

The Role of Music in Anime

An Absolute Beginner Study of Audiovisual Storytelling and Cultural Influence

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of music in anime as a fundamental component of audiovisual storytelling and cultural expression. Adopting a beginner-friendly qualitative approach, the study examines how soundtracks, opening and ending themes, and background scores contribute to narrative development, emotional resonance, and character identity, using well-known anime films and series as examples. Through selected case studies and qualitative analysis, the paper highlights how musical elements such as leitmotifs, tempo, and genre blending enhance viewer engagement and interpretation of animated narratives. It also demonstrates how music interacts with visual storytelling to strengthen emotional impact and narrative meaning. In addition to its narrative function, the study considers the broader cultural influence of anime music, including its role in shaping audience perception and supporting the global reach of Japanese popular culture. It also briefly examines the relationship between anime and the music industry, particularly the impact of theme songs on fan communities and transmedia expansion. In some cases, the adaptation of songs across languages—such as foreign songs reinterpreted in Japanese also contributes to unique audience experiences. By combining basic theoretical concepts with accessible analysis, this research provides an introductory framework for understanding how music operates within anime as both a storytelling device and a cultural force. The study ultimately argues that music is not merely a supplementary element, but an essential component in defining the emotional and cultural depth of anime.

Keywords: Anime; Audiovisual Storytelling; Anime Music; Soundtrack Analysis; Leitmotif; Cultural Influence; Viewer Immersion; Japanese Popular Culture

1.

INTRODUCTION

Anime, as a distinctive form of animated media originating from Japan, has grown into a global cultural phenomenon known for its unique visual style, complex narratives, and emotionally engaging storytelling. It is typically hand-drawn, either manually or digitally, and then animated using digital production tools. While considerable scholarly and popular attention has been given to its visual aesthetics and thematic depth, the role of music in shaping the anime experience remains comparatively underexplored, particularly from an introductory perspective. Music in anime is not merely an accompanying element; it actively contributes to how stories are perceived, experienced, and remembered by audiences. From opening and ending theme songs to background scores and character-specific motifs, music plays a critical role in establishing tone, reinforcing narrative structure, and enhancing emotional impact. Elements such as rhythm, tempo, instrumentation, and recurring musical themes work in coordination with visual cues to create a cohesive audiovisual experience. For instance, the use of leitmotifs can signal character development or emotional shifts, while carefully composed soundtracks can intensify dramatic moments and guide audience interpretation.

Beyond its narrative function, anime music also holds significant cultural value. Theme songs and soundtracks often extend beyond the screen, influencing popular music trends, fan communities, and the global perception of Japanese culture. The increasing international popularity of anime has further amplified the reach of its music, making it an important medium of cultural exchange and soft power.

This paper adopts an introductory, exploratory, and theoretical approach to examine the role of music in anime, focusing on both its storytelling functions and broader cultural implications. By analyzing key concepts in audiovisual storytelling alongside selected examples, the study aims to provide a foundational understanding of how music operates within anime. Ultimately, this research argues that music is not simply a background feature, but an essential component that shapes both the narrative depth and cultural impact of anime.

For clarification, the term *anime* (アニメ) is a Japanese loanword derived from the English word *animation*. It is a shortened form of *animēshon* (アニメーション), which became widely used in Japan during the 1970s to refer specifically to Japanese-produced animated works.

2. BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

Anime has developed over decades into one of the most influential forms of global media, originating in Japan and gradually expanding its reach across international audiences. Known for its distinctive visual style and diverse storytelling, anime spans multiple genres and appeals to a wide range of viewers. While visual artistry and narrative complexity are often highlighted in discussions about anime, the auditory dimension—particularly music—plays an equally important yet sometimes underexamined role in shaping the overall viewing experience.

Music has been an integral part of Japanese animation since its early development, evolving alongside improvements in animation technology and storytelling techniques. From orchestral background scores to modern electronic compositions, anime music has

adapted to reflect changing artistic trends and audience expectations. Opening and ending themes, in particular, have become iconic elements of anime culture, often performed by well-known artists and contributing to the identity and popularity of a series. Over time, anime music has also extended beyond its original function as background accompaniment. It has become a significant cultural product in its own right, influencing music charts, fan culture, and global perceptions of Japanese media. The integration of music with visual storytelling allows for a deeper emotional connection between the audience and the narrative, enhancing mood, character development, and dramatic tension.

Despite its importance, the role of music in anime is often overlooked in beginner-level media studies, where greater emphasis is placed on visual and thematic analysis. This creates a need for more accessible studies that explore how music contributes to storytelling and cultural meaning within anime. By examining this relationship, the study aims to provide a foundational understanding of how audiovisual elements work together to create a cohesive and emotionally engaging experience.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of music in audiovisual media has been widely explored within film and sound studies. Claudia Gorbman, in *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, argues that film music often operates “unheard” by audiences, subtly guiding emotional interpretation and narrative understanding (Gorbman, 1987). Similarly, Michel Chion, in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, emphasizes that sound and image function together to produce meaning that neither could achieve independently, highlighting the inseparable relationship between auditory and visual elements in storytelling (Chion, 1994). Within animation and anime studies, Susan J. Napier discusses anime as a complex audiovisual medium where visual style and sound design work together to construct meaning and emotional depth (Napier, 2005). Thomas Lamarre further expands this perspective in *The Anime Machine*, explaining how anime uses layered audiovisual techniques, including sound, to create dynamic narrative experiences beyond traditional cinematic form (Lamarre, 2009).

In addition, research published in journals such as *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and *Mechademia* has examined the role of soundtracks in anime, particularly how music contributes to emotional framing, character identification, and world-building. These studies collectively suggest that music is not merely supplementary in anime but functions as an essential storytelling component.

3.1 Claudia Gorbman – Narrative Film Music

Claudia Gorbman’s work in *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* provides a foundational framework for understanding how music functions in audiovisual storytelling. Gorbman argues that film music often operates on a subconscious level, meaning that it is not always consciously noticed by the audience but still plays a crucial role in shaping emotional interpretation and narrative meaning (Gorbman, 1987). She identifies key principles of film music such as invisibility, inaudibility, and emotional signification, all of which contribute to guiding audience response without directly drawing attention to the music itself.

This theory is highly relevant to anime studies because anime frequently uses background scores to enhance emotional depth in scenes without explicit acknowledgment within the narrative. For example, music in emotional or climactic moments subtly directs viewer perception, reinforcing sadness, tension, or excitement. Gorbman’s framework suggests that music functions as a narrative tool that supports storytelling rather than existing as an independent element.

Her work is significant because it establishes that music is not merely decorative but structurally integrated into audiovisual media. This provides a strong theoretical basis for analyzing how anime uses background scores to influence audience emotion and narrative comprehension.

3.2 Michel Chion – Audio-Visual Relationship Theory

Michel Chion’s *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* presents a critical examination of the relationship between sound and image in audiovisual media. Chion argues that sound and visual elements should not be studied separately, as their interaction produces a combined effect known as “audiovisual fusion,” where meaning is created through their synchronization (Chion, 1994). He introduces concepts such as “added value,” which explains how sound enhances the emotional and narrative interpretation of visual scenes. In the context of anime, Chion’s theory is particularly relevant because anime relies heavily on the integration of music and visuals to construct emotional and narrative depth. Background scores, sound effects, and silence all contribute to shaping how scenes are perceived by the audience. For instance, the same visual scene can evoke completely different emotional responses depending on the accompanying music.

Chion’s work highlights that sound is not secondary to visuals but an equal partner in meaning-making. This perspective is essential for understanding anime as an audiovisual medium where music actively participates in storytelling rather than simply supporting it. His theory provides a strong analytical foundation for examining how anime uses soundtracks to influence pacing, tension, and emotional engagement.

3.3 Susan J. Napier – Anime as Audiovisual Narrative

Susan J. Napier, in *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*, explores anime as a complex cultural and audiovisual form of storytelling. She argues that anime is not simply animation but a medium that combines visual style, narrative depth, and sound design to create emotionally and thematically rich experiences (Napier, 2005). According to Napier, anime often uses stylized visuals and carefully composed soundtracks to enhance emotional resonance and thematic expression. Napier emphasizes that music in anime plays a significant role in shaping audience interpretation, particularly in emotionally charged or climactic scenes. The use of opening and ending themes, background scores, and character motifs contributes to narrative continuity and emotional framing. These musical elements help guide viewers through the story while reinforcing character identity and emotional development.

Her analysis also highlights anime’s ability to blend cultural expression with storytelling techniques, making it a unique global media form. Music, in this context, becomes a bridge between narrative structure and emotional engagement, allowing audiences to connect more deeply with characters and themes. Napier’s work is essential for understanding anime as a holistic audiovisual medium in which music is deeply embedded in storytelling rather than functioning as an external addition.

3.4 Thomas Lamarre – The Anime Machine and Media Theory

Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Machine* provides a media-theoretical approach to understanding anime as a unique form of animation. He argues that anime should not be viewed simply as traditional animation but as a layered system of movement, sound, and visual composition that creates meaning through interaction rather than realism (Lamarre, 2009). Lamarre introduces the concept of the "animatic machine," which describes how anime constructs dynamic audiovisual experiences through the coordination of multiple elements. In relation to music, Lamarre's framework suggests that sound is an essential component of anime's layered structure. Music interacts with visual movement to create rhythm, emotional pacing, and narrative depth. Rather than serving as background decoration, soundtracks in anime contribute to the structural flow of scenes and enhance viewer immersion.

Lamarre's work is particularly useful for analysing how anime uses non-realistic visual styles combined with expressive music to produce emotional and thematic intensity. His theory supports the idea that anime operates through audiovisual layering, where music is integrated into the construction of meaning rather than being separate from it.

Overall, Lamarre's perspective helps establish anime as a distinct audiovisual system in which music plays a structural and expressive role in storytelling.

4. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the substantial body of research on film music and audiovisual storytelling, the specific role of music in anime has not been examined to the same extent. Existing studies, though limited in number, primarily focus on general film scoring techniques or animation as a visual medium, often overlooking the ways in which anime uniquely integrates music and visuals to construct meaning. Consequently, the contribution of music to narrative development, emotional expression, and audience engagement in anime remains insufficiently explored. Anime employs music in distinctive ways, including background scores, character themes, and opening and ending sequences, all of which play a significant role in shaping the viewer's experience. However, these elements are frequently treated as secondary to visual storytelling within academic discussions, resulting in a gap in understanding music as an essential component of anime's narrative structure.

Furthermore, anime music has achieved considerable global popularity, reaching audiences far beyond its country of origin. Despite this growing influence, limited attention has been given to the reception and engagement of international audiences with anime soundtracks. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining the role of music in anime storytelling and its broader cultural impact.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study follows a descriptive and interpretative research design. It is descriptive because I explain how music is used in each anime, and interpretative because I analyze what that use of music means in terms of storytelling and emotional impact.

The research is based on a case study design, where each anime is treated as an individual case. I first analyzed each one separately and then compared them to identify similarities and differences in the use of music.

My approach involved:

- Selecting anime from different genres
- Observing key scenes and episodes
- Noting how music is used in different contexts
- Interpreting its effect on storytelling and emotion
- Comparing findings across all four case studies

This design helped me understand not only how music works within each anime, but also how its role changes depending on the genre and narrative style.

6. METHODOLOGY

In this study, I used a qualitative approach to understand how music functions in anime storytelling. I chose this method because my focus was on observing and interpreting how music influences emotions, scenes, and narrative meaning, rather than working with numerical data.

To explore this, I conducted case studies on four anime works: *Whisper of the Heart*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, and *Haikyuu!!*. I selected these because they represent different genres—slice of life, magical fantasy, comedy, and sports—which helped me observe how music is used in varied storytelling styles.

I watched selected scenes and episodes multiple times, paying close attention to background music, character themes, opening and ending songs, and even moments of silence. While analyzing these, I focused on how music influenced emotional tone, character development, pacing, and overall audience experience.

This method allowed me to personally observe patterns and differences in how music supports storytelling across different types of anime.

7. SELF CONDUCTED INFORMAL/ EXPLORATORY CASE STUDIES FOR THIS RESEARCH STUDY

For this study, I conducted a qualitative case study analysis to understand how music is used in anime as part of audiovisual storytelling. The aim was to observe how different types of anime use music to support emotion, narrative structure, and audience engagement.

I selected four anime works for this analysis: *Whisper of the Heart*, *Card captor Sakura*, *Crayon Shin-Chan*, and *Haikyuu!!*. These were chosen because they belong to different genres and storytelling styles, which allowed me to compare how music functions in each context.

I carried out this study through close viewing of selected episodes and scenes. While analyzing, I focused on background scores, character themes, opening and ending music, and the use of silence. My attention was on how these musical elements influence emotions, pacing, and overall storytelling.

This case study approach helped me understand the different roles music plays in anime and how it contributes to both narrative meaning and viewer experience across genres.

7.1 CASE STUDY 1: *Whisper of the Heart*

I conducted a case study analysis of the anime film *Whisper of the Heart* with a focus on how music contributes to its narrative structure and emotional development. The film, directed by Yoshifumi Kondō and produced by Studio Ghibli, uses music as a central storytelling device rather than a background element. My analysis focused on repeated viewings of key scenes, particularly those involving the protagonist's relationship with music, creativity, and self-discovery. One of the most significant aspects observed is the role of music in reflecting the protagonist's internal emotional journey. The recurring use of the song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" serves as both a narrative anchor and a symbolic representation of longing, aspiration, and personal growth. Rather than simply functioning as a soundtrack, the song is integrated into the story itself, influencing character interactions and emotional progression. This demonstrates how music operates as part of the narrative structure rather than as an external addition. Additionally, the film's original score uses soft, minimalistic compositions that support the reflective tone of the story. The music often aligns with moments of introspection, allowing the audience to engage more deeply with the character's emotional state. Silence is also used effectively in several scenes, emphasizing realism and emotional subtlety.

From my analysis, it is evident that music in *Whisper of the Heart* plays a dual role: it enhances emotional expression while also supporting narrative development. The integration of diegetic and non-diegetic music creates a layered storytelling experience where music becomes an extension of character identity and thematic meaning. This case study demonstrates how anime films can use music not only to support visuals but to actively shape narrative depth and emotional resonance.

7.2 CASE STUDY 2: *Cardcaptor Sakura*

I analyzed the anime series *Cardcaptor Sakura* to examine the role of music in episodic storytelling, emotional framing, and character development. My analysis involved reviewing selected episodes across different narrative arcs to understand how background scores and theme music contribute to the overall viewing experience. One of the key observations is the consistent use of musical themes to represent emotional states and character identities. The series frequently uses soft, magical, and orchestral compositions to create a sense of wonder and emotional warmth. These musical choices align closely with the show's themes of innocence, friendship, and personal growth. The opening and ending themes also establish emotional continuity across episodes, reinforcing the tone of the series. Character motifs are another important aspect of the soundtrack. Certain musical patterns are associated with specific characters or emotional situations, allowing the audience to form subconscious connections between sound and narrative development. This use of leitmotif strengthens character recognition and emotional attachment.

Additionally, music is used to guide pacing within episodes. During transformation sequences and emotional climaxes, the intensity of the music increases, enhancing dramatic impact. In contrast, slower and softer music is used during reflective or emotional scenes, supporting audience immersion.

From my study, it is evident that *Cardcaptor Sakura* uses music not only as background support but as an active narrative tool. It contributes to emotional storytelling, character development, and episodic structure, making it an essential component of the anime's overall impact.

7.3 CASE STUDY 3: *Crayon Shin-chan*

I examined the anime series *Crayon Shin-chan* to understand how music functions within a comedic and everyday-life narrative structure. My analysis focused on selected episodes to observe how sound and music contribute to humor, tone, and storytelling.

Unlike emotionally driven anime, *Crayon Shin-chan* uses music in a more playful and exaggerated manner. The background scores are often light, humorous, and repetitive, reinforcing the comedic tone of the series. Music is frequently used to emphasize comedic timing, particularly during exaggerated character reactions or absurd situations. This demonstrates how music can function as a tool for humor rather than emotional depth alone. The opening and ending themes also contribute to the identity of the series. They are energetic, catchy, and reflective of the show's lighthearted nature. These themes help set expectations for the audience before each episode and maintain consistency across the series. In some scenes, sudden changes in music or exaggerated sound effects are used to enhance comedic impact. Silence is also strategically used before punchlines, increasing comedic tension. This shows that even in a comedy-focused anime, music plays an important structural role in shaping audience response.

From my analysis, it is clear that *Crayon Shin-chan* demonstrates how music can be used in non-traditional ways within anime storytelling. Instead of focusing on emotional depth, it uses sound to enhance humor, pacing, and narrative rhythm.

7.4 CASE STUDY 4: *Haikyuu!!*

I analyzed the anime series *Haikyuu!!* to examine the role of music in sports storytelling, particularly in building tension, excitement, and emotional engagement. My study involved reviewing key match sequences and character development arcs to understand how music interacts with visual action. One of the most significant findings is the use of high-intensity orchestral and electronic music during volleyball matches. These compositions increase the sense of urgency and excitement, effectively mirroring the fast-paced nature of the sport. Music is closely synchronized with gameplay moments, such as spikes, blocks, and turning points, which enhances the dramatic impact of matches.

Character themes are also used to highlight emotional stakes. As characters face challenges or overcome obstacles, the music shifts to reflect determination, struggle, or triumph. This helps the audience emotionally connect with the players and their development throughout the series.

In contrast, slower and softer music is used during training or reflective scenes, allowing space for emotional depth and character introspection. This contrast between high-energy and calm musical segments creates a balanced narrative rhythm.

From my analysis, it is evident that *Haikyuu!!* uses music as a key narrative tool to enhance both emotional storytelling and action sequences. The soundtrack plays a crucial role in shaping audience engagement, making matches feel more immersive and emotionally impactful.

8. DISCUSSION OF STUDY

In my analysis of the four selected anime works—*Whisper of the Heart*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, and *Haikyuu!!*—I observed that music consistently plays an important role in shaping storytelling, although its function varies depending on genre and narrative style. While studying *Whisper of the Heart*, I noticed that music is closely tied to the protagonist's emotional journey. The use of recurring musical motifs and songs helped me understand how music reflects personal growth and inner feelings. In *Cardcaptor Sakura*, I observed that music is used more to create a continuous emotional atmosphere across episodes. The background scores and character themes helped maintain a sense of warmth and fantasy, and I could clearly see how they supported emotional consistency in the story. In contrast, when I analyzed *Crayon Shin-chan*, I found that music functions mainly to enhance comedic timing. I observed that sudden musical changes and exaggerated sound effects were used to increase humor and highlight punchlines. This showed me that music does not always serve emotional depth but can also structure comedy and rhythm in storytelling. In *Haikyuu!!*, I noticed that music plays a strong role in building intensity during sports matches. The fast-paced and energetic soundtrack helped increase tension and made key moments feel more dramatic and engaging. I observed that music and visuals were closely synchronized, which strengthened the impact of action scenes.

Across all four case studies, I found a common pattern: music significantly influences how scenes are experienced, whether through emotion, humor, or tension. From my perspective, music consistently works as an essential storytelling tool rather than just background sound.

Overall, my analysis showed me that anime uses music flexibly depending on genre, but in every case, it enhances narrative meaning and viewer engagement.

9. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

This study is based on the idea that music is an integral part of audiovisual storytelling in anime, working together with visual elements to shape narrative meaning and audience experience. The framework for this research is built on the relationship between **music (independent element)** and its influence on **audience perception and storytelling (dependent outcomes)** within anime.

In this study, music includes background scores, character themes, opening and ending songs, and the use of silence. These musical elements interact with visual storytelling elements such as animation, dialogue, and scene composition. Together, they contribute to three main outcomes: **emotional expression, narrative development, and audience engagement**.

The framework also considers that the function of music may vary depending on genre. For example, in emotional or dramatic anime, music may primarily enhance emotional depth, while in comedy or sports anime, it may support timing, pacing, or intensity. Despite these differences, music consistently works alongside visuals to strengthen storytelling.

In addition, the framework acknowledges the cultural dimension of anime music. With the global popularity of anime, music also plays a role in shaping international audience reception and cultural influence.

Overall, this conceptual framework helps in understanding how music and visuals interact in anime to create meaning, and how this interaction affects both storytelling and audience experience across different genres.

10. IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the importance of music as a key element in anime storytelling rather than a secondary or supportive feature. One major implication is that music should be understood as an active part of narrative construction, as it contributes significantly to emotional expression, pacing, and audience engagement. This challenges the common perception that visuals alone carry the primary storytelling responsibility in anime.

Another implication is related to genre differences. The findings suggest that music functions differently depending on the type of anime, yet consistently plays a role in shaping viewer experience. This indicates that music analysis should be considered across different genres rather than being limited to a single style of storytelling.

The study also has cultural implications. Since anime music has gained global recognition, it contributes to cultural exchange and influences how international audiences perceive Japanese animation. This shows that anime music is not only important within storytelling but also in shaping global cultural connections.

Finally, this study suggests that more attention should be given to music in media studies, especially in animation research. Understanding how music interacts with visuals can provide deeper insights into how meaning is created in audiovisual media.

11. LIMITATIONS

This study is based on a qualitative case study approach, which comes with certain limitations. Since the analysis is based on selected viewing of scenes and episodes, the findings are interpretative in nature and may vary depending on the viewer's perspective. Different viewers may perceive the role of music differently based on personal experience, cultural background, and familiarity with anime. Another limitation is the small number of case studies used. Although *Whisper of the Heart*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, and *Haikyuu!!* represent different genres, they cannot fully represent the entire range of anime available. Therefore, the findings may not be universally applicable to all anime productions.

Additionally, the study does not include interviews with composers, directors, or audiences, which could have provided deeper insights into the production and reception of music in anime. The analysis is also limited to observable elements such as background scores and themes, without technical musical breakdown (such as composition theory or instrumentation analysis).

Finally, time constraints limited the depth of scene-by-scene analysis that could be conducted. A more extensive study could include a larger dataset and more detailed musical analysis to strengthen the findings.

12. CONCLUSION

Through this study, I was able to explore how music functions as an essential part of anime storytelling rather than just a supporting background element. By analyzing *Whisper of the Heart*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, and *Haikyuu!!*, I observed that music plays different roles depending on the genre, but consistently contributes to shaping emotion, narrative flow, and audience engagement.

In emotional and character-driven stories like *Whisper of the Heart* and *Cardcaptor Sakura*, I found that music enhances emotional depth and helps express inner feelings that are not always directly spoken. In contrast, in *Crayon Shin-chan*, music is used more for timing and humor, showing that it can also support comedic storytelling. Meanwhile, *Haikyuu!!* demonstrated how music can increase intensity and excitement, especially during high-stakes sports moments.

Overall, my analysis helped me understand that music in anime is not separate from storytelling but deeply integrated into it. It works together with visuals to create meaning, guide emotions, and shape how the audience experiences each scene. I also realized that while music functions differently across genres, its importance remains consistent in enhancing narrative impact.

This study has given me a clearer understanding of how audiovisual elements work together in anime, and it highlights the significant role music plays in both storytelling and audience perception.

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