

Essay by Miya Yosahida

Since Japan is filled with many dialects and sub-cultures, it should come as no surprise that its music is also very versatile. The multitude of genres reveals the diverse interests of the Japanese people. Although American songs have become extremely popular in Japan, J-pop and traditional Japanese music are considered “in”.

Genres of Japanese music can almost be categorized by generation and age. Enka, often called “modern folk music” is most popular among the older Japanese. It was particularly popular during the WWII era. Although it is called folk music, it is very different from American country-western folk music. It’s actually considered to be the most “Japanese-sounding” of all genres of Japanese music, especially since “kashu”, or singers, often wear traditional kimono when performing. Enka music is usually slow in tempo, and the songs are often about loneliness and loss.

Then there is the ever popular “J-pop”, which includes many other sub-types of Japanese music that are normally considered separate in other countries. Although Americans consider rock and R&B to be completely different from pop (some fanatics would attack you for even suggesting otherwise), J-pop often includes J-rock and the Japanese form of R&B. J-pop songs usually take after American songs and though the lyrics are mostly in Japanese, often, the songs contain English phrases or titles. Also, J-pop celebrities are not only widely known throughout Japan, appearing in TV shows, but also enjoy a well-known reputation in Asia. “Aidoru kashu” (pop stars) such as Chisato Moritaka, Seiko Matsuda, and Dreams Come True, that have been popular for many years are considered to be extraordinary successes. However, more often, “aidoru kashu”, especially that of the bubblegum music, rely more on their looks and personality rather than their talent as a singer. These young teenagers sing light, bouncy, upbeat tunes, and although they are cute, they are often not capable of carrying a tune. These singers have huge impact on the youth in Japan in terms of fashion and language.

Often, many pop stars become famous through the relatively new genre of game music. Since gametracks are being sold on CDs nowadays, this is an easy way for singers to expand their reputation in other countries, especially the United States.

There are also innumerable types of classical music in Japan. These include “shōmyō” (Buddhist chanting), and “gagaku”, or orchestral court music, both of which go back to the Nara and Heian eras. “Gagaku” is a type of classical music that has been performed at the Imperial court since the Heian period. Japan is also a prominent market for western classical music and jazz, due to the older generations.

Surprisingly, reggae has been taking off recently. Japan welcomed Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and other Jamaican artists in the 70s, but it wasn’t until the 80s that Japanese reggae began to prosper. Among the earliest Japanese reggae artists were Rankin’ Taxi and Nahki, who began the unique technique of singing in Japanese with a Jamaican accent. Two of the leading Japanese reggae artists at present are Moomin and Pushim, who both sing in the “lovers rock” style (reggae-influenced songs with soft, romantic lyrics).

Of course, Western pop and rock music has been popular for many decades, going as far back as the Beatles and Elvis. Nearly all the famous singers in America are also famous in Japan: Mariah Carey, Green Day, Aerosmith, Backstreet Boys, to name just a few. Despite this enormous influence that the West has had on Japanese culture as a whole, the cultural pluralism that has helped Japan to keep both the new influence and the old traditions unified is what allows both the westernized J-pop and Japanese enka to coexist.