finnish heavy metal bands for example. Other examples of the Japanese obsession with other foreign countries can be seen even on the streets of Tokyo in certain areas where there is a trend among a particular group of Japanese men to dress up and dance like Elvis Presley. In the Japanese language there are many loan words from English too, especially nowadays. During my Japanese language studies I have come across many English words in Japan that have a different meaning to the original word. This to me tells that perhaps there has been something lost in translation during the process of trying to integrate something foreign and cool. And I personally can find this exact example in the context of Japanese music as well. So with all of these influences from the West, I personally feel that rather than the Japanese replicating another culture in an authentic way, they create their own version of it with their own twist, which results in an original phenomenon that is considered characteristic to Japan in the rest of the world. I am not saying that a Japanese person could not become fluent in another language or

musical style, but in general the average Japanese person who is not exposed to foreign countries might have difficulties learning it thoroughly, since as in the concept of bi-musicality, one would have to fully engage not only in learning the music but also in performing it as well.

5.3.3 My observations of the Japanese culture

As I got introduced to aspects of Japanese culture as a kid, I feel like I have been observing it for longer than the average Finnish person my age. Still, it was not until I started to visit Japan frequently as an adult that I started noticing the details about the culture more and more. Even though I became a little bit familiar with the culture of Japan, I could still notice its difference from my own culture in Finland and other countries that I had been to. Even though I feel that a lot of foreigners become fans of Japanese culture, it is still a small, underground fan culture compared to the fans of some Western culture that has taken over the world globally. The culture and customs of Japan are simply so different from all the other cultures in the world that it has not yet reached a high level of global popularity. And as pop culture and pop music seem to be a reflection of people's everyday life, it makes sense that the average Western listener does not feel related to the pop culture of Japan.

Although I have not worked in Japan, I have traveled there quite frequently and even been to situations where I have gotten a taste of the Japanese working culture. I have done a few small performances in Japan with local musicians and now I am going to reflect on my experiences. The first performance I did was an improvised musical setting where I played drums with another percussionist as a duo. Although it was an improvised setting, we did prepare for the performance by spending time together earlier that day playing, moving and talking. So in the case of the improvised show, we did some sort of a rehearsal or preparation during the day, but we did not spend much time at the sound check as we wanted to leave ideas for the show itself. However in my other experiences playing gigs in Japan during a sound check you often actually rehearse the songs that you are about to perform later during the gig from start to finish. This happened in my other performances in Japan where we played actual pre-arranged songs. This is already quite different from my experiences playing gigs in Finland where the rehearsing usually takes place at the rehearsal space before going to the venue of the gig. We did practice the setlist in Japan in a rehearsal studio or “スタジオ” (“sutajio”) as they say in Japan, but in addition to that, the sound check time was also a time dedicated to play through the setlist. The fact that at least in Tokyo, musicians usually rent a

“sutajio” by hour can have an effect on this. In Helsinki, Finland where I live, musicians tend to have their own rehearsal space that they can use freely and that they pay for monthly. This can make a difference in how we use our time at the rehearsal space compared to the Tokyo way. The only time this kind of a “practicing until the last minute” rehearsing might happen in Finland is when you have a theater production that requires a lot of rehearsing in a short period of time and sometimes the final rehearsal will happen on the day of the first show. So in Japan I actually have not really heard the word ‘soundcheck’ but rather “リハーサル” (“rihaasaru”=rehearsal). This to me tells about the Japanese way of polishing things until the last minute as opposed to the West where we might think that “it is already good enough” or something like that. I think that another reason why Finnish musicians do not rehearse during the soundcheck is that the soundcheck times at the average venue are quite short, perhaps due to the limited working hours that people have. And this is a big difference between the working culture in Japan and Finland; the working hours.

So the improvised performance that I did felt a little bit different from the other performances that I have done in Japan. But even after the improvised show, the whole team including some friends in the audience went out for something that the Japanese call “打ち上げ” (“uchiage”). According to Aijima and Sato (2015), “uchiage” literally means “to finish a particular task successfully”. In the context of music, in my perception it is a sort of an after party where people have drinks and food and reflect on the gig. During my first uchiage I noticed that there was even some criticism said about the show, how to improve it and so on. And as a foreigner, perhaps I was not so much aware of how to behave in this situation. From my upcoming experiences of uchiage I noticed something in common which was that usually the youngest member of the band asked the older or more experienced musicians about how they could improve. I am not sure whether this is a custom but I have seen it happen a few times and think that perhaps it is a way to show modesty and respect to your “先輩” (“senpai”=older student or colleague). In Finland I have not seen this as much in such a concrete sense. There can be slight modesty in the interaction or showing respect in some other way, but still it feels more equal overall within all musicians in Finland.

So one aspect that I personally noticed about the Japanese working culture was the hierarchy. If I was playing with a musician who was older than me, there was a sort of a hierarchy in the air although it was not made so clear, especially because I am a foreigner. But I could see it in the other players and the way they interacted with each other. A younger musician would use

the formal way of speaking Japanese called “敬語” (“keigo”). The venue owners were kept in a high position and everyone behaved very respectfully and modestly towards them, again using keigo. Nevertheless they were all friendly and very helpful and cooperative. In Finland everyone feels like being more on the same level and they casually talk to each other no matter how old you are or what your position is. These observations on hierarchy are only my experiences as a musician and they might not directly tell about how it affects the music of Japan. But I think that I got an idea about the way the Japanese working system functions, even though I believe that the office workers in Japan seem to have much stricter rules and hierarchy.

5.3.4 The environment of J-pop

I feel that the sound of J-pop fits the hectic big cities of Japan like Tokyo and Osaka. I have been to both cities several times both before and during my field trips, and coming from Finland they feel like very big cities with a lot of people around. There is music, sounds all around, different kinds of people, shops, restaurants, lights, advertisements, vehicles, etc. The capital of Finland, Helsinki is not like that at least to that extent. When I reflect the scenery of Finland to its pop music it makes sense to me. The average Finnish pop song is much more subtle and simple, like the Finnish culture itself. In Finland there are only around 5 million people, and we are spread around the country. There is a lot of forests and empty spaces. Although Finland and Japan are geographically quite similar in size, the amount of people is different as Japan has a population at around 124 million. So a big city like Tokyo is very densely populated and there is very little free space to relax unlike in Finland. So when I listen to J-pop and think about the places where the music is mostly being produced and played in, it makes sense. A normal arcade in Tokyo reminds me of J-pop as well: hectic, lots of different kinds of sounds coming from here and there, flashing lights, fast paced music from dancing and “taiko” games. I have found that perhaps the average Japanese person living in a big city like Tokyo has a bigger tolerance for a lot of triggers all around, as it is their everyday life.

5.3.5 Different ways of engaging in the music

The nature of most popular music seems to be based on a simple 2/4 or 4/4 rhythm with evenly spaced rhythms that are easy to groove to. In my experience, oftentimes in a concert in Finland the audience will start clapping on 1 and 3 to this kind of a rhythm. However in

Japan I have mostly seen the audience clap or shout on 2 and 4. This to me tells that perhaps different countries feel the same kind of rhythm differently based on what they are used to and the way they are taught. The audience in a J-pop gig might even have a choreography that most will participate in. This might be a reflection on the group work aesthetic mentioned earlier. In Finland, however, the audience seems to be more subtle in their engagement to the performance. Personally I feel that this might come from a fear of letting loose in front of others, especially without being under the influence of alcohol. Both Japan and Finland seem to like to drink alcohol and let loose during a gig, but I have noticed that in Japan it can also happen without alcohol. I have seen a pop performance in a mall in Japan in bright daylight where the audience was dancing to a choreography according to the song being performed. I have also seen Japanese salarymen fully enjoying a street performance in front of a train station by dancing and cheering to the performer. This kind of a sight would be considered a bit weird in Finland in my opinion, especially if the viewer is not drunk. But this also tells about the Japanese fan culture being very engaged and loyal. I have noticed that Japanese music fans might get really into a band or an artist and devote a lot of money and time to that. In Finland this might be more something that younger kids do when they have a favorite artist. But in general as adults we do not tend to go that far in the fan culture like Japan.

5.3.6 Image of pop artists in different cultures

In my opinion, not only the music but the visual aspects such as the appearance of the performers (artists) play a role in how pop music can become popular. Many pop artists seem to have a certain target audience. For example, specific genders and races seem to have a certain taste when it comes to popular music, which can be an effect from the society (Donze, 2017). When looking at the visual aspects of J-pop and comparing it to Western pop, they seem to differ quite a lot. I can see why J-pop might not appeal to the majority of the Western audiences since the outlook of many J-pop artists or “idols” seem to be colourful and flashy as opposed to something more chill and “cool” like many Western artists. In my experience J-pop artists usually try to be “cute”, and in the West the artists seem to aim to be “cool” or “sexy”. Brasor and Masako (1997) state that one of the biggest characteristics in J-pop is its carefree and childlike sensibility. And as Wai-Ming (2004) says, J-pop singers are mostly handsome young boys and cute and pretty young girls who can sing, dance, act and dress. However, we have to keep in mind that these adjectives are all in the eyes of the consumer, so

I can only say from what I have experienced or heard myself. A male Finnish pop star seems to be expected to be masculine and cool, but when talking about the average ideal type of a man in Asian countries, I have found that in general they seem to value a more sensitive and cute type. This might reflect on how J-pop idols look like as well, as the target audience values a certain kind of look.

5.4 My own songwriting practices

I have been writing songs for almost as long as I have been playing music seriously, but it is only quite recently that I have started to really focus on songwriting and do it in a more conscious way. For the past 10 years I have been writing songs for my rock band Pumpuli whenever I felt like I wanted to try to write a new song for that band. But I did not practice songwriting in the same way as I would practice an instrument. Recently I started my own solo career as 'TOIVO' (Finnish for "hope", taken from my last name) and I have been writing songs more seriously in order to reach more people with my music. I have been trying to write songs under the "genre" of pop music, but as I have been exposed to different kinds of genres all my life, the result might not sound like the average Finnish pop song. And I strongly believe in the statement that pop music is not just a sound but a concept and that anything can become popular. I started studying pop song writing with a composer who has done a long career as a pop song writer both in Finland and abroad. Even though I am a Finn and I have been exposed to Finnish pop music all my life, I do not identify that as my main expression in pop music. For the past years I have been listening and studying J-pop much more than Finnish pop. So I learned a lot about Finnish pop music and the business through my studies. As I started to write my own Finnish pop songs, I tried to replicate some of the traits in Finnish pop songs and the end result sounded more like Finnish pop than what I would naturally sound like. However, when playing the songs to other people, they often mentioned that the songs sounded a bit like J-pop to them. Even a colleague of mine who has experience in J-pop said this about many of the C-parts in my songs. This was interesting to me since I purposefully tried to sound like Finnish pop instead of J-pop. I tried to approach major labels with these songs but did not get anyone interested. So I decided to write the kind of pop songs that would come out naturally from me and appeal to me. This time I tried to apply more elements of J-pop in my music. I still decided to sing in Finnish as opposed to Japanese as I am not trying to become a J-pop artist, but just make my own kind of pop music

that has influences from J-pop. Whether a Westerner can become a J-pop artist would be a topic for another study. Next I am going to analyze some of my own recent compositions.

5.4.1 *“Flexailla” (“To flex”)*

“Flexailla” is a song that I wrote while being in Japan. I wrote it myself with a DAW (Ableton Live) in my accommodation in Tokyo. I tried to find synth sounds that would please me and remind me of J-pop. I found a nice bass sound and started to jam with that. I came up with the main riff for the song quite soon after. At the time I was still trying to make the chorus of the song sound like Finnish pop so I started jamming on a simple 4 chord progression for the chorus. Then I wrote the melody for the chorus which I tried to make as catchy as possible, and even incorporate a vocal hook technique that I had heard in the Lady Gaga song “Poker Face” (2008). I wrote the lyrics while waiting for a train or riding a train in Tokyo about a simple night out in a city. I chose to sing about Helsinki instead of Tokyo as it would fit the language better. The C-part of the song was born when I got back home in Finland and I started to experiment with more complex chords on the guitar. I accidentally played a “wrong” chord which ended up inspiring me to insert a 2-5-1 progression to the part, which in my opinion made it sound quite a lot like J-pop.

5.4.2 *“Sido mut” (“Tie me up”)*

I built this song over a progression which came as a result of trying to make a medium tempo J-pop song. I started the process by playing a pentatonic figure characteristic to J-pop with a bell sound that I thought sounded beautiful. I came up with a 4 bar figure that was based on the pentatonic scale and that has a rhythm that reminded me of J-pop and Japanese traditional music. I added chords that are pretty simple and basic for any Western pop song, however I have not heard these chords played in this exact rhythm before which made me feel good about it, since as a composer one of my main goals is to write original sounding music. But as it is 2025 and there is a lot of pop music existing already, it feels nearly impossible to write something completely new. The whole song is basically based on this 4 bar progression and I just change the melody with each section. I wanted to keep the pentatonic staccato-like, almost mechanical feel in the A-parts that would remind me of J-pop. Only the pre-chorus has different chords, which were inspired by the J-pop group Perfume. I wanted the section to change the feel of the song completely so I decided to make it sound a bit like the Brazilian bossa nova. Later on we added a bass line in that section with a producer that was inspired by

a J-pop song “Chocolate Disco” (2008) by the group Perfume. For the chorus I tried to write something repetitive and catchy and the line “Sido Mut” came out naturally. I started to build the lyrics from that as a joke to give the song a playful and not so serious atmosphere. The C-part functions as a synth/guitar solo. I wrote the melody by just playing lines that I really enjoy with a nice synth sound. The song will be released on most of the streaming platforms under my artist name ‘TOIVO’ by the time this thesis is published.

5.4.3 “*Älä tuu mun fiidiin tanssimaan*” (“*Don’t come dancing in my feed*”)

Here is another song that I wrote in a humoristic tone, especially when it comes to the lyrics, which I wrote first. I started jamming on the chorus lyrics while trying out different kinds of chord progressions on the guitar. The chorus was born very fast as well as the rest of the song. The A-parts introduce a motif in the melody which I tried to make a little bit more busy than the average Finnish pop song. I used a chord progression in the A-parts which sounded beautiful for me and then added “responses” to the vocal melody with a bell sound that I like to use in my songs. I wanted to modulate the song in the C-part as it would be something that J-pop utilizes quite often and I naturally found a way to modulate it back to the final chorus of the song. Although this song might not reflect the modern J-pop sound that much, I felt like it could sound something like Japanese pop in the 80’s which is called “City Pop” (Sommet, 2020).

I am quite happy with these songs that happened as a result of this research. Although I am not claiming to be playing J-pop, I still wanted to have influences from it. And when playing these songs to other musicians, many of them seemed to like the songs and told me that it sounded like J-pop.

6 Discussion

This chapter functions as a conversation between my results and findings with the theoretical and literary aspects mentioned earlier in this thesis.

The main goal of this artistic research was to explore the music of J-pop and its culture and see whether I can develop bi-musicality through it in my own music practices. The theories and concepts of bi-musicality and musical home served as a main principle throughout this research. As I was not able to find academic texts relating to my main research question, I chose to look at the different topics that could be useful in this study. Reading about Japanese culture seemed relevant and De Mente's (2011) book provided me with a lot of knowledge about the history and the early stages of Japanese culture. The concept of "kata" that he talked about made sense to me after being in Japan for many times and seeing how the Japanese in general seem to follow the rules and have a certain communal "right" or "correct" way of doing things. However, when I asked about the "kata" concept from some Japanese friends of mine, they were not sure what it was. Perhaps it is something that is not talked about nowadays with such a term, but I have personally noticed this phenomenon when spending time in Japan with Japanese people. On the other hand, it is not the first time I have come across a Westerner talking about a 'Japanese concept' from the history of Japan that the modern day Japanese people do not even know or think about. As we study a culture that is not our own, I think that we are likely to come across culture and concepts that are outdated or very rarely used in modern everyday life. I have noticed the same in my own country Finland, since as I live my everyday life, I do not think about the culture of Finland, I just live it. However, the foreigners who come to Finland might want to know and understand the culture and that is why they are more invested in it than me.

The working culture of Japan seemed to be almost exactly as I had imagined. I personally did not have 'toxic' experiences in the working culture in Japan as Widarahhasty (2020) mentions in her text as I do not have experience working in a company in Japan. But I could still notice the hierarchy through which I can see the potential in Japanese working culture getting quite harsh and maybe even toxic. I also heard about my Japanese friends' experiences working in Japan, and most of them confirmed that it can be very hierarchical and mentally demanding. Wolf (2013) among others talked about the Japanese tendency of wanting to belong in a group. This could be seen in the working life and in the education of

Japan (Granström, 2015). As I did not study in a school or work in a company in Japan, I do not have personal experience in this, but through the performances that I did in Japan I got to experience some of the group spirit; fully committing to the performance together by rehearsing and preparing, going for meals and an after show “uchiage” together, and supporting each other. The word “頑張る” (“ganbaru”=to do one’s best) was indeed always present in the context of performing in Japan in the meaning of “good luck!” or “let’s do this together!”. In Finland I have noticed a much more individual mindset as Wolf (2013) mentioned happening in the West. In some cases I have seen musicians arrive later to the load-in of the gig than the rest of the band in Finland because they “only play piano (or sing, etc.), and do not have anything to carry or to set up”. Also, in my experience rarely the whole team will go for an aftershow drink or gathering. Only during special occasions. Compared to Japan, Finland does not have that many options for a night hangout outside, which for sure plays a role in this. But still it is rare to see the whole team working together from start to finish during a concert day in Finland while in Japan this seems to be the norm. But of course, there are many exceptions both in Finland and in Japan.

In the beginning stages of this research I really wanted to know about the history and the musical elements of J-pop, and Wai-Ming’s (2004) text provided me with brief but interesting and useful information about the origin of J-pop dating back to the 1990’s, its popularity in Asia, and the basic principles of the performers or ‘idols’. Since my study is about the modern Japanese pop music, I can relate to the fact that early J-pop sound was born in the early 1990’s as I can hear echoes from that sound even in the present day J-pop such as Yoasobi and Hoshino Gen. After all, a lot of Japanese pop music throughout history seems to share the same musical principle; Japanese traditionalism blended with Western harmony (Hughes, 2008). Through the Westernization of Japan (Pecore, 1991), the Japanese seemed to have integrated Western culture including music and theory in their education system, which I believe made a huge impact on Japan’s way of thinking and hearing music. I have come to think that this is one of the beginning factors that led to J-pop sounding the way it does, as the Japanese integrated Western harmony and musical tendencies to their expression. But with the Japanese deep roots in their traditions or their musical home, it tends to blend with the Western musical ideas and create a sound that is characteristic to Japanese music and especially J-pop.

As I started to immerse myself in the genre of J-pop in the beginning of this research study, I was taking the first step in bi-musicality. As with language I noticed that the more I had immersed myself in the genre of J-pop, the musical elements started to naturally come out from me. I had been listening to J-pop even before this research so I think that it made a difference as well. But I have noticed that the concept of musical home is very important when creating new kinds of music. In my case I tried to make J-pop my musical home, which would then come out naturally from me when composing. And through musical analysis (artistic research) I found that this had in fact happened. In the beginning there were more times when I purposefully tried to include a J-pop trait in my song. This process can be thought of as artistic research practice, where one experiments with different kinds of song writing methods. Whether my compositions that resulted from this research can be considered J-pop would be a good subject for another study, but for now I am happy to have implemented some of the musical elements in my own music in an ethical manner. Doing songwriting with local musicians in Japan helped me to understand more about the process of writing J-pop as well as some of the traits of the genre. This is a crucial part in bi-musicality, as like mentioned before, only listening and analysing the music is not enough to fully understand the music. And although I was not able to perform the songs that I wrote with Japanese musicians live, I did do performances with the local musicians in Japan where we played other popular Japanese songs. So I got the experience of playing in Japan with and for the locals. As mentioned in bi-musicality literature, this helped me to better understand the context and culture of J-pop.

7 Conclusions

This artistic research study was meant to raise awareness and to better understand the world of J-pop by developing bi-musicality through immersion in it. By listening to the music, learning the language and the culture, and talking and playing with the people who make and consume the music, I was able to get a better grasp on J-pop. I found that the Western culture, especially American culture, has had a huge impact on Japan and its pop culture. This combined with the traditional elements of Japan has resulted in J-pop sounding the way it does. The image of J-pop and the idols reflect the societal values and ideals of the average Japanese person. Pop music is the music of the people, which is a reflection on society, and this also applies in Japan. However, as Japan has a history of being an isolated country with long and unique culture and traditions, it is simply a very different culture from anywhere else in the world, which has resulted in distinct sounding popular music. In fact, the sound might be so distinct and different from the rest of the world that perhaps some Western countries find it hard to understand it at first. This was also my case before, but as a curious musician and a fan of different kinds of music, there was something in J-pop that made me want to listen to it more and more. Perhaps it was the mixture of familiar Western elements combined with the not so familiar traditional Japanese elements. I believe that in the West one has to be very open minded towards different countries' music, or a musician who is curious about different styles of music in order to understand or at least appreciate J-pop. Having influences from J-pop in my own music has resulted into what I would call a unique and innovative form of pop music that I hope many people will like, or at least try to. I am hoping that this study will spark inspiration in the reader in developing bi-musicality and creating new kinds of music. There is always a chance to go deeper in a musical genre like J-pop by spending more and more time in Japan trying to connect with the people and the environment, and I am hoping that I can continue the research journey like this in the future.

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