When is Japanese, Japanese? A Tale of Two Musicians

Terence Lancashire

Driving down the Hanshin highway that runs from Kobe to the centre of Osaka, I switched on to my favourite radio station FM Cocolo. FM Cocolo broadcasts from Nankō, in the deep south of Osaka from the Southern Harbour, and programmes are geared towards resident foreigners as well as Japanese people. The station’s DJs are a mix of professionals and amateurs of various nationalities broadcasting in both their native language and various abilities of Japanese. A core of Japanese DJs adds professional weight to the station, and these DJs dominate the morning slots playing current hits, interviewing Japanese residents overseas and reviewing new albums and singles.

On the morning I was listening, a Japanese DJ by the name of Jun was interviewing a music critic about a newly released song by J-pop star Utada Hikaru. The song, ‘Be my Last’, was being compared with those in Utada Hikaru’s first all-English album Exodus, which came out in 2004. Although the music was not particularly different in style, ‘Be my last’ had been written in Japanese for the Japanese market, and, according to the music critic, the lyrics expressed were particularly suited to Japanese sensibilities. The music critic spoke of ‘the cultural characteristics’ of the song to define the essence of Utada’s Japanese rendition as if these characteristics went beyond the simple use of the Japanese language. Although his comments were compacted, the sentiments expressed reverberated with those of J-pop’s sociological guru, Ugaya Hiromichi, who produced two books at the beginning of 2005 analysing both J-pop as an industry and J-pop as a sociological phenomenon. In the latter, J poppu no shinshō fūkei (An imagined scenery of J-pop), Ugaya
sets out to elucidate the extra-musical characteristics of selected Japanese performers, Kuwata Keisuke of the Southern All Stars, J-pop idol Hamasaki Ayumi and singer song writer Yumin, amongst others, whose personalities, performance venues and physical presentations are such that particular empathetic bonds are created between them and their Japanese listeners (Ugaya 2005).

In contrast to the musical talents that Ugaya chose to demonstrate the empathetic, Utada Hikaru’s style is atypical and perhaps for this reason she was excluded from Ugaya’s discussion. When I first heard Utada Hikaru in the canteen of my university in 1999, it was obvious that she represented something different, at least in a Japanese context. It seemed for the first time that Japan had produced a singer who could possibly compete in the international arena and whose music style and voice projection had put to rest the image of the ‘cute’ (or burikko) – women behaving like young girls – that had hitherto been common to many Japanese female performers. Takemura Mutsushige, author of *Utada Hikaru no tsukurikata*, had made a similar observation suggesting, sarcastically, that music had hitherto been dominated by the compositions and productions of Komuro Tetsuya, a one-man equivalent to Britain’s Stock, Aitken and Waterman of the 1980s. Komuro intentionally pitched his tunes to ‘polyp-inducing’ high frequencies so that his female protégé definitely left an impression but at the same time they were forced to squeal slightly flat because true pitches were beyond physical reach. Utada Hikaru’s singing at last represented that of a ‘normal’ girl, sung in lower frequencies and therefore in tune (Takemura 1999, 22–29). The sarcastic tone of Takemura is obvious but the ‘normality’ of Utada’s voice did stand in contrast to musical precedents. The reason soon became apparent. I learnt that Hikaru was American born and raised, and despite her Japanese nationality, her residence in Japan has been sporadic. Thus, although not clearly defined, to hear comments on the intrinsic Japanese nature of Hikaru’s Japanese-language songs on Jun’s radio programme challenged perceptions of Hikaru as a North American with a Japanese passport and an Oriental face.

Hikaru’s musical activities rekindled an ongoing concern with the significance of identity in a musical context. For the ethnomusicologist, the basis of his/her discipline has been the match between musical activity and the ‘local’ cultural context that influences both on creative and social levels, the generation and support of a given music. Steven Feld has neatly summarized, however, how globalized mediated popular music in particular has long challenged that premise. Timothy Taylor and Ian Condry have respectively provided examples of how popular music and, particularly, popular music in Japan demonstrate the complications of the