



Carolyn S. Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, and Power*

Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2008. 208 pages, appendix, glossary, notes, references, index. Hardback, US\$150.00; Paperback, £23.50. ISBN 978-0-415-38057-7 (hardback); ISBN 978-0-415-49221-8 (paperback).

In *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, and Power*, Carolyn Stevens gives us a glimpse into the historical processes through which prewar music, consisting of folk songs, work songs, and the prototype *enka* once sung by street-corner balladeers, evolved into a music scene dominated by contemporary “J-pop” commodities, sold in a mass market with annual sales of 4.6 billion yen in 2002. Today, she says, Japanese mainstream popular music—or *kayokyoku*—refers to what is heard on television and on the radio and products whose sales are recorded in *Oricon*, the Japanese equivalent of *Billboard* magazine. This music, when referred to as “J-Pop,” has the added nuance of contrasting Japanese cultural identity with Western pop.

More than simply an overview of the music scene, Stevens provides us with a vantage point for a critical examination of postwar Japanese culture. For example, we learn how the “message music” influenced by the likes of Pete Seeger and Peter Paul and Mary waxed and waned along with the rise and fall of the militant student movement of the sixties. The boom in light, escapist music for the mass market is linked to the need for relief from the anxiety and stress generated by an expanding, then bursting, bubble economy.

The book is also filled with informational gems that explain social as well as musical trends, particularly how trends are shaped by the profit motive. For example, if one has noticed or wondered why the songs one is likely to hear in a karaoke box seem to be becoming increasingly bland, Stevens links the idol phenomenon to the karaoke phenomenon, explaining, “Complex vocals were not required of the idol performance [and] a concurrent *karaoke* wave of popularity meant that there was a growing market for hit songs with easy-to-sing melody lines and lyrics. After the split between *kayokyoku* and *enka*, vocal technique and musicianship came to be associated with the *enka* artists” (50).

Japanese Popular Music is organized into five distinctive essays and an introduction. Stevens recommends seeing the book as so arranged and explains that it was written so it could be read selectively as well as from cover to cover. In the introduction, Stevens outlines her perspective, experience, and interest in the subject—she trained in cultural anthropology, is a keen consumer and fan of Japanese popular music, and worked in a Japanese entertainment agency, contributing English-language materials and writing song lyrics. The introduction then offers a short summary of the book’s key analytical framework—a focus on the interaction between culture, authenticity, and power. This section serves to signpost some of the key perspectives of later chapters: cultural identity is about “positionality”; authenticity, although now somewhat lost in a multilayered postmodern reality, is still sought through musical expression. While theory-hungry readers may have wanted an expanded examination of the interrelationship of these key concepts at this juncture, others will be thankful for the easy-access format and will want to move into the main body of work.

The first essay, *Definitions*, investigates several threads relating to the extent to which Japanese popular music is Japanese—or more precisely, how it is made Japanese by locals and foreigners alike. Later on we are provided with an explanation of the unique tonal qualities of Japanese music. Specific questions are posed and discussed. How is Japanese popular music different from Western popular music? What cultural heritage defines Japanese popular music? How does popular music interact with and influence other musical forms in Japan? If this essay speaks to any one of Stevens’ three key concepts (culture, power, authenticity), it is to *culture*. For although it moves through a variety of discussions—including how an important folk tradition sprung from the work songs (*so-ran bushi*) of northern fisherman—the key argument is on how cultural identity and music interact and find in each other resources that help them form meaningful boundaries.

In the next essay, *The Particulars of History*, the focus moves from *culture* to *power*, particularly power with reference to the Japan-US relationship and what this has to say about the nature of positioning vis-à-vis the West. In particular, the influence of the US military in general and the Pentagon’s Far East Network is explored. The chapter will also treat fans to facts on the musical development and careers of genuine stars such as Misora Hibari, Go Hiromi, and the late Sakamoto Kyu, beloved for his “Sukiyaki” song. The chapter’s main focus, however, is on the diversification of popular music over its history. As in so many cases where Japan is seen as groupist, collective, or homogeneous, the deeper enquiry reveals an intense

pluralism and diversity at the heart of historical and contemporary change.

Along with a detailed coverage of marketing issues, the third essay, “The Business Side,” takes us, rather politely, through the conflict between “artistic truth” and the possibility that “the popularization of music is not merely based on musical merit but is significantly affected by the careful application of business processes, such as marketing, PR, and spin.” Stevens concludes that the successful application of business connections between record companies, entertainment agencies, and the media, most importantly television, are what create hits. The chapter also includes a treatment of the humorous—or, depending on one’s perspective, tragic—tale of the birth of the TV music show without music, a case of mass marketing triumphing over music appreciation. There is some hope, however, for those who wish to break out of the system as independent music grows in scope and influence.

The fourth essay, “Technology, Consumption, and Authenticity,” presents a lively discussion of how advanced information technology enhances the immediacy of the consumer’s experience of music as a commodity. Issues such as piracy and ownership are also covered, and here Stevens grapples most explicitly with the question of authenticity. Misora Hibari’s trademark tears at the end of songs “were proof of authentic emotion” (50). “New rockers” such as *Happi Endo* (Happy End) strived for cultural authenticity both as rockers as real as their Western counterparts such as Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, and as authentic expressions of Japanese soul with lyrics about loneliness when temple bells ring. She also finds New Music stars such as Yamashita Tatsuro authentic in terms of production: “Whether folk or rock, male or female... these performers shared a crucial characteristic: they were songwriters in their own right, so they did not have to rely on the production team of talent agencies for compositions... [They were] able to produce themselves ... allowing them artistic and some financial independence from the mainstream “show biz” industry” (47).

Also covered here is the history, sociology, and politics of the various media and modes of programming used to distribute popular music. We learn how television supplanted radio as the most important media driving marketing, how broadcasters use audience segmentation strategies, and how they reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, we read about Shibata Kaoru’s experience as “the assistant personality” for a male DJ on AM radio—how “gender expectations were embedded in the program audition.” The producer told her he wanted a sweet and virginal voice that would not be threatening to young male listeners. When the station later discovered that the audience was primarily middle-aged housewives, small business owners and taxi drivers, she was told to “speak with a sense of the common people.”

The final essay, “Translations: Internationalizing Language and Music,” provides an analysis of the use of English in Japanese pop and the significance of this practice. In the first two decades after the Occupation, foreign music accounted for the highest percentage of music sales. It was considered natural to enjoy songs in English with little or no understanding of meaning. The essay also describes how the production of Japanese covers of foreign music has been dramatically successful, to the extent of reviving the careers of artists such as Go Hiromi, whose rendition of Ricky Martin’s “The Vida Loca” became the ending song for the hit TV show

Wonderful and stayed in the top ten on the charts for seven months in 1999.

It is noted that, by 1970, the tide had turned and *hōgaku*, Japanese pop, took the lead in sales away from foreign music. This leads to a careful discussion of the newer and increasingly frequent practice of inserting often inane English phrases into Japanese rock songs and love ballads. Linguistic data are provided to illustrate how common the practice is. “Striking in these statistics is the doubling of the rate of occurrences of foreign words in the mass media,” she says (134). Stevens explains that English is most frequently used in Japanese rock, due to its affinity with the genre’s place of origin. She uses the unfortunate term “Japlish” in her lengthy analysis of the integration of English terms into Japanese popular culture. The sound of interposed English lyrics is more important than meaning, she says, as she provides insights into the differences between Japanese and English songwriting based on the essential and unique qualities of the Japanese language. Blending the book’s concepts of authenticity, culture, and power, Stevens sees language in music as a key mediator of identity. Stevens concludes, “if the pen is mightier than the sword, then language here is a double-edged sword, elevating the West, yet at other times deflating its hegemonic status.”

Stevens’ contribution to the English-language literature on Japanese popular music is a welcome one. Despite its modest length, the book provides a comprehensive and stimulating examination of Japanese popular music, which is described as “the background noise of our everyday lives” (1). The book’s combination of the anthropological perspective and Stevens’ personal immersion in the industry provides much of the book’s substance as the reader is progressively introduced to the many-layered workings of the world’s third largest music market. *Japanese Popular Music* will serve as an excellent first port-of-call for students setting out to gain a familiarity with this increasingly researched topic. At the same time, its many specific anecdotes, references and resources will amuse, stimulate, and inform the more experienced researcher and general reader alike.

Bruce WHITE
Doshisha University