

Xenosaga Episode II - Weekly Volume IV: Sound staff interview

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Sound staff interview

We bring you a special feature with Kajiura Yuki-san, responsible for the music in this game, and Super Sweep. We hope you'll enjoy all the behind-the-scenes insight we'll provide.

MOVIE SCENE

Kajiura-san was in charge of all the background music featured during the cutscenes. She single-handedly brought the world of "Xenosaga" to life through her unique skills, and we tried to find out more about the secrets of her compositions and her personality.

I love "Xenosaga"! I enjoyed composing for it

Interviewer: How did you prepare for composing music for the movie scenes [in this game]?

Kajiura: First of all, I played the first game, "Xenosaga Episode I: The Will to Power" (hereafter "Episode I"). Once I started, I couldn't stop and ended up finishing it in one sitting. (Laughs)
After that, I was allowed to read the scenario for "Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Böse" (hereafter "Episode II"), so I kept reading like I was in a dream, wanting to find out what would happen next and ignoring my work. (Laughs) The soundtrack in the first game was wonderful, and I loved the story, characters and world. When I thought about getting the chance to make the soundtrack for the sequel, I couldn't be anything but happy.

Interviewer: Did you get any requests from Monolith Soft that the music should convey any particular image or other things like that?

Kajiura: They told me to imbue this world vision with my own sound. This was the first time I'd worked substantially on a creating a fictional world set in outer space, so what I had in mind was [making] an atmosphere of "open space". That doesn't mean the entire game takes place in outer space, but when I saw the outer space parts, I thought "it's all just space, so far in every direction", and I thought I should try to convey that with sound... Just by having that aspiration, it turned out all right. [A little unsure about this one, sorry]

Interviewer: Do you usually play games, Kajiura-san?

Kajiura: I enjoy RPGs. But since playing them takes time, I'll get through about one or two a year. Since I'm not the type who can play just a little once I start, when I do play one I'll turn into a "missing person" for a week. (Laughs) Of course my schedule will be empty too. At those times I'll just sleep around two hours [per night]. I'll prepare myself with walkthroughs, don't make any detours for mini-games, and just go straight after the main story... People ask me, "How can you enjoy playing them like that?", though. (Laughs)

Interviewer: So you decided to make "Episode II" one of those you'd play this year, right?

Kajiura: Yes! Once I got my hands on the game, I took a little break from work. (Laughs)

Kajiura Yuki

She made her debut in 1992 with Unit See-Saw. After being active for about two years, she started her solo career. She's contributed music to a wide variety of fields, such as TV, commercials, movies, anime and games. She also works as a sound producer. The URL for her private site she mentioned during the interview is <http://fictionjunction.com>.



YUKI KAJIURA

The language of the song lyrics is Yukilish! What is the truth behind those peculiar vocals...?

Kajiura: For instance, when I'm creating, say, the intro song for an anime, I have an awareness that this is something that's going to introduce a 30-minute-long program. I've worked on a lot of things set in fantasy worlds, so [in those cases] I want to make people forget about reality and take them to that world through the intro's one and a half minutes of music and images. But when I'm composing, I'm limited to the documentation and raw materials I have at hand, and I feel the rest is a struggle of imagination. When I'm allowed to read the first draft of the script, I might end up feeling like slipping some weighty-sounding language into the song lyrics for some reason. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Speaking of song lyrics, there are vocals in "Episode II" too, so what language are they in?

Kajiura: I the ending song is in English, but apart from that it's all in a made-up language. Kajiura-language. When I was recording the vocals at the studio in New York and the staff asked me the same thing, I replied, "it's Yukilish!". (Laughs)

Interviewer: Do you always use this technique?

Kajiura: Yes, I use it a lot. I use Italian and things like that too, but it's really annoying to carry a dictionary around, and having to stick to the proper sound of the language takes away some of your freedom. For example, like with the score for the "Episode II" trailer movie, it's a bit slow in the beginning, then it goes "tatata" in the second half and becomes more techno-like. If all of it had been in Italian, there would have been parts that wouldn't have worked very well. In cases like that, with a made-up language, you can just do whatever you want. (Laughs) According to the melody, I might hear Italian inside my head, while the chorus parts might have more of, say, an Eastern European feel, that's the kind of image I have as I'm composing.

Interviewer: When you're composing, do you just naturally feel that the "sound" of the language you're using is important?

Kajiura: First, I sing a suitable song and record it, then I listen to it and write out the Kajiura-language from that. Honestly, I think the rhythm of the language I just sing at the spur of the moment is pretty nice. With the score for "Episode II", even if I wanted to convey a message with the feel of the sound and melodies, I didn't feel I needed to give the lyrics any [actual] meaning...
I'd say I wanted to convey a sense of rhythm and something like feelings, using human voices.

	<p>The driving force of the work?!</p> <p>Kajiura-san watched the finished movie scenes while composing the soundtrack. She seems like the type to find more characters she likes in each work, and that influence comes out subtly in her music too. For example, while she was working on this game, on seeing the movies, she said things like "Jr.! Don't cry!!". (Laughs) So in other words, Kajiura-san's favorite character is Jr. By the way, it seems like she grew fond of Jr. and Ziggy because of the first game. "I can't wait to see what's going to happen to Ziggy. He seems sad, somehow," she said about the wait for the sequel.</p>
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Interviewer: Where does your inspiration for that image come from?

Kajiura: The things that have touched me in my past, maybe. I've been a big fan of opera ever since I was a kid, but I also listen to a lot of other things. I love world music, and I also like traditional Northern European music, Eastern European music and things like that. From that kind [of music], I've probably been influenced by the pronunciation of Bulgarian voice, Italian and German melodies. When I'm writing music, I might think "this song has an Italian feel", or "this one might feel a bit German", or maybe it somehow feels Russian. Those kinds of images come welling up. So just like that, I end up writing, say, fake Russian or fake Hungarian. (Laughs)

Opera, Northern European, British Looking for the roots of Kajiura's music

Interviewer: Since you came to like opera, would you say the roots of your music are there?

Kajiura: When I was a kid, it was all about opera, but when I grew up it wasn't to quite that degree anymore. The opera thing was my parents' influence. We also went to Germany when I was a kid, and since my parents were big fans of opera, they took me to a lot of opera houses. But when I was in later years of elementary school, I started noticing other things too. Since my older brother started listening to The Beatles, I was

influenced to do the same. (Laughs) Since I had an obsessive personality, I memorized all the lyrics, even if I didn't know any English. Around the time I got to high school, I really got into British pop. I wasn't interested in America at all, and I only paid attention to the British charts. We didn't have a TV at home, so I only had the radio. Back then, there was a program called "British TOP20" every Saturday night at 2AM, so I set my alarm clock and got up, and I made a chart every week... So that's how I spent my high school years.

Interviewer: Being introduced to opera by your family must have been fun, right?

Kajiura: Especially by my dad, who's a particularly annoying man. (Laughs) They didn't just watch operas, they also loved to sing. When I started elementary school, they made me learn the piano, but the purpose of that was so I could accompany their singing. When we had guests, they'd call me, then make them listen to their singing! Is that normal? (Laughs)

Interviewer: By the way, you also like books, don't you? For instance, there's a list of your favorite books on your homepage. For one thing, is there any reflection of the influence literary writing has had on you in your music?

Kajiura: Yes, definitely. When I'm reading a book, there's music floating inside my head, so that's why I like them so much. Since media such as movies already have sound, there's no room for imagination there. But since books don't have sound, anything goes, right? Reading a book and hearing the music in my head, turning to my Mac to compose and then going back to the book when I'm satisfied...that's something I do a lot.

She wanted to convey her message through the "sound" and melody lines of language, rather than through the meaning of the lyrics

The secrets behind the obsessive Kajiura-san's composing methods <3

Interviewer: So when you're composing, you just put down your gear in front of you and sit down?

Kajiura: I have my Mac in front of me, take hold of the microphone, and when I'm at home I sing at the top of my voice. (Laughs) On the one hand, I'm always walking around carrying a score, so I can compose anywhere... But actually, in most cases I do it during my first consultations with a director or sound director. I'll often have something like 3 tracks floating in my head, with one of them becoming the main theme. Even when that doesn't happen, I'll [at least] come up with 10 important tracks this way. When the melodies come floating, I have to say "Excuse me for a second!" and write them down even if I'm in the middle of a conversation (Laughs). That's really hard to do in front of people I've just met for the first time, but when I'm with people who are used to it, I'll just be writing away on a piece of paper while I'm talking... Really, meeting other creators and listening to them is what has the greatest influence on my work, and it also makes my imagination flow.

Interviewer: Did anything particularly interesting happen while you were working on this project?

Kajiura: Nothing I'd consider that interesting. I feel I was allowed to work relatively smoothly. But there's always some times when I can't write anything and end up yelling "gyaa!". (Laughs)

Interviewer: Are there any items you'd consider essential to have at hand while you're working?

Kajiura: Something to drink, I guess. Right now I like rose hip tea. Before that, it was ginger tea, and before that, camomile tea (laughs). When it comes to ginger tea, it has to be made with a real dried ginger root, not ginger-flavored black tea. Those are pretty hard to get hold of, so I used to import them privately. But since it's gotten colder lately, I think vitamin C is really important, so I switched to rose hip tea. (Laughs) It's not really as serious as a proper "ceremony", but first of all, before I begin working, I always put some tea in the pot, turn towards my Mac, and say "Well, let's get started!".

Interviewer: Would you say you lose and gain enthusiasm for things quickly?

Kajiura: It depends on what kind of thing we're talking about, but yeah, maybe. For example, after seeing an inaniwa udon lunch, I ended up eating nothing but inaniwa udon for about a month. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Finally, please tell us where you're taking your music career next.

Kajiura: In general, the main thing I want to do is move people emotionally. That's my motive for making music. But I don't really care about genres or languages. Regardless of what form it takes, I just want to make something that reaches peoples' hearts. To achieve that, I think the most important thing is that I'm moved myself. In my opinion, making something that move myself is the quickest way towards making something that will move other people.

QUEST & BATTLE SCENE

The members of Super Sweep were in charge of the event music outside the movie scenes, field, dungeon and similar music, and also all the sound effects.

It was a fight against memory [restrictions] and time Creating music with the internal sound engine [lit.: source]

Interviewer: Supersweep was in charge of various parts of sound design, but did you decide on particular tasks each of you would handle?

Hosoe: My main responsibility was directing all the music from the internal sound engine.

Saso: I did the battle tracks, event music and sound effects. Apart from me, there was also one other person working on sound effects.

Interviewer: You had an opportunity to work on the music this time around, so how did that come about?

Hosoe: About a year ago, Namco told me they wanted me to work with the internal sound engine. At the time, I didn't even know the title yet, but... That was my opportunity.

Saso: The actual work took about half a year, but there was a stage before that where I was trying to understand the world vision and other things about the game, and that took quite a while. I was allowed to read the entire scenario, but that wasn't enough, so I played "Episode I" as well, and then I finally felt I understood it properly. After that, since they were finishing the actual video, I made the event music and things like that at the same time. If there were any changes to the events, the music would have to change as well, so that relationship influenced my work all the way to the end.

Hosoe: For example, if they wanted to include voice acting at a certain point, or do something in battles, along with those specifications we'd have to decide how much could be done within our memory budget, and prioritize accordingly. This could take quite a bit of time and work.



Inserting the music and sound effects with precise timing

Interviewer: You were talking about the world vision earlier, so what kind of view did you have of the game while you were composing?

Hosoe: It's slightly incorrect to call the work I did this time "composition" in that sense. Personally, I didn't really intend to change the image of "Episode I", but I didn't have any choice in the end. The method we used this time was to start by deciding how much memory we had, and then trying to fit as much beautiful music and expressing as much of the world vision as possible within those limitations. Usually, we'd start by composing the music and then turning it into data, so in terms of the end result this ended up as a kind of backwards approach.

Saso: Speaking for the battle music I was in charge of, I honestly felt that I finally got a proper grip on it by the end. In particular, I really increased the number of different kinds of battle music this time. I spent a lot of time worrying about how to differentiate the robot battles and character battles. As for the event scenes, once I heard my music alongside the images, I thought things like "since the tempo here is bad, I should try changing it," and kept working on it like that.

Hosoe: For the event parts, the original plan was that Monolith Soft would insert the finished tracks, but they thought it'd be good if we could match them to the right moments during the events and to the timing of the acting, so we got to make suggestions ourselves. Thinking back on it now, it really was a lot of hassle. (Laughs)

Saso: For example, even if it was a "happy song", the [exact] kind of emotion could vary. It'd be different based on the situation, like "not happy from the bottom of my heart, just kind of happy".

Hosoe: It'd also be different depending on whether MOMO or someone else was sad. We were rapidly arranging things based on character differences like that and to incorporate the timing of the video. There are also some scenes where [our music] continues along with Kajiura-san's, so there's also that balance to consider. When you're trying to match them all the way up to the small parts, one track can become very different. [Not 100% sure about that one, sorry]

Likewise, the sound effects would also change completely depending on the character, and we worked very hard to differentiate them, as I've said earlier. For example, even individual elevators sound completely different based on their type.

Saso: But even if it was a struggle, we were very glad when it was all finished. When I saw the finished scenes with sound effects and music and found them convincing, I was really happy.

Interviewer: What you'd really like to ask players to pay attention to has to be the synchronization between the events and the music, right?

Hosoe: That was something we worked hard on, but actually, "the best would be for the players not to notice anything and just smoothly enjoy the scenes". I'd say "things you don't notice" are good things... [No idea what's up with the quotation marks there]

The duo who made the background music are the masters of these characters

Interviewer: I'd like to ask about your personal feelings on "Episode II". Are there any characters you particularly like?

Saso: Ziggy for me!

Hosoe: I've probably said it before...(Laughs) I also like Ziggy. And I made the background music for the Uzuki residence, so I quite like that song. It's really nice in scenes such as the one where Jin appears, so if pushed I'd have to say I like him too, since I had a small hand in shaping him. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Well then, please tell us about the company Super Sweep.

Hosoe: Originally, we were mainly focused on making sound for arcade games, so we haven't had too much contact with home console users until now. Our members are working on their respective project in personal units, as for the content of their work I couldn't really say more than that they're "doing various things". (Laughs) I guess it's not really like a company in the usual sense. It's more like family, with the feel of individuals meeting up.

Saso: Since our office is just a regular apartment, coming on company visits to us feels more like going over to visit a friend's house for our guests too. It's so comfortable that everyone ends up overstaying their visit. (Laughs)

Interviewer: What kind of music do you want to make after this?

Hosoe: I'd like to try composing for something that's actually finished. With games, if you start working on the music during the development period, you'll have to make a lot of changes to your work while you're doing it. That's inevitable, so if I had the chance, I'd like to try making music for something involving images where it's not like that.

Saso: As long as I have the stamina for it, I want to make music with a lot of energy! (Laughs) On this project, I was personally impressed that I was able to master the new challenges. I think it's nice to get the chance to do that.

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