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Popular music in Japan: Very different? Not so different?

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Japan has been often referred to as the second largest national market for the popular music business, only after USA. This market has unique aspects in many ways, but the most distinct character is its domestic orientation. While some Asian nations share interests in Japanese popular music for certain degrees, Japanese musicians may hardly be known in the Western world. The language barrier is the largest factor to explain the situation, but it might not be the only reason.

Though almost all musical elements in modern Japanese popular music originated in the Western world, they are domesticated or re-organized to produce something quite different from the original Western counterparts. Taking cases from the history of popular music in 20th century Japan, I will describe some typical acclimatizing processes of Western music elements.

Introduction of Western music into the schools

Japan experienced a rough and rapid process of modernization, or Westernization, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Meiji Restoration in 1867. The introduction of Western music was one aspect of that modernization. While some elements of Western music like military bands and church hymns arrived a little earlier, their influence was limited. Most ordinary Japanese people were exposed to Western style music through school education, which was under the control of the Ministry of Education. In fact, it was still under construction by the Ministry for almost all part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Shuji IZAWA (1851-1917) was a pioneer of modern music education in Japan. He was sent to study in Massachusetts, USA from 1875 to 1878 with varied assignments, one of which was music education. After returning from USA, Izawa (with another colleague) submitted a proposal for establishing a research body for music, and it was realized as the *ongaku torishirabe kakari* (音楽取調掛), or Music Study Committee, which survived for almost a decade (1879-1887), and then became the Tokyo School of Music (currently

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Tokyo University of the Arts). Izawa invited his mentor, Luther Whiting Mason (1828-1896), the Director of the Boston Music School, to visit the Music Study Committee, and Mason stayed in Tokyo for 1880-1882.

One of the MSC's missions was to provide materials for music education at schools in Japan. Early songbooks in 1880s, compiled by Izawa, Mason, and others, largely consisted of Western folk songs with translated (or newly created) Japanese lyrics. Gradually, the share of original songs by Japanese composers increased, and in 1910, the first authorized songbook fully penned by Japanese composers was published by the Ministry of Education. This was called the *Jinjo shogaku tokuhon shoka*, or Song Textbook for the Ordinary Elementary School).

Songs in those songbooks were influential in establishing Japanese aesthetics towards Western music. One example of the adaptation or acclimatization process of Western music found in Japan was the development of *yonanuki* pentatonic scales. Songs with *yonanuki* pentatonic scales were often found in Celtic or other European folk songs like *Auld Lang Syne*, *Comin thro' the Rye*, etc., and many of them were, and still are, well-known among the Japanese because they have been commonly used materials in music classrooms. While the major *yonanuki* pentatonic scale consists of the same notes as the traditional Japanese folk song scale, the minor *yonanuki* pentatonic scale consists of the same notes as *miyako-bushi* (都節), or the traditional Japanese "urban music" scale. What was lacking in traditional Japanese pentatonic scales is a sense of "tonic". As the result of the traditional sense of scales meeting the Western theory of scales, *yonanuki* pentatonic scales were found (or invented) as a useful springboard for Japanese to jump into Western music.

#### Early recordings

First commercial recording in Japan is said to have taken place in 1899 using wax phonograph cylinders, but those contents were lost. First known recordings by Japanese performers was carried out in Paris, France on Berliner disc in 1900. First full-scale recording in Japan was in 1903, by Frederick William Gaisberg (1873-1951), and some songs from this recording sessions in Tokyo were commercially made into discs, and imported home to Japan.

Historians are divided in answering what and when was the first recorded "hit song" in Japan. *Matsu-no-koe* (1906) by Ryogetsu KAMINAGA (1888-1976), and *Fukkatsu shoka* (1915), a.k.a. *Katyusha no uta* by Sumako MATSUI (1886-1919) are often

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referred to as the first one.

Domestic production of gramophone records started in 1910, but domestically manufactured ones, in its quality, were not yet sufficiently comparable with imported ones.

### The Invention of “Folk songs”

The term *min'yo* (民謡) was coined around 1891 as a translation for “Volkslied” in German, or “folk song” in English, and came into currency after 1906. The Ministry of Education started collecting local folk songs nationwide around this time, and academic (and somewhat political) discussion over *min'yo* flourished from the 1910s on. Many composers who were educated in the Western music tradition, in partnership with poets/lyricists whose ideology was *genbun itchi* (言文一致), or the unification of speech and writing, published mass quantities of *shin min'yo* (新民謡), or new folk songs, from the 1920s onward. The timing of this movement coincided with the period of the re-establishment of the record industry in Japan.

Although motives found in both the lyrics and melodies of *shin min'yo* followed or respected the tradition of folk songs, some melodies found in *shin min'yo* are quite different from traditional ones. Many *shin min'yo* pieces were sung and popularized by singers who had been trained in Western classical music. Other *shin min'yo* pieces were made popular by *geisha* singers, who were also the conservators of a type of traditional music. Their performances often showed a unique amalgamation of Western and traditional Japanese sounds.

When Japanese record industry was re-established in late 1920s, those *shin min'yo* pieces, singers, composers and lyricists would shift to form those of mainstream popular songs, or *ryukoka* (流行歌).

### The Introduction of Western Popular Music into Show Business

The first commercial opera company in Japan was organized in 1911 at *Teikoku Gekijo* (帝国劇場), or the Imperial Theater, which was closed down in 1916 after a series of commercially unsuccessful productions of Italian, and original Japanese operas. Following this failure, some singers from the company started small productions of excerpts from operas, operettas, and other Western musical pieces at music halls in Asakusa, the most flourishing show business quarter in Tokyo of the time. *Jogun*

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*shusse* (女軍出征), or the Women's Army, in 1917, which was one of the earliest successes of the form that later become known as "Asakusa opera", was a comedy plotted by a Japanese playwright. It included several popular Western songs with Japanese lyrics added, including *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. While more serious performances excerpted from operas sung in Italian were also popular, most popular among Asakusa opera performances were adaptations of popular classical music with often comical Japanese lyrics. Materials sung in Japanese included arias from classical opera pieces, popularized Western folk songs, and those penned by Japanese composers, often splicing existing melodies. For the audience at Asakusa, it was one of the most fashionable modernist culture of the time.

The prosperity of the music business in Asakusa was lost in the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923. The earthquake gave a serious, if not fatal, blow to the music business from theater to the record industry. At that time, Japan largely imported gramophones and records from Western countries, namely the USA, the UK, and Germany, and the quality of domestically manufactured records was insufficient and seen second-class. After the quake, the Japanese government raised tariffs on luxury goods, including gramophones and records, to 100%, which encouraged importers to start high-quality domestic production of gramophones and records, using Western technology (and capital). In 1927, Columbia and Victor started joint-ventures using Japanese and foreign capital, and headed by non-Japanese presidents. Polydor was owned by a Japanese company, with the technology supplied by its German partner company, and started operation also in 1927. Two purely Japanese record companies, King (established in 1931) and Teichiku (1934), successfully followed after these international labels, and competed with them using new technology, and a new process of (electric) recording. These five companies largely controlled the market until the 1970s.

The arrival of new process records and these five companies introduced a new pattern of producing records. Rather than recording existing popular songs, new songs were written, recorded and promoted to gain popularity. New song sprang from *shin min'yo* movement quickly constituted mainstream *ryukoka*. In some cases, songs newly published in the USA were transplanted, lyrics written in Japanese, and recorded by Japanese singers. As a result, the Japanese audience was exposed to the American jazz music of the time, but the popularity of the resulting songs was not the same as it was in the USA. While songs like *My Blue Heaven* (whose Japanese version came out in 1928) and *Dinah* (1935) were big international hits, ones like *Sing A Song Of Araby* (1928) were commercially successful only in Japan. At this stage, the roles of

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gatekeepers, who browsed foreign material and chose songs to be introduced into Japanese market, were critical in shaping the aesthetics of the Japanese audience's preferences in Western music.

Some Americans in Japan, including Nisei (second generation) Japanese Americans, and college graduates also conveyed American music current into the Japanese market. Jazz, Hawaiian music, and, to some extent, country music penetrated into Japanese popular culture, along with the tango and chanson, which came from European origins.

### At War

From the 1930s on, Japanese popular culture became more and more tightly controlled by the authorities of the time. Those aspects of entertainment culture which were seen either as of foreign (enemy, *i.e.* Anglo-American) origin or harmful to healthy social values were eliminated.

Singers of jazz and other foreign (or foreign influenced) music were either forced to stop recording at all, or were co-opted by the authority to provide recordings of songs to encourage wartime morale. Many songs were censored and banned, or in some cases banned after becoming a hit.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, all American influenced music was banned. Music of the axis nations, Germany and Italy, including the tango, survived for a while, but they were also seen inappropriate as the war came near its end. And as a result of American air raids, the record industry in Japan was thoroughly destroyed by 1944.

### The Occupation

The occupation of Japan after WWII was officially executed by UN troops including China, Soviet Union, *etc.*, but practically it was mainly enforced by US forces, who guaranteed their soldiers the same quality of life everywhere in the world, and providing entertainment, including dance and music, was a part of these requirements. Strong demand for players and singers who could play and sing American music arose in socially devastated and economically destroyed urban areas of Japan. Many Japanese who could play instruments or sing in English filled the demand, and made efforts to keep up with the requirements of their audience. As a result, America's favorite music, jazz (both swing, and bebop), Hawaiian, country, Latin, *etc.* penetrated deeply into aesthetic of Japanese musicians.

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## Domestic development and Imports

After the Occupation, Japan entered into a period of economic boom which lasted until 1973. Big demand for live music in troop camps was lost, but musicians survived by finding places in reviving nightclubs, and the newly born world of television. Those musicians and singers trained with American aesthetics then started turning to Japanese audiences.

The more stable economical life meant a larger market for show business and music related industries. The term *koyo-kyoku* (歌謡曲), which was originally coined in the 1930s, became the standard expression to refer to mainstream popular songs. Many of the songs were in *yonanuki* pentatonic scales.

At the same time, as was the case during the prewar years, many American hit songs were transplanted and sung in Japanese starting in the late 1940s. Some big hits came out of this practice, especially in the 1950s. Rock'n'Roll was introduced almost simultaneously, but as "Rockabilly" a new form of country music. Japanese Rockabilly singers sang not only Rock'n'Roll but also the bubble gum music of teen idols. As the role of the gatekeepers was still so strong that some songs made big hits in Japan without any success in USA.

## Catching up

In late 1960s, two international musical trends washed over the Japanese aesthetic in popular music: one was electrified guitar bands, and the other was modern American folk music. The Beatles visited Japan in 1966, and naturally became a phenomenon. However, it should be noted that the Ventures was almost as big as the Beatles in Japan in the late 1960s. Japanese boy bands with electric guitars—known as the "Group Sounds"—became so popular among teenagers that schools often prohibited their students from listening to their music. Many young artists sprang out of the "Group Sounds" phenomenon, and later became important musicians, songwriters, producers.

Meanwhile, Joan Baez visited Japan in 1967, giving a strong impression with her political attitudes. "Folk song", as a loan word from English became popular, almost totally neglecting its connotation as *minyo*, and young Japanese folk singers started singing, and writing their own original songs. Japanese folk songs largely lost their

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political edges by around 1972. Folk became a less political, more individualistic kind of music, and gained great commercial success in late 1970s. The arrival of “folk” music, encouraged many future musicians to write their own pieces, and songwriting became commonplace.

The reign of the mainstream *koyo-kyoku* was shaken roughly by “folk” and its successor—coined “new music”—in the late 1970s. “New music” was an idea set against mainstream *koyo-kyoku*, and was used to refer to music for the younger generation, with stronger flavor of contemporary Anglo-American music. It also had a strong inclination toward musicians’ own songwriting, and even built up dedicated businesses by establishing management companies, and even record labels. In the late 1980s, another new term, “J-Pop”, was introduced. At first, “J-Pop” meant a kind of Japanese popular music which would suit the taste of listeners of non-Japanese music. Several years later, the term became so widely diffused that it came simply to mean popular Japanese music.

During the expansion of “J-Pop”, *enka* was re-established as a genre of somewhat uniquely Japanese popular music. The history of the term *enka* dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the contemporary connotation of *enka* was established only in the 1960s (or in the 1950s, as some people argue). It is a successor to mainstream *koyo-kyoku* in its heyday, with a dash of Japanese flavor, which might be expressed with pentatonic scale, a grainy voice (melisma, *etc.*), effective use of traditional musical instruments, or singers’ costumes. Though musically *enka* is almost totally Western, it is often believed to have been traditionally Japanese. Today, *enka* is not a major field within Japanese popular music, but it still holds a strong tradition in the music charts, and its position is often compared to that of country music or blues in the USA.

Roughly since the 1980s, as it became easier for Japanese people to travel abroad, and for a larger number of international musicians to perform in Japan, the importance of the roles of gatekeepers decreased rapidly. However, now shrinking Japanese market is still not fully open for the direct penetration of international hits, for the language barrier is very strong, and the population is large enough to sustain the Japanese language music industry on its own right. Today, you can listen to almost any kind of music performed by Japanese musicians in the Japanese language. What is in question now is whether Japanese music can provide anything to stimulate the popular music of other nations, or in other words, whether Japanese music has any original value which might have universal validity.