

Soundscapes of Japan: Popular Music in Global Circulation

Workshop at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 12-13 March 2026

Japanese popular music is often viewed as a domestic or East Asian phenomenon, yet its global reach has steadily expanded since the late 20th century. With the rise of digital media, Japanese music now circulates internationally through diverse and sometimes unpredictable channels—foreign-language covers, fan labour, otaku culture, and online platforms. These transnational flows reflect not only technological shifts but also cultural and political contexts that shape how music travels and is received. Despite its global diffusion, Japanese music continues to express national identity and cultural specificity. Whether through idol aesthetics, anime soundtracks, or genre innovations, it retains distinct markers that resonate with international audiences while remaining rooted in local traditions. This duality invites deeper inquiry into how music functions as both a cultural export and a site of identity negotiation. This conference presents case studies of Japanese popular music artists across genres, exploring how they navigate global markets, engage with foreign audiences, and maintain cultural authenticity. The papers examine the roles of technology, fandom, translation, and genre in shaping music's transnational movement. They also consider how fans abroad interpret and recontextualize Japanese music within their own cultural frameworks. Together, these studies offer a nuanced understanding of Japanese popular music as a dynamic cultural form—one that moves fluidly across borders while continuing to reflect its origins. The conference foregrounds the complex interplay between globalization and cultural expression in the evolving soundscape of Japanese music.

Day 1 (12 March)

9.00 Welcome and introduction

9.30 **Scott Aalgaard** (Wesleyan University)

Counter-Flows: Anti-Idols and the Critique of American Hegemony

Japan's "idols" [*aidoru*] tend to be panned in scholarship as hollow, empty commodities, as fiction. This hollow-ness is integral to the idols' viability as an iconic commodity. The hollow-ness that is at the core of the idol formula, however, actually announces one means of the formula's undoing, suggesting the need to assess (some) idols differently. In this presentation, I will introduce what I call *anti-idols*—artists who may have emerged and/or been marketed as "idols" but who fill the void at the form's core with unexpected creativity and critique. Turning against the idol formula reveals its gendered, constructed nature, and opens onto the possibility of critical appraisals of related extra-musical phenomena as well. These phenomena can be social, political, economic, or a combination thereof. This presentation explores the critique of geopolitics and of American hegemony in postwar popular music that is articulated by anti-idol "girls' rock" royalty Princess Princess, and the band's guitarist Nakayama Kanako. For these artists, turning against the gendered normativity informing the idol formula extended into a critique of highly gendered aspects of geopolitics. As I'll show, both layers of this critique centered on the figure of the *doll*: by becoming anti-idol and appropriating/re-deploying the doll motif, these artists were able to develop critical indictments that were both musical and extra-musical in scope.

10.15 **Adrienne Renee Johnson** (Shirayuri University)

Dead Subculture to "Unique Japanese Culture": Rebranding Visual Kei through Overseas Recognition

As of the early 2000s, visual *kei* was dead—at least to the general Japanese public. After a brief boom of popularity in the late 1990s, it became victim to its subsequent market oversaturation and quickly crashed into obscurity. Even as "Cool Japan" strategies ramped up to boost Japan's image overseas with popular culture, visual *kei*'s contemporary decline in marketability meant it was not a prime candidate for inclusion. However, the subculture persisted, finding new avenues of survival through independent, bottom-up, and unpredicted (often online) pathways which took it abroad, inspiring

international demand that baffled a domestic audience. Despite a lack of understanding, mainstream Japan was happy to regroup, rebrand, and retcon the narrative, discursively reframing the meanings of visual *kei* in response to this external value stimulus. Visual *kei* has thus been re-legitimized in the wake of its international popularity: a 'dead' fad re-made into a "unique Japanese culture" (Logmi Biz 2016) that "the Japan of today can be proud of" (Osawa & Shigematsu 2008, 74)—a welcome change for many in a subculture used to mainstream derision and denial. However, this rebranding, and its potential for nationalistic cooptation, is not universally embraced. Instead, it inspires a variety of discursive interpretations and reactions, and visual *kei*'s meanings remain in flux. In short, the domestic discourse surrounding visual *kei*'s globalization demonstrates the increasingly fractal nature of cultural flows in the Internet age, as well as the fluidity of meaning-making and identity formation in post-bubble Japanese society.

11.00 Coffee break

11.15 **Katō Ken** (Mejiro University)

Naming Popular Music: A Cultural and Semantic Genealogy of Music Labels in Japan from the Meiji Era to the Present

While the global circulation of Japanese music is often discussed through contemporary genres like "J-POP" and "City Pop," the semantic genealogy of these labels reveals a century-long struggle to define Japanese identity through the lens of Western music. This paper provides a critical analysis of the evolution of music labels in Japan, arguing that these terms are not mere descriptive taxonomies but performative constructs that negotiate the tension between domestic sentiment and Western modernity.

I introduce the concept of the "Katakana Buffer"—a linguistic and cultural space where foreign concepts are appropriated and domesticated while maintaining their "otherness." The study begins by examining the 1920s institutionalization of Keiongaku (Light Music) by the national broadcaster NHK. This top-down categorization sought to "sanitize" the perceived vulgarity of early Ryūkōka (popular songs) by imposing Western orchestral standards. Following the post-war idealization of "Popular" music as a symbol of democratization, the 1960s witnessed the rise of "Pops." I interpret the uniquely Japanese pluralization of "Pops" as a "simulacrum of the West"—an accumulation of fragmented urban imaginaries that sought to transcend the traditional Japanese musical idiom.

The analysis further traces the 1970s emergence of "New Music" as a grassroots resistance against the institutionalized Kayōkyōku system, which was often criticized by the younger generation for its "wet" domestic sentimentalism. This semantic trajectory reached its zenith in 1988 with the invention of "J-POP" by the FM station J-WAVE. I argue that the prefix "J" functioned as a strategic "bleaching" agent, effectively stripping away the lingering domesticity of Kayōkyōku to produce a sleek, internationalized commodity. By tracing this naming history, this presentation demonstrates how the act of labeling has historically performed the identity of Japanese music, navigating a persistent cultural oscillation between "the West" and "the Self."

12.00 **Moritz Sommet** (University of Fribourg)

Inventing Mood Kayō: Processes of Popular Music Genre Formation in 1950s to 1970s Japan

By tracing the history of mood *kayō* ムード歌謡, my paper examines how popular music genres were constructed and stabilized by the Japanese music industry in the postwar era. In the late 1950s, composers such as Yoshida Tadashi conceived mood *kayō* as a deliberate counterpoint to styles that evoked feelings of rural nostalgia. Influenced by Western mood music, Latin music, and jazz and represented by singers like Frank Nagai and backing bands such as The Mahina Stars, mood *kayō* was initially coded as urban, modern, and transnational. By the early 1970s, however, the genre had merged with *enka*, which was then crystallizing as a nostalgic and ostensibly 'typically Japanese' form. The analysis demonstrates that both the initial construction of mood *kayō*'s image and its subsequent redefinition resulted from marketing strategies within the music industry, alongside broader shifts in the media ecology and technological-economic innovation.

13.00 Lunch break

14.15 **Nagata Mikito** (Waseda University)

How Heavy Metal Took Shape in Japan: Music Life, BURRN!, and Early Reception

In English-language scholarship, Japanese heavy metal is often conceptualised through an Anglo-American framework of musical genre, an approach that tends to overlook how such terms acquired different meanings in the Japanese context through translation. To examine how the category of “heavy metal” (ヘヴィメタル) took shape in Japan, this study analyses Japanese music magazines from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, focusing on *Music Life (ML)* and *BURRN!*. Founded in 1937, *ML* introduced British heavy metal to Japanese readers in the late 1970s. Originally launched in 1984 as a special issue of *ML*, *BURRN!* subsequently played a major role in shaping what “heavy metal” came to mean in Japan. While *ML* presented heavy metal as a fashionable form of popular music alongside new wave, and as a development from hard rock, *BURRN!* redefined it as a more male-centred and specialised field by moving away from *ML*’s celebratory, pop-oriented mode of presentation. At the same time, the magazine coined terms such as “L.A. Metal” to classify particular styles, demonstrating how genre categories were reinterpreted in Japan rather than simply imported from Anglo-American usage. By tracing how genre terms were translated and reinvented in these magazines, this study argues that Japanese heavy metal emerged not as a straightforward imitation of Western models, but as a locally reconfigured genre whose meanings were shaped through translation, classification, and visual mediation.

15.00 **Dariusz Brzostek** (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń)

Japanese Jazz and Global Sound, or Global Jazz and Japanese Sound? How Technology Shaped Jazz Production in Japan and Circulated It Worldwide

This paper examines the globalization of Japanese jazz from the 1960s onward, with particular emphasis on recording technologies and record production, as well as on the ways in which jazz expression was reshaped within a cultural context markedly different from Afro-American and European traditions. The analysis focuses on two interrelated issues situated within the history and archaeology of media:

1. The emergence of Japanese recording studios and record labels—most notably Three Blind Mice—as global points of reference for jazz recording practices in the 1970s (for instance, in the recordings of the Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio);
2. The impact of new sound-production technologies in encouraging Japanese jazz musicians to move beyond traditional forms of expression toward experimental and avant-garde practices, exemplified by Masayuki Takayanagi and the tabletop-guitar technique.

The theoretical and methodological framework draws on Science and Technology Studies (STS) and sound studies, with particular attention to research on the role of technology and recording studios in music production (including approaches associated with studio ethnography: Meintjes 2003; Krogh Groth 2014; Crowley 2019), as well as to the ways in which these technological environments shape the aesthetic forms of musical styles and genres.

The aim of the presentation is to explore how “Western” jazz—mediated through Japanese technological and production practices—came to signify a distinctive Japanese sound, functioning both as a marker of audio-engineering quality and as an influential reference point for jazz producers worldwide.

15.45 Coffee break

16.00 **Aleksandra Jaworowicz-Zimny** (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń)

Idol Dance Cosplay in Poland: Between Cultural Mediation and the Construction of Self

The digital nature of Japanese virtual idols – fictional, anime-style singers featured across multiple media – allows them to adopt diverse personas depending on the media format and modes of user interaction. This flexibility has enabled the emergence of idol cosplay, a practice that has gained popularity in Poland, where several semi-professional idol dance groups have formed. These groups

primarily cosplay characters from *Project Sekai: Colorful Stage!* and *Love Live! School Idol Project*, performing choreographed dances and lip-syncing to franchise songs at fan conventions.

Unlike traditional cosplay, which typically prioritizes visual accuracy, idol dance cosplay emphasizes performance, audience engagement, and entertainment. As “idols”, performers recreate choreographies, gestures, and interaction styles associated with Japanese idol culture while embodying hybrids of fictional character and personal identity.

This paper argues that idol dance cosplay groups function as embodied cultural mediators who translate Japanese idol performance practices into the Polish fan convention environment. Through these performances, they familiarize local audiences with virtual idol culture and promote music-based franchises that remain relatively niche among Polish consumers of Japanese popular culture. At the same time, the practice shapes the performers themselves, providing a platform for self-expression, self-development, and self-promotion.

Drawing on interviews with members of the groups Yoru Idols and Hiroto Idols, participant observation at events, and analysis of social media content, the study demonstrates how embodied performance simultaneously transforms virtual idol personae and the cosplayers’ sense of self.

16.45 **Dorothy Finan** (University of Leeds)

Building Transnational VTuber Idols (and Their Fandoms) in Japan: A Case Study of Hololive

Virtual YouTubers (or VTubers) are “real” online personas who perform to a global audience on digital streaming platforms using live motion-tracking avatars which are mostly rendered in an anime style. The industry is centred in Japan, with major hubs in South Korea, Indonesia, and the US, and grew rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many performers with the backing of major VTuber talent agencies and multi-channel networks such as hololive can expect to release professionally-produced popular music tracks and tour the world as hologram pop idols. This paper will argue, through a case study of the VTuber agency hololive, that the VTuber idol industry is built on a combination of the production and promotional logic of manufactured Japanese teen pop performers (idols) and the transmediality of otaku media, with one specific distinguishing feature; a very loose derivative works policy, actively encouraging the creation of fanworks, and their reincorporation into official intellectual property (IP). This paper will therefore explore the tensions of such a policy for building transnational VTuber idols and their fandoms.

Day 2 (13 March)

9.30 **Michael Furmanovsky** (Ryukoku University)

Katō Kazuhiko, Kitayama Osamu and the Kyoto-Based Reinvention of Japanese-Language Popular Music, 1965-75

This presentation uses the career of the seminal Japanese folk and rock singer, musician, songwriter, and producer Katō Kazuhiko (1947-2009) and his closest associate Kitayama Osamu to explore the birth of what can be called modern Japanese popular song (MJPS) in the city of Kyoto in the late 1960s. MJPS is defined here as Japanese language, western-style popular song built around keyboards and guitar and generally created, sung, and arranged by local or amateur musicians and singers rather than professionally trained and employed composers, lyricists, and session musicians. The reasons why MJPS had its birth in the Kansai area--with a handful of Kyoto-based universities playing a particularly outsize role-- is explored with reference to several factors. These include not only the regions traditional cultural characteristics but also its post-war vernacular-based comedic entertainment culture; its relative isolation from military radio penetration and the important role of chorus-based music in its elite universities’ clubs. Finally, too, an explanation is sought through an in-depth examination of the coming together of Katō and Kitayama, a duo whose symbiotic creativity can be compared to the Beatles’ Lennon and McCartney in the UK in terms of its national impact.

10.15 **Sayo Sakamoto** (University of Southern California)

Singing as Homecoming: Mikami Kan and Migrant Youth from Tōhoku

Music can render a distant place present, even when return is no longer possible. In late 1960s Japan, as rapid economic growth accelerated rural-to-urban migration, the meaning of home grew unstable. Young people from Tōhoku were drawn into Tokyo through collective employment programs, arriving in a metropolis that demanded reinvention while the rural landscapes they left behind were themselves being transformed by depopulation and industrialization. Home was no longer a fixed site of origin but a shifting constellation of memory, ideology, loss, and desire—at once intimate and mediated, lived and imagined.

This paper explores that unstable terrain through the work of folk singer Mikami Kan, a migrant youth from Aomori who emerged from Tokyo's underground scene. Rather than reading his songs as nostalgic longing for furusato, I argue that Mikami stages homecoming as an expressive negotiation of rupture. By the time he arrived in Tokyo, the mass-cultural image of rural Japan circulating in popular media no longer corresponded to everyday reality. His performances dwell in this disjunction. They reveal the impossibility of return while resisting the demand for seamless urban assimilation.

Focusing on vocal timbre, dialect, and lyrical insistence, I illustrate how Mikami transforms displacement into an artistic practice. Singing becomes a way of inhabiting contradiction itself—a provisional dwelling in the space between countryside and metropolis, memory and modernization. In this sense, homecoming is not geographic but acoustic: it takes place in the act of voicing, where contradiction is sustained rather than overcome.

11.00 Coffee break

11.15 **Anita Drexler** (Osaka University)

"Asian Pops" in Japan and their Contribution to the Transition from the New Music-Era to the Age of J-Pop

In this presentation, I am going to examine how narratives prevalent in the so-called "Asian Pops" boom of the early 1990s were later-on re-contextualized to contribute to a discursive construct about the "international appeal" of J-Pop, targeting domestic, Japanese audiences.

From the early 1980s onwards, Japanese compositions – many penned by New Music-affiliated songsmiths – served as an important source material for artists across East and Southeast Asia. While some artists, such as singer-songwriter Nakajima Miyuki, gained at least some limited exposure abroad, the lion's share of cover versions by Asian artists circulated in the respective markets without explicit reference to their Japanese origins, thus aligning themselves with Iwabuchi Kōichi's theory of "culturally odorless" Japanese cultural exports.

In the early 1990s, however, a number of these Asian cover versions were re-imported into Japan in the context of the "Asian Pops" boom. Here, artists from predominantly the Sinophone world, were marketed towards a Japanese audience through compilation CDs and media coverage that stressed the broader regional appeal of Japanese compositions.

Later, in the year 2002, The Yamaha Music Foundation released a three-disc compilation series that revisited many of these Asian cover versions along the lines of a new, potentially more self-serving agenda, that not involved rebranding former New Music artists as "J-Pop", but also renavigated the axis around notions of "international" along new lines – by shifting its reference point from the previously ubiquitous "Anglophone" sphere towards an "Asian≠Sinophone" one.

12.00 **Lauri Kitsnik** (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

The Trajectory and Traces of Nakajima Miyuki's Rouge: Transnational Palimpsests and Tactile Media of the Mid-1990s

Nakajima Miyuki is one of Japan's most enduring singer-songwriters, active from the 1970s to the present day. What sets her apart from many contemporaries who have largely remained local acts is the substantial following her music has gained across East Asia, reaching beyond national and linguistic boundaries. In the Sinosphere especially, many of her songs have been covered by local artists since the 1980s. However, it is the single "Rouge", originally written for Chiaki Naomi in 1977, that has led the most remarkably long and complex afterlife. Initially failing to chart, the song

subsequently became emblematic of East Asian pop music's power to transcend genre, borders, and language. Its 1992 reinvention as "Vulnerable Woman" by Faye Wong in Cantonese catalysed a regional surge, fuelling resonance across the Sinosphere and paving the way for further reinterpretations. By the mid-1990s, the melody had migrated through Southeast Asia and into Europe, spawning covers in Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, English, Turkish, and Estonian. These versions, shaped by lyrical choices and musical styles of their own, recast the melody into forms ranging from melancholic ballads to upbeat Eurodance and outright parody. This paper examines the palimpsestic nature of popular song covers by tracing the transnational journey of "Rouge" and analysing its lyrical transformations, stylistic shifts, and mutable meanings. By charting its trajectory across shifting cultural and political contexts, this case study offers insights into broader patterns of modern identity, media globalization, and East Asia's contribution to global soundscapes.

13.00 Lunch break

14.15 **Marié Abe** (University of California, Berkeley)

The Poetics of Mishearing: Listening for Affinities and Colonial Traces Across Japanese and Ethiopian Popular Music(s)

In the subcultural scenes of world music aficionados and African music fans in Japan, it's common knowledge that some of the Ethiopian popular music from the 1970s uncannily resembles *enka*, the sentimental popular music from 1950s Japan. The unexpected aesthetic resonance and cultural affinity that emerge from the moments of hearing oneself in other's music have spurred genealogical curiosity and imagined narratives ranging from south-south affective alliance to Japanese chauvinism. What kinds of itinerant paths have the musical sounds traveled to arrive at this moment of recognition of affinity? What kinds of relations of sameness and alterity are at work within the affectively charged moments of mishearing filled with a palpable sense of disorientation, mischief, and at times cultural superiority? I pursue this line of inquiry by tracking the itinerant route *enka* circulated from Japan to Ethiopia—via Japan's former colony Korea, where Ethiopian soldiers fought along the UN troops during the Korean War. I consider the poetics of mishearing as a cultural vehicle in order to explore the relation between the infrastructures that mediated these encounters on the one hand, and the generative worlding potential of musical imaginaries that emerge from such encounters on the other. As such, this paper seeks to reorient the global circulation narratives that have been predominantly placing the North America at its center, and recasts what Laura Doyle calls interimperial relations often subsumed by stories of Euro-American empires.

15.00 **Ohwada Toshiyuki** (Keio University)

Robots and Chinoiserie: Afro Asian Futurism in Yellow Magic Orchestra

This paper examines Yellow Magic Orchestra within the intersecting frameworks of techno-Orientalism and Afro-Asian cultural exchange. Formed in 1978 by Hosono Haruomi, Sakamoto Ryūichi, and Takahashi Yukihiro, Yellow Magic Orchestra pioneered synth-pop by combining electronic technology with stylized images of Asia. The paper first explores how China—particularly the post-Cultural Revolution moment and the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations—informed the group's aesthetic imagination, visible in Chinese-themed compositions and stage costumes such as the "red Mao suits." It then argues that the group strategically performed a self-Orientalizing image that both engaged with and complicated Western techno-Orientalist stereotypes of Asian technological modernity. Finally, the paper situates Yellow Magic Orchestra within an Afro-Asian framework by examining its engagement with African American musical traditions, including disco and early hip-hop. Through these transnational connections, the paper proposes Yellow Magic Orchestra as an example of Afro-Asian futurism.

15.45 Coffee break

16.00 General discussion and concluding remarks