



IN FOCUS

COMMENTARY SOUNDCAPES AND MUSIC TRADITIONS

In this first of two series on music and sound, contributors explore soundscapes and music traditions. We see various contexts for the examination of sound as well as how music traditions are affected by technological changes. We also read about how conflicts revolve around particular soundscapes and examinations of sound in distant contexts—one reaching back into history, and another reaching into the world of recordings by and about Osama bin Laden.

Listening to Kamagasaki

DAVID NOVAK
UC–SANTA BARBARA

Since 2002, I have been listening to Kamagasaki. In this highly controversial neighborhood in South Osaka, Japan, which is largely populated by migrant workers and *nojukusha* (homeless “field campers”), I began to hear voices, noises, and silences in the public space of sound. Over the last several years, Kamagasaki has been the site of increasing social action around the enforcement of noise regulations—both in homeless and labor communities and in the context of broader anti-globalization protests—that have radically altered the local soundscape. The public policy about homelessness creates debates about the place of music and sound. These conflicts have had lasting effects on urban planning in South Osaka and are deeply connected to ongoing struggles of homeless and disenfranchised worker populations. In the sounds of the city, I learned about the impact of recent noise control regulations on its communities of day laborers and displaced people, and the new noises of political activists. Like most other global cities, Osaka is rife with internal social differences in the perception of noise. Its soundscape reverberates with the political effects of cultural policies around public musicmaking that emplace urban communities in disparate ways.



Politicizing Soundscapes

The concept of soundscape refers broadly to a sonic cultural landscape, which is constructed through the social and musical mediations that connect people to their environments (Samuels et al 2010). For composer R Murray Schafer, who coined the term, a *soundscape* reflects the contextually specific local relationship of sound and place, which impacts the cultural perceptions, beliefs and behavior of its publics (Schafer 1977). Schafer’s idea was brought into anthropology through Steven Feld’s work in the acoustic and cultural environment of the Kaluli people in the Bosavi rainforest of Papua New Guinea. Feld’s writings and recordings showed how bird and waterfall sounds had influenced Kaluli musical aesthetics, as well as shaping the social discourse of rainforest inhabitants and their cultural senses of place (Feld 1982, Feld and Basso 1996). But in the multilayered populations of most global cities, the emplacement of sound is broadly contested between different social and class positions. Different assessments of noise in public and private spaces add a powerful political dimension to city soundscapes. In particular, noise control regulations contribute to disparate projects of urban planning, which often conflict with the music-making practices of local communities and can lead to the criminalization of public sociality.

During my fieldwork in Osaka in the early 2000s, I began to visit a weekly song-party held by migrant workers and homeless in Tennoji Park, close to a club where I conducted other fieldwork. The street music performances took place every weekend on the fringes of a day laborer quarter in the working-class heart of South Osaka known as Kamagasaki, a subsection of the Nishinari ward. Over one-third of Japan’s growing homeless population of at least 25,000 lived in this area in a tent city (*tento mura*), while other workers lived in *doya*, transient hotels under the train tracks. On weekends, locals set up itinerant *karaoke* booths in the public walkway around the park using noisy portable gas-powered generators. Nostalgic *enka* songs memorialized the loss of home for these temporary workers—often from rural Japan, but also Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines—who sang of the effects of urban displacement in their everyday lives (Yano 2003). Performances took place every Sunday as revelers drank and sang in makeshift bars constructed out of the blue tarps that have become iconic of homeless residences in Japan. Walking the periphery of the park beyond a plexiglass barrier that separated the paid entrance section from the karaoke party, the sound systems competed with the loud whirring of the generators. Voices of beer-soaked singers overlapped in their distorted, emotional renditions of almost-forgotten popular melodies (links to video and sound recordings at www.music.ucsb.edu/Novak).

From Music to Noise

When I returned to Osaka in 2007 to conduct a collective field recording project documenting the soundscapes of Kamagasaki, the tents were gone and the singers had been displaced. In the months leading up to the World Rose Convention in May 2006, the city began a campaign of forced eviction, termed *normalization* by urban planners. Coordinated evictions from the autonomous spaces in Kamagasaki culminated on January 17, 2006, when 28 tent homes were pulled down and destroyed by police, city officials and private railway workers. Part of the justification for the eviction was the aural public disturbance created by the karaoke at Tennoji Park. The term used in the Japanese press for the police response too was sonic: *shizuka ni saseru*—to “quiet” the insurgency. But these sonic moments do not simply bookend the local criminalization of music. The removal of the Tennoji Park karaoke party is part of a crisis of urban development in the wake of Japan’s failed “construction state” (*doken kokka*) of the 1990s, which invested city governments in corrupt infrastructure projects. The transformation of music to noise pinpoints the contestation of public space as part of these new contexts of Japanese political struggle, particularly around the neoliberal globalization of labor through temporary workers (Hasegawa 2006, Fowler 1997, Stevens 1997). Urban soundscapes are embodied

through cultural policies and public discourses about changing populations. Noise, in particular, has been increasingly invoked by neoliberal city governments attempting to limit the impact of transnational migrant labor and homeless movements, as well as anti-globalization groups. But as some are silenced, other forms of noise permeate the city.

The events surrounding the shutdown of the Tennoji karaoke party—as well as other musical practices of public street performance that have been marginalized in recent years—reflected a conflation of different noises in Osaka’s bankrupt city government, as well as a loose configuration of global and local social protest movements. The noise of riots has long been part of Kamagasaki’s soundscape and history of political marginality in several homeless and worker uprisings. But in recent years, activists have borrowed sonic techniques from sound demos that took place during the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, in which mobile sound units and marching bands broadcast and perform music in the streets (Hayashi and McKnight 2005). In 2008, protests against the G8 summit brought further sound demos, musical performances, and other reclaim-the-streets actions to Osaka, which were taken up by local homeless activists. In effect, protesters fought noise regulations with more noise, even as the Kamagasaki community applied for civil rights protection to reoccupy their tent homes in the area. The resulting riots and street protests led to further attacks against migrant labor advocates and homeless unions (see YouTube links at www.music.ucsb.edu/Novak). Through the intervention of sound demo protests, a new layer of noise has risen to social attention over the originally disputed noise of the karaoke party.

The political soundscape of South Osaka is constituted through public contestations between these different representations of noise. The situation has been amplified through struggles over citizenship, political resistance, civil disobedience and the effects of global migration in contemporary Japan. Soundscapes do more than just echo holistic cultural perceptions of sound in a local environment. Dialectical oppositions of noise and music constantly change and reorganize public space, as ideologies of sound are politically mobilized to transform the cultures of global cities. In Kamagasaki, the enforcement of noise regulations is an anxious discourse about cultural diversification and the displaced subjects of neoliberal economic development. Environmental noise has become a context of social knowledge: Its forms influence the emplacement of urban communities and alter the cultural trajectories of music and musicians in public life.

David Novak is assistant professor of music at University of California–Santa Barbara. His research interests include globalization of popular music, experimental culture, technological mediation and social practices of listening. He is the author of the forthcoming book Japanese: The Cultural Feedback of Global Media Circulation (Duke University Press, 2011). □