Japan’s Book Donation to the University of Louvain

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Japan’s Sonic Modernity: Popular Music and Culture in the 1920s

Introduction

“Jazz is the current mass music [in the 1920s]. It is our living and thinking that is being reflected here. [...] The urge for the present massification flowing through the world is being filled by jazz.”2 The contemporary critic Horiuchi Keizō illustrates how, here exemplified with jazz, Japan’s society in the so-called Roaring Twenties was rapidly transforming into a mass society signified by mass consumption. Japan emerged from the First World War as one of the victors at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.3 As one of the world’s great powers, it also contributed to the postwar reconstruction of the university library in Leuven.4 The 1920s book donation might be seen as a reflection of Japan’s postwar society. Parts of the Japanese cultural elite judged the effects of its transformation into a mass society as detrimental to an authentic Japan. Hence some of them believed a true cultural self was to be found in the Edo period (1600-1868), which explains the selection of many books for the donation to the University of Louvain.

Of course, the conception of such a past was rather imagined than real and, in itself, a very modern idea. In fact, in many ways ever since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the beginning of a construction of a modern nation state in the following decades, Japan experienced an identity conflict in which looking towards past, present, and future were all inherently modern.5 Nonetheless, the donation mostly showed only the ‘modern past’ since most of the books were from the now glorified Edo period. At the same time the mass culture of 1920s Japan was as modern as in Europe and the US, advancing at a fast pace. It was consumed in a visual, material, and culinary way,6 but – not to be underestimated – also sonically via the ubiquitous presence of new sounds that reverberated through society and literally set the tune for this new type of advanced modernity.7 In this sonic modernity, jazz and jazzy popular music signified the tempo and energy by which change was taking place. To illustrate this transformation to mass culture, this essay briefly discusses the socio-economic context of the 1920s, followed by the places where popular music was consumed, and lastly both the role and influence of the culture industry.

Japan’s Transformation to a Modern Mass Society

During the First World War, Japan profited from the power vacuum in East-Asia. As the region became cut off from European supplies, the demand for Japanese products from the Entente powers and the US soared. Japan’s own industrial sector was stimulated because of the regional demand for not only chemicals, machinery, and heavy industrial products but also for liquor, toys, and other commodities that the European wartime economies could not deliver. After a burst of investment, the Japanese domestic market became less dependent on the importation of foreign goods. By 1920, as a result of its expanding heavy industry, Japan had finally completed its industrial revolution and had in many ways transformed into an economic state comparable to the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States.

The industrialization process affected all of Japan, both urban centers and the rural areas alike. New infrastructural development connected and integrated cities within a broader domestic transportation network. Cities provided more work opportunities and commuting became
Japan’s sonic modernity: Popular Music and Culture in the 1920s

By 1920 Tokyo had already doubled in size from around 1900 to over three million inhabitants; Osaka rose from 820,000 to about 1.25 million; Kobe went from 240,000 to 640,000; Kyoto grew from 350,000 to 700,000; Nagoya more than doubled from 240,000 to 610,000; Yokohama exploded from 190,000 to 570,000; and ten other cities reached more than 100,000. In addition to the work opportunities, urban centers had a broader array of choices for consumption and offered the comfort of technological progress. Department stores; new commodities like the radio; the colorful lightbulbs of the entertainment industry; the explosive expansion of the transportation network, including the first subways in East Asia; electrically driven machinery in bigger factories; the honking of cars and buses – all characterized the speed with which the future was arriving. Another potential factor was the creative effect of destruction: The Great Kantō earthquake and the subsequent fires on 1 September 1923 razed most of Tokyo and Yokohama and killed almost 100,000 civilians. As a direct consequence, many in the entertainment sector moved to Osaka. Even so, the greater Tokyo area experienced an accelerated modernization during the reconstruction that followed, ultimately establishing itself as an ultramodern space. In the end, cities came to symbolize a future where possibilities seemed unlimited and growth endless.8

These drastic changes had consequences for Japan’s society. The working class increased from roughly 20 million in the 1880s to about 27 million by 1910.9 More prominent was the rise of the middle class, characterized by the salaryman. Their share increased from 1% around 1900 to about 10% in the beginning of the 1920s. Another fundamental change in Japanese society concerned the position of women. They filled about 30% of the blue-collar jobs in manufacturing, but in the 1920s became increasingly active in white-collar positions such as clerks, elevator girls, bus girls, and teachers. Despite a gender inequality that manifested itself in lower wages, having their own income provided women the opportunity to become more financially and personally independent, and to cultivate the self before marriage.10

Lastly, there were the nouveaux riches or narikin 成金 who profited immensely from the booming economy in the 1910s, and who were prominently portrayed in newspapers as decadent money spenders. Despite this general trend of social and economic progress, inflation and the volatility of the economy made for rising inequality.11

In the 1920s the masses in Japan enjoyed their access to new commodities and leisure activities like the dance hall, cafés, and travel resorts. The advent of mass media in Japan played a major part in this expanding consumerism. Although print media already flourished in the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the literacy level rose from 30% to 70%,12 their sales boomed in the 1920s. However, the accessibility and dissemination of new media, like the cinema, records, and radio, offered the Japanese – as was the case worldwide – a new, different sensory experience. Together these media offered images about modern life, especially via iconic figures like the moga モガ (modern girls) and the mobo モボ (modern boys), who defied traditional gender roles through their habits and avant-garde fashion styles. Even if these two figures were mostly fantasy, it was their medial representation that mattered. The Japanese intelligentsia heavily documented quotidian life with a mixed feeling of anxiety and intellectual curiosity, pointing to their influence on society. The mobo broke with typical ideas of Japanese masculinity, while the moga was as a “powerful symbol that represented the possibilities for what all women could become.”13 Breaking with the old and embracing the new was accompanied by exploring new frontiers. It was no wonder that a greater interest in discovering more about the erotic, the grotesque, and the nonsensical led to a phenomenon called ero guro nansensu エロ・グロ・ナンセンス. These concepts clearly contrasted with traditional ideas about gender, sexuality, the position as imperial subject, and cultural influences from outside. The nexus between consumerism and modern life had a profound impact on the discussion of Japanese identity.14

Popular Music and Modernity in Japan

Few music genres have characterized a global phenomenon so clearly as jazz in the so-called Roaring Twenties. While jazz is generally accepted to have begun in the United States in 1917, its syncopated notes reverberated in a synchronous moment over the entire world.15 By the early 1920s the first articles on the American phenomenon appeared in Japanese newspapers.16 Meanwhile, Japanese travelers to the US seemed to take quite an interest in acquiring records – even if only a minority had been able to travel intensively. On the other hand, “Jazz allowed Japan’s
self-styled modernites [sic] to experience an authentic and simultaneous modernity though they might never see or directly experience the rest of the world.”

Commercial dance halls and cafés were the main places that popularized jazz in Japan during the 1920s. The former boomed as social dancing had already taken off among urbanites in the previous decade. Moreover, several cafés even transformed into dance halls, like the Union in Osaka. The floor of the dance hall was cramped with embracing couples who moved on the up-beat syncopations of live jazz performances. Part of the allure of these places came from how they tore down traditional gender barriers. Their exotic names hinted at a promise of experiencing the modern, with places such as Paulista, Florida, and Parisien in Tokyo and Osaka, while smaller cities emulated the metropoles by hosting their own dance halls, like Venus in Kanazawa. The business was highly lucrative, not only significantly influencing the development of jazz but also the public perception of the music. Male customers could partner up with so-called “taxi dancers” 職業ダンサー for a limited amount of time by buying tickets. One method to increase the profits of the house was to let musicians play short songs so that “taxi dancers” could sell more tickets. Revenues could also be raised by testing the limits of the erotic as boundaries with outright prostitution were blurred. When “taxi dancers” with their Western style clothing and bobbed hairstyles became involved in scandals, the press and Japanese authors eagerly exploited the events. Mass media and literature presented the modern girl as lascivious, thereby further fanning the flames of the debates about Japanese collective identity, morality, and gender.

It was thus no surprise that in the 1920s many municipalities considered jazz and dance halls dangerous to public morality. Already by 1928 a national ordinance was implemented to regulate the sector. Jazz coffeehouses provided an alternative for the more expensive dance halls of the late 1920s. Its origins lay in the Meiji period, when the concept of coffeehouses came to Japan with the import of Western culture. These coffeehouses or kissaten 喫茶店 served as public spaces where people could socialize regardless of class or rank. However, with the advent of the record and gramophones, a new combination was formed: specialized music coffeehouses, such as the classical music coffeehouse or meikyoku kissaten 名曲喫茶店. Now a gramophone, such as the Harmony by Nipponophone ニッポンフォン displayed in our exhibition, offered background music for the visitors. In fact, the jazz coffeehouse was more an amalgam of different types of businesses from the early twentieth century, combining elements from the café, music coffeehouses, and milk halls. The jazu kissaten, however, built up a reputation for having an excellent sound installation boosted by a big record collection of foreign jazz, or in some cases via visual stimulation. The waitresses, who sometimes became celebrities, were also advertised outside the businesses with snapshots. Thus, besides jazz from the gramophone, one could enjoy food and drinks, or in some venues even receive “erotic services”.

The Commodification of Popular Sounds

In the 1920s popular music, in addition to music in general, was consumed both live and recorded. Though already active in Japan around the turn of the nineteenth century, record companies boomed after the war. The number of phonographs purchased increased more than tenfold in five years (1919-1924): from 125,000 imported and 260,000 domestically produced ones to almost 1.7 million and about 4.3 million ones, respectively. In addition, the 1920s saw major technological improvements in the music industry, such as electrical recording. An important change came, however, after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. To balance the budget for the reconstruction of the devastated areas and protect the economy, the Japanese government imposed a tariff of 100% on imported luxury goods, including records and gramophones. In order to circumvent this new tariff and be able to compete with national companies, three foreign record companies established their own subsidiaries in Japan in 1927: the Victor Talking Machine Company, Columbia, and the German Polydor thus created Nippon Victor 日本ビクター, Nippon Columbia 日本コロムビア and Nippon Polydor 日本ポリドール.

Victor, Columbia, and Polydor brought in their own business concepts, thereby substantially changing how music was produced and sold in Japan. Until 1927, record companies waited for a song to become a hit before recording it to make profit. The archetypical example is Kachyūsha’s song カチューシャの唄, which was composed for the actress Matsui Sumako 松井須磨子 to sing in the play Resurrection. After the play was
performed in the major Japanese cities, the score and record were sold. After 1927, though, the industry reversed that strategy in a Fordist way to record and sell as many hits in a row as possible.26 Record companies introduced an exclusive contract system that bound performers, composers, and lyricists overseen by music directors in an assembly-line structure.27

What characterized Japan’s popular music in the Interwar period – generally called ryūkōka 流行歌 – is its tendency for being highly cosmopolitan and having confusing categories. Various subgenres existed with the use of Western or Japanese instrumentation, or a mix of both, and a pentatonic scale. The so-called jazz songs or jazu songu ジャズソング offered translations of American Tin Pan Alley songs with a jazzy tune, yet were different from the jazz of Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong. “New folk songs” (shin min’yō 新民謡) incorporated Japanese folk songs or themes with Western arrangements. The commonality for ryūkōka and jazz was often the absence of any clear distinction, thereby blurring the boundaries. In fact, jazz referred to an amalgam of different Western popular music genres such as fox trot, tango, rumba, waltz, and symphonic jazz. Jazz musician Kami Kyōsuke 紙恭輔 (1902-1981) wrote in the film magazine Kinema junpō キネマ旬報 in 1935: “The word ‘jazz’ is a strange word and even if its origin lacks details, there is also no definition; and because nobody knows it, it has become a word that I don’t know if it’s good to tell anything when you immediately hear it and try to explain it.”28 The music industry played into this ambiguity, using the buzzword “jazz” as a nexus between other aspects of modern life for selling more records.

Record sleeves served to attract customers visually in a similar fashion to CDs or LPs and even continue today in a virtual setting like Spotify. They were sold with artistic designs that helped to create a certain idea of what one could expect from a record company and its music.

The beautiful designs on the sleeves displayed in our exhibition illustrate how they potentially reflect a 1920s sensibility. A remarkable example
is a sleeve from *Nipponophone*: it shows a gramophone with its typical flower-shaped horn, of which the melodious notes and the brand name succeed in even enticing a sitting Buddha away from his meditation.

It should be noted that the English text was not necessarily aimed at a foreign audience. Instead, it fitted the context of consumerism and interest in the exotic. Moreover, the English words connected to the dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture after the First World War and gave an aura of being modern. The front and back cover for *Tsuru rekōdo* or *Crane Records* is an example of how the use of electricity was breaking through in society.

This Nagoya-based company boasted being the first Japanese company to produce electrically recorded records, a development which is fittingly reflected by the lightning bolt that flashes through their logo. In that way the company promoted itself as part of the modern future. The front sleeve shows a cabinet gramophone offering the experience of live performances of traditional Japanese music styles and modern music. Similarly, the back cover depicts a record shooting a flash of lightning towards a radio. In both instances traditional and popular music come to life, as can be seen from the dancers and musicians in the middle. There could also be different references to the other wonders of the modern age people were living in. *Hikōki rekōdo* or *Airplane Records*, honors its name by depicting biplanes on the back cover. While the airplane was already in military use during First World War, it symbolized the next frontier in transport technology in the 1920s, when civil aviation began to develop and became a major symbol of 1920s modernity.

**Development of a Dense Mass Media Mix**

The consumption of popular music via the dissemination of records was further encouraged by the collaboration of different mass media. Through a dense “media mix” of the Japanese national radio-broadcasting company NHK with record and film companies, the combination of each other’s audience benefitted all parties in maximizing their profits. Newspapers and magazines...
served as mass advertisement platforms, featuring articles that introduced the newest popular records and films, as well as listing the daily radio programs.

In 1925, the first radio broadcast was launched in Tokyo by the Tokyo Broadcasting Station, and a year later the fusion of three metropolitan radio companies (Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya) established the first nationwide radio company, the Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai 日本放送協会 (NHK). Japanese popular music was first considered a lowly, vulgar genre by government officials and metropolitan intellectuals, and thus unsuitable for broadcasts. Broadcasts were originally limited to classical music, Taishō period (1912-1926) educational songs, and some Western pop songs. However, the programs gradually changed by the beginning of the 1930s. As the price of radios sharply declined, they became increasingly accessible to Japanese citizens. Various radios were produced by Japanese firms such as the Matsushita Electric Industrial Company (currently Panasonic).

Some radio makers also produced records, like Nippon Victor – a prewar ‘sonic empire’ – which evolved after 1945 into the entertainment electronics giant JVC, best known for its postwar global success, the VHS.

The early radios had free-standing horns as speakers, but those soon became integrated in the radio itself and in some cases combined with the record player. It became clear that the new audience favored Japanese popular music, such that ryūkōka – though under government censorship – became programmed for the airwaves. Record companies saw an opportunity to collaborate with NHK, thereby directly promoting songs to a nationwide audience.

The 1929 silent film Tōkyō Kōshinkyoku (Tokyo March) excellently exemplifies the cooperation between record and film companies. Famous director Mizoguchi Kenji 溝口健二 (1898-1956) adapted the original love story from author Kikuchi Kan 菊池寛 (1888-1948). Despite the rather negative reviews in newspapers and movie magazines, this silent film performed well with the masses.

Its success was due to the popularity of the film’s accompanying theme song (eiga shudaika 映画主題歌), which sold over 300,000 copies. Film company Nikkatsu 日活 had struck a deal...
with Nippon Victor to record the *shudaika* and then distribute it strategically, timed with the movie’s release, in cafés and in Nikkatsu-owned cinemas in and around Tokyo. Furthermore, this jazzy hit—sung by Satō Chiyako 佐藤千夜子 (1897-1968), written by the renowned poet Saijō Yaso 西條八十 (1892-1970), and composed by Nakayama Shinpei 中山晋平 (1887-1952)—reached that hit status, particularly because it mirrored different aspects of modern life in Tokyo. The four stanzas reflected the four parts of the city, each with its own distinct characteristics. Ginza boasted the dance halls where men and women drank liquor and danced to the syncopated beats of jazz; Marunouchi had the business center, crowded with people during rush hour; Asakusa was where the first subway in East Asia operated; and, lastly, Shinjuku stood for cinema and teahouses to relax, department stores, and the newly opened Odakyū train, which connected the capital with the resort area Hakone, close to Mt. Fuji.

The importance of the theme song continued into the 1930s and became even more prevalent with the arrival of the first talkie *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine* (*Madamu to Nyōbō* マダムと女房) by Gosho Heinosuke 五所平之助 (1902-1981) in 1931. Jazz played an essential role to the story and the main theme song reflected jazz’s modern allure. While the theme song and the talkie movie profoundly impacted the cinema experience—relaying sound from film itself, often coupled with a contemporary story—they did not radically replace silent movies in Japan. The silent films accompanied by the *benshi* 弁士, the popular live narrators of 1920s cinema, only gradually lost terrain. The historical, sword-swinging samurai film genre called *chanbara* チャンバラ, for example, remained popular into the 1930s. Nonetheless, recorded sound heralded the future, and jazz saw its popularity skyrocket by the end of the 1920s and during the 1930s. Besides the availability of records, fans also had access to music sheets for playing and singing the *shudaika* themselves. The covers for these sheets are visually modernistic, conveying the atmosphere of the movie. Using elements of what signified modern Japan, real or imagined, was a way to attract consumers. Again, the image of the *moga* evoked such ideas (Figure 1). Even the erotic element was not shunned in regard of better sales, as is evidenced by the cover for the music of *Miss Nippon* (Figure 8).

**Conclusion**

Japan’s transformation into a society of mass culture and mass consumption in the 1920s was on par with the West. Jazz, and popular music in general, represented this transformation as it made the modern audible to its audience. Additionally, jazz in Japan allowed anyone to experience another world without having to travel abroad. However, Japan’s sonic modernity was far from limited to the audible. A trip to a dance hall meant an evening out to dance to live jazz, possibly with a partner from the other sex. A jazz coffeehouse offered recorded jazz with a glass of beer brought by a waitress, which was part of the gendered attraction at that time. The record sleeve, too, referred visually to technological progress. Furthermore, that same record was also music in a visually and materially compacted form. Thus, through its interconnectedness with other aspects of modernity in Japan, popular music represented the possibilities of what it meant to be modern.

The demand for such dreams was accommodated by the booming mass media that provided these images for consumption. Through cooperation via advertisements, sleeves, records, covers,
magazines, and films, these media reached the masses. Consequently, there was a shift in how collective identity was constructed: from a top-down approach attempted by the ministerial bureaucracy during the modernization process in the Meiji period to more liberal options in the 1920s where the Japanese state seemingly had lost control over the effects of modernization. However, the pervasiveness of all these new ideas and the debates about them in mass media, despite conflating reality, seriously impacted the search for the supposedly true “Japanese” identity. For many, the authentic lay in the culture of “Edo Japan”. Ironically enough, even that past was not free of intellectual, political, and commercial contestation and was molded in the context of the massification of the 1920s.34

Arriving in Leuven in the mid-1920s, the donation of over 3,000 prevalently early modern titles in 14,000 volumes should therefore be understood in the context of Japan’s vibrant mass culture. Even if the books themselves were centuries old, their selection was, in a unique way, eminently modern.

8. Cover of sheet music titled for the film ‘Miss Nippon’ (Misu Nippon no uta) of 1930 by Nikkatsu. Private collection of Aurel Baele.