

# **Musical Performance on the Streets of Osaka City**

**Prof. Dr. Shin Nakagawa**

Department of Asian Culture and Urbanism, Faculty of Literature and Human Science

Osaka City University, Osaka, 558-8585, Japan

Email: [silence@mbox.kyoto-inet.or.jp](mailto:silence@mbox.kyoto-inet.or.jp)

## **Introduction**

Numerous street musicians are now active in Japan's public places. These include various kinds of musicians, professionals as well as amateurs. They may appear simply to entertain passers-by, but as long as the street where they play is a public space, their performance has some social meaning as well.

They have become particularly active on the streets in recent years, maybe since 1998. "Yuzu", a folk duo who sang on the street in Yokohama City, were successful in releasing their CD and then became major musicians in 1998. Their success story stirred up many young people and encouraged them to follow "Yuzu's example".

Yet this case alone cannot explain the reason why the number of street musicians is increasing so rapidly. Another factor is that society is now more likely to accept them. According to the law in Japan, street performances are prohibited, but this restraint has recently been relaxed. This means that society allows street musicians to locate themselves within its daily scenery.

Speech for the street musician means speech for society as a whole. In this sense, the flourishing condition of street music can be considered positively. It can be observed that society itself is undergoing change. In what ways is it changing? I would like to throw out some suggestions on this matter in this paper.



Map of Osaka City

Four areas, eg. Umeda, Kyobashi, Namba and Tennoji are popular for street musicians.

### 1. From the Site of Street Music: Umeda Station

In this section, I would first like to speak about street music from the point of view of the musician. Why do people sing on the street? Because it is free? Because it is open? Because it is comfortable? Because they want to be the center of attention?

When I asked some musicians, “Why do you play on the street?”, they answered, “I want to attract attention”, “I want to communicate with passers-by”, “I can earn money”, “This is practice. I cannot practice at home, because my house is too small” and “I want to be a professional”. Each musician had his own motivation. We cannot find one true reason from these answers. So let us proceed anyway!

Now let us examine Umeda Station as a case study and discuss “the formation of space”. Umeda, in Osaka, is the terminal for Japan Railways, Hankyu Railways, Hanshin Railways and the subway. Musicians play in underground spots and bridges for walkers on the streets where many people pass through the terminals and go shopping. Umeda is a very suitable space for them to appeal to a wide public. The main sites for street performance in Osaka are usually centered in major transport terminals and commercial areas. Musicians do not move, but play at particular points. In Europe and

in most Asian countries, we can see musicians moving in the traffic, but never in Osaka.

The street musicians come to perform at Umeda from 21:30 to 23:00 in the evening. Before that time, this place is too crowded with passers-by to allow sufficient space for performers. About four or five groups begin by setting up instruments and loudspeakers on the ground and they start to play music. Many people still pass on by; but the place changes gradually into an acoustic space, which is divided into a few circles that are made up of the various audiences. As a result, this place is quite transformed into a performance space. However, as this place is not a closed concert hall, a crossover of functions remains. Therefore it becomes a very complicated space where “the space for passers-by”, “the space for performers” and “the space for homeless people” etc. overlap or eliminate each other. It is complicated, because different functions and meanings are simultaneously given to this space.

This place was built for walking, but now it is also used for sitting. However, one may leave whenever one likes. The borderline (or outline) is quite vague, and its meaning is vague, too. This is characteristic of performance space on the street. We feel very comfortable in it, because various spaces are loosely overlapping and being broken up.

Quite a lot of people stop to enjoy the music, but they come to such a place neither to pursue ethnic identity nor to make communities, as Tanenbaum points out New Yorkers do in her book, *Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subways of New York* (1995). The people at Umeda are caught up in somewhat looser feelings. But they do share a sense of being linked to each other or existing together.



1. Musicians at the bridge on the street. (Umeda)



2. You can see the JR railways station of Osaka, behind the performance space (Umeda)



3. People are stopping to walk and enjoy music. (Umeda)  
which  
(Umeda)



4. This band is surrounded by many people  
causes a little traffic jam on the street.

## 2. Sociology of Street Sounds

Some communication occurs in street performance, and messages are exchanged between musician and audience. It is very meaningful for both, but often meaningless for people outside the circle. As performance occurs on the street, performance sounds go out of the circle and float here and there without a particular destination. At this moment, sound becomes not a medium for musical meaning but one of many environmental sounds, that is to say, street music becomes one factor in the soundscape of the city.

The music-sociologist Prof. Hiroshi Ogawa said, “If I designed a sound space in a city, I would like to propose a space where a street musician could easily play an active part” (1991). According to him, unnecessary BGM (background music) and the inescapable sounds of the city, from those of sound signals for the blind, to those of streets sellers, are enemies of the street musician. One is happier to look forward to street music than to hearing standard BGM everyday in subway passages. This is quite an optimistic statement, but Prof. Ogawa would like to make the matter of street music a central issue in soundscape design. As he has told us, a street musician can perform more easily now than compared with ten years ago.

However, when I heard performances at Umeda, I felt they were unpleasant to the ear, because various sounds overlapped and were too loud. This condition doesn't matter for the audience, but how do other passers-by or station staff feel about it? If someone feels the performances are

unpleasant, the sounds may not be regarded as music but rather as noise. How is street music, which is indeed considered noise by many people, accepted by society? What do musicians think about this matter?

It is interesting that most street musicians don't have any idea of public sound. They don't give much consideration to whether sounds produced by them construct a soundscape in their city. They may be too egotistic to take others into such consideration. Under these conditions, problems of noise pollution occur and they can cause conflict with the inhabitants of the area. The law is usually applied to this sort of case to bring about a solution, but the position of musicians is weak under the law.



5. Communication between musician and author.

Activities of performers on the street without permission are illegal and are controlled by the police under the Road Traffic Law, specifically the first section: "Prohibited activities on the streets"; of the fifth chapter; "Road use".

According to article seventy-seven: "Permission for the use of roads"; if somebody opens a stall or stand on the street, uses the road in order to hold a ritual event, or to take film; and this causes a severe traffic paralysis, he must have obtained permission in advance from the police. Musicians should apply to the police in advance for permission to use the road, but in fact such permission is rarely granted.

According to article seventy-six: "Prohibited acts"; any activity which could disturb the operation of traffic or create danger on the street is prohibited. Such articles are applied in order to control musicians and dancers on the street. If they are arrested, they are required to write out a

promise that they will never play on the street again. Such cases are certainly increasing now which indicates that street musicians are very active in Osaka.

Such control becomes more stringent whenever an international event like the World Cup for soccer is held. In fact, when the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) conference was held in Osaka in November 1995, the control of street performers and vendors was heavily enforced. According to a statement by the Osaka police, the performers and vendors on the street were impolite to guests from foreign countries. The police wanted to sweep them away from the city center.

If an international event is held, the number of visitors from abroad increases automatically, and activities on the street are controlled from the viewpoint of preserving the beauty of the city. However, we should be very careful, because recently the police often control people on the street, including homeless people, using the pretext of an upcoming international event as an excuse.

The World Cup for soccer was held in both Japan and Korea in June, 2002. Games were played in Osaka, too. I watched the manner in which police controlled the event but, to my surprise, their control was not heavy-handed. It is not entirely clear whether such control has become more lenient today than it was a few years before. Of course, street music is still illegal, but the police can sometimes overlook it. This is part of deregulation policy in Japan. Under these conditions, musicians are enthusiastically trying and always striving to develop their street culture.

### 3. Permitted Street Music

In contrast to the above, there are cases in which street music is positively accepted by society. For example, we can witness very active performances in front of musical instruments stores in Shinsaibashi Street.

Shinsaibashi Street is very famous for shopping, and most storekeepers demand that musicians do not play in front of their stores, but one musical instrument store hasn't rejected performers. Far from it, the store has encouraged the musicians to use its space for performance. Street music freaks know this, and they go there to enjoy music. Since TV and radio crews often come to take pictures or make recordings for broadcast, this place has steadily become more popular. This benefits the store, because the name of the store has become more famous, too. If some musician should gain success as a major star, this place could even become a symbolic "holy ground". This case indicates

that street musicians can be easily involved in commercial strategy and that their activities are being recognized by society. The number of stores like this, where security guards don't get rid of musicians from in front of the shop is now increasing in Osaka.



6. Musicians at Shinsaibashi Street. (Namba)  
(Namba)



7. She sings while demonstrating her CD.

In these places, people close their eyes (or ears?) to some noisy sounds and want to support the development of a new culture. The noise of a soundscape cannot be measured physically, but rather psychologically. Even if a sound is very loud, it could be accepted in society, for example, a temple bell. It would be a very rare case if the sound of a temple bell were considered a mere noise, because this sound is regarded as more than a little necessary by the community at large. In this way, the sounds of street music are also gradually penetrating into society.

What does this mean for society when it can positively accept the sounds of street music?

Street music consists of sound and text. Until now I have discussed street music from the standpoint of its being an acoustic event, but the texts which are often created by street musicians should also be paid attention to, because such texts can send a direct message.

Street performance has been strongly controlled since olden times. For example, we can see official documents from the eighteenth century in which there are descriptions about the prohibition of bon odori (the 'bon' dance). Bon odori is performed by people on the street or in the gardens of houses in August and September, in order to pray to ancestors. Why was this dance sometimes

prohibited? The political leaders of the day feared the rise of anti-establishment movements. In addition, in the seventeenth century, this kind of dance was prohibited by the Bakufu (the government of the Edo Period). In this sense, the street was a dangerous space, in which political messages could be brought out in the open.

In the history of modern street music in Japan, the “folk guerrillas” at the front of JR Shibuya Station in Tokyo at the end of the 1960s insisted that the government should permit people to use open spaces for political assembly. They sang anti-war songs, linking their performance in a prohibited place with the ideals of freedom and liberation. The anti-war assembly their songs accompanied was strongly suppressed by the government as a matter of course.

Street performance is now controlled under the Road Traffic Law, but the potential of street performance goes far beyond matters of traffic. It has to do with political matters, too. In this context, the fact that street performance tends to be accepted by society is meaningful.

Of course, it could be said that street music is permitted on the streets now only because the musicians are not so political. They are not dangerous people. Their various motivations were already introduced at the beginning of this paper. They have no political background.

However, gaining freedom of performance on the street is really significant. We feel happier, because we can freely send a message to many and unspecified persons on the street, whether that message is political or not.

Maybe musicians think only about their own expression now. That is all right. The street is a kind of laboratory where they can find and develop new music which cannot be created with high technology like a computer mixing machine, in a closed studio.

What does a society in which people can sing freely look like? Once, the Osaka police regarded street musicians as mere rubbish, but I don't. Society has changed a lot. Street music has not yet matched the scenery of the city. But if street music diffuses through it sufficiently, then I can say that Osaka City could be considered beautiful.

## References

Cathwrine Grout and Tsutomu Iyori (ed) “Le paysage de l'espace urbain” In *Situ*, Enghien-les-Bains, 1998

Günther Noll ‘Strassenmusik in Köln’ in G. Noll and W. Schepping (ed) “Musikalische Volkskultur in der

Stadt der Gegenwart” Metzler Schulbuch, Hannover, 1992: 96-126.

Hiroshi Ogawa ‘Kyoju-kukan to Soundscape (Living space and Soundscape)’ in Kinki Kenchikushi-kai Kyogikai (ed) “hiroba” No. 325, 1991: 33. (Japanese)

The Soundscape Association of Japan (ed) “Soundscape” No.1, 1999.

The Soundscape Association of Japan (ed) “Soundscape” No.2, 2000.

The Soundscape Association of Japan (ed) “Soundscape” No.3, 2001.

The Soundscape Association of Japan (ed) “Soundscape” No.4, 2002.

The Soundscape Association of Japan (ed) “Soundscape” No.5, 2003.

Susie J. Tanenbaum “Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subway of New York” Cornell University Press, New York, 1995.

Hiroshi Yoshimura “Toshi no Oto (Urban Sounds)”, Shunju-sha, Tokyo, 1990. (Japanese)

### **Thanks to**

Mr. Eiichi Tsujio for photo 1-5 and Ms. Asako Shimooke for photo 6-7.