

Column: “Observations on Karaoke”

I love karaoke and often head out to karaoke boxes with colleagues and friends to sing my favorite songs. Sometimes I enjoy karaoke in the company of trainees visiting from overseas.

It is a well-known fact that karaoke originated in Japan. In the late 1960s, drinking establishments began attaching microphones to their jukeboxes—which until then simply played background music—enabling patrons to sing along to the tunes. This is believed to be the precursor of karaoke.

The 1970s saw the arrival of cassette tapes of popular songs minus their vocal tracks. These tapes were adopted by the aforementioned early karaoke systems, attracted attention as a potentially lucrative business, and became widespread across the country. The term “karaoke” also became a household name.

A rush of technical innovations followed, adding features to the karaoke machine such as lyrics display, music videos, and scoring. The late 1980s debut of the “karaoke box,” which made it possible for small groups of people to enjoy karaoke casually in the relative privacy of an enclosed space at affordable prices, turned karaoke into a pastime of nationwide popularity.



A jukebox

That karaoke was invented in Japan, and became widely accepted to the extent that it is now arguably part of the culture, is deeply related to our national psyche, I tend to think.

The Japanese people have always loved singing. Chinese poetry introduced from the continent in or around the 7th century, when Japan was in the process of becoming a unified state, inspired a popular pastime, which involved composing short poems expressing personal feelings, to go with given, prescribed melodies. In the 8th century, the first anthology of such verses, *Manyoshu*, was compiled, which contained not only works by royalty and the nobility but also works by common people as well, suggesting that songs were already familiar to all reaches of society.

The day-to-day lives of ordinary folk gave birth to songs unique to each region, which were inherited by successive generations, though these were mostly songs without any instrumental accompaniment.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, elementary school education in Japan began to include music in the curriculum. The purpose was to “nurture an aesthetic sensibility and culti-



A traditional folk song performance

vate refinement by singing simple songs,” and the focus of classroom activities was again on the performance of vocals-only songs. The Japanese fondness for songs only seems natural given such a historical background.

Under normal circumstances, Japanese society tends to shun behavior that makes one stand out, intentionally or unintentionally. Japanese culture is traditionally averse to direct articulation of views and ideas. In a society like this, songs have been essential means of communicating one’s real feelings, albeit indirectly. In a country where conversation has traditionally been carried out in hushed tones, because of constant worries over what others overhearing might think, people do not feel bold enough to cause loud noises even at home, theoretically the most private of spaces, lest they offend the neighbors. The karaoke box, where we can sing our favorite songs as loud as we like without worrying too much about others, therefore, proved a haven for the Japanese—a rare, private space where people could for once let their hair down, emancipated from social restraint.

It is also true that Japanese people above a certain age tend toward the agoraphobic. The majority of Japanese grown-ups would not even dream of singing or dancing in front of numerous strangers at nightclubs or other similar establishments. We feel much more at home among people we know, in an enclosed space occupied solely by ourselves. Sharing time and space with those we are comfortable with, and singing favorite songs without worrying about what others think, provide a very effective means of refreshing the mind and relieving daily stress. Another property unique to the karaoke box is its capacity to make people feel much more at ease with each other, encouraging greater empathy.

Moreover, karaoke enables the singer to occupy center stage—at least during the song—allowing total immersion in a world of one’s own. Fellow karaoke goers tolerate this, because they know that once it’s their own turn, they too can indulge in the same pleasure. This unwritten rule satisfies the intrinsic human need for self-esteem. Working life does not offer that many chances of playing a leading part. Such a part also requires great effort. But in the world of karaoke, anyone can become a star effortlessly and unflinchingly.

Karaoke is the rare chance to instantly play the coveted star role, to step aside from everyday life for a brief moment, and do things one has always wanted to do but couldn’t, or something one wouldn’t even dream of doing, without reserve or hesitation.

Hence the Japanese frequent the karaoke box, seeking the extraordinary experience that is easily available. Singing our favorite songs at top volume, we rid ourselves of the day’s stress, immerse ourselves in the euphoria of center stage, and make ourselves ready to head back to the workplace the next day feeling totally refreshed.

Karaoke also offers a great opportunity to learn about the Japanese and Japanese culture. It is a chance to catch a glimpse of the Japanese in their raw, uninhibited state.

I cordially invite you to Japan, where you are most welcome to join me for karaoke.



A karaoke box