[Chapter Number]

The serious business of song - karaoke as discipline and industry in Japan

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Introduction

Karaoke, or the act of singing along to a pre-recorded vocal-less audio track (often accompanied by visuals), has drawn a considerable amount of attention as one of Japan's foremost pop-cultural exports. Book-length studies such as Hosokawa & Mitsui's *Karaoke Around The World* (1998), Drew's *Karaoke Nights: An Ethnographic Rhapsody* (2001), Zhou & Tarocco's *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon* (2013) and Brown's *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (2015) have viewed the narrative of karaoke's journey from Japanese invention to global success story as one fundamentally mediated by 'local' uptake; karaoke as a medium that adapts technologically and performatively depending on where it is being consumed. However, this view of karaoke 'by-satellite', as a series of interconnected but disparate local scenes, obscures a key dimension; karaoke as systematically informed by Japan's socio-cultural forms and spaces, as opposed to being merely a 'product' of Japan. Can the Japanese karaoke experience instead be re-situated as part of something larger—both a vital component in a thriving domestic music sector, but also as a key node linking together the ideas of 'practice' and 'pastime'? Is it possible to read karaoke in Japan as not merely a playful form of musical interaction, but one in which wider, pre-existing structures and systems of social capital formation are re-enacted and given firmer meaning?

Answering these questions is important because they can help us to better understand the inherent tension that exists between descriptions of karaoke as something to be approached as simple entertainment—a means of unwinding after a long day at work—and as something serious that needs to be 'practiced'. The recent *Be More Japan*, a glossy hard-cover volume aimed at a populist audience, is typical of this friction; on one hand describing

karaoke as a jubilant means of 'team-bonding' amongst a 'hardworking Japanese population', whilst simultaneously introducing the notion that despite initial protestations that proficiency level does not matter, it actually *does* (Beidas and Moul 2019: 159). This is most apparent in concepts such as the *jūhachiban* (lit. number eighteen), a term taken from traditional theatre form kabuki and used to refer to one's favourite song, or specifically, the one you excel at singing best (Kelly 2005: 163) and the phenomenon of *hitokara* (solo karaoke), often done so the singer can practise and improve their favourite song (Matsumoto 2016: 3428). These terms underscore the presence of a systematic approach to karaoke in Japan defined by the identifiable 'value' of skill and excellence on the part of the singer, whereby they are expected, or feel obliged to practise in order to meet a certain standard. It is here that the crucial nuance alluded to in the 'discipline' mentioned in this study's title can be found; namely, that discipline can encompass both the means of training, through practice, to obey a certain code of conduct or behavioural norms, but also stand for an identifiable branch or body of knowledge.

Taken together, these two nuances form the backbone to what we might term the karaoke 'system' in Japan, or a Japanese 'model' of karaoke. More than simply a technological interface to enable amateur singing within a public sphere, the suggestion here is that karaoke in Japan is far more along the lines of a lubricant or service, enabling an interconnected web of social systems to thrive by virtue of a body of knowledge (songs, and the capacity to sing them) in common amongst its participants. By identifying and then synthesising together 'markers' or symbols of discipline identified in a spread of prior case studies on karaoke into a composite picture, it is possible to re-approach the history of karaoke with a view to how audiences in Japan find value in these systems of practice. This will take the form of a number of distinct sub-sections of discourse analysis that in turn considers karaoke performance as something one is able to not only practise, but also improve in via the processes of routinisation and incentivisation. In each of these sections, these components will be shown as crucial in reinforcing and perpetuating karaoke as a *disciplined* system, to which these standards are constantly measured and sought to be met by karaoke audiences, even if in a subjective, unquantifiable manner. Today, karaoke finds itself one of countless words (file next to karate and katsu) to join an 'intercultural' lexicon of Japanese aestheticism (Wong 2004: 72), so much a part of popular mass culture that their original meaning begins to blur. By dissecting the various dynamics that define karaoke as both a form of entertainment and a driver of social capital, that blur can be brought back into clear focus.

Opting in to the in-group—Practice and participation as pastime in Japan

Of the existing studies of karaoke, William H. Kelly's *Training for Leisure - Karaoke and the Seriousness of Play in Japan* arguably comes closest in its approach to codifying and linking karaoke as it is performed in Japan to a set of wider cultural concepts and practices that exist beyond the pastime itself. This approach is rooted in what he sees as a natural extension of the idea of *kata* (forms) and *dō* (paths) found in the ideology of arts (both aesthetic and martial) in Japan (Kelly 2005: 153). Kelly looks at the phenomenon of 'training' for karaoke via a series of organised classes which, crucially, turn the training process into an observable system or pattern of "senso-motoric coordination" that plays on a deeper-seated aesthetic of "repetition in learning". Here, mastery comes through frequency, or what Chiesa (2005: 194) terms the "ethics of effort"; namely, that the concerted and integrated act of practice amongst individuals working in concert on an activity can in many ways simultaneously become both the means and outcome of a training regimen. Much like the compulsory choir classes in Japanese high schools, the implication is clear; through sheer number of hours spent on singing, a kind of national "base aptitude" is achieved (Kelly 2005: 157).

Practice provides a measurable scale by which practitioners of an activity can gauge not only their acumen at that particular point in time, but more crucially, are made cognizant of the steps they must follow to reach a level occupied by their peers. When everyone is equal, and we play by the rules (implicit or otherwise), our position within the group is justified—we know where we stand. But this position—this sense of being 'among equals'—is inherently reliant on a constant, minute-level jockeying for position, an endless recalibration of individual anxieties and self-pride, and it is this that drives us to improve. A 'bad' performance at karaoke would destroy this self-pride, and by extension the self that exists as part of the group (Kelly 2005: 165). Individually, our self-value is difficult to determine, but when placed in proximity to others, suddenly the distance (or closeness) between us becomes all the clearer.

The 'performance' of karaoke extends beyond the actual singing itself to an entire periphery of 'rules' that dictate an acceptable experience, as presented in Japanese women's magazine Josei Seven—in this instance aimed at fresh employees who have just joined a new company:

1. Listen respectfully to the singing of the boss
2. Practice and be able to sing at least three duet songs so that you are able to accompany your boss on request
3. Take care not to sing the boss's favourite song as he is likely not to be able to sing too many different songs
4. Take care to avoid songs which are likely to have a depressing effect, such as those which are nostalgic or about separation and lost love
5. Take care to avoid songs which are unfamiliar to others since they are more likely to chat during your performance if they do not know the song
6. Avoid sexy songs which are likely to offend senior office ladies
7. Choose a song the boss has heard at least once before
8. Wear a suit rather than a sexy dress out of respect for senior office ladies
9. When not singing, be sure to maintain an awareness of and express an interest in those around you

 (Josei Seven 22 April 1993, trans. in Kelly 2005: 159)

Beyond the face-value humour of these 'rules' lies a far darker tinge of peer-pressure, a world rife with the dangers of corporate 'hazing' and the implication of playing up or shutting up. Karaoke, as seen here, is a "compulsory company activity […] especially for female staff and new recruits to the company", so much so that they feel "duty-bound" to comply (Zhou & Tarocco 2013: 41). Implicit in that repeated "Take care" is a far stronger 'Do not!', whilst the language of "respect", "offence" and "awareness" presents an intimidating cocktail of obstacles to avoid. Not even foreigners are excused—Shitamachi suggests that any foreigner invited to karaoke whilst conducting business in Japan would be well advised to steer clear of *My Way*, *Yesterday*, or anything by Elvis Presley because "the chances are you've chosen the one song they can sing in English and taken away their opportunity to impress you" (Shitamachi 2015: 103). The Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* is cited as occupying a particular category of its own: "songs that are too fast paced *for a typical Japanese to master* yet are still well known" [my emphasis] (Shitamachi 2015: 103). The more serious takeaway from both Shitamachi's account and the rules presented in *Josei Seven* is that the practice of karaoke is not only about what one should do, but also what one *should not* do. This codification of karaoke has gone as far as driving the spread of special 'karaoke

courses', offered in many cities to professionals looking to avoid an embarrassing *faux-pas* (Kelly 2005: 154).

This need to practice runs in tandem with a corresponding awareness of 'taking part'. Wong sees this dynamic of taking part as a performative activity, one in which value is created through the act of participation: "The point is simply to take part — to demonstrate good humor and good manners by taking one's turn, as well as by expressing appreciation of others' singing" (Wong 2004: 78). In performing karaoke, we perform by the rules of societal expectations on what constitutes an acceptable, appreciable karaoke performance. Thus, it is not so much the act of 'taking part' that is important here, but rather the *ability* to take part. We might not be the *best* singer amongst our peers, but notions of 'good' humour and 'good' manners imply that our act of performing karaoke fundamentally rests on objective standards that must be practised and met. Rather than soldier on with a horrendous dud performance that offends and disrupts the sensibilities of the in-group, better to opt out entirely. In this, a darker sensibility can be read—that the "emphasis is on participation rather than skill" (Wong 2004: 78) precisely because anyone with a truly awful voice is already in the safely negligible out-group, and only those within the appreciable base level of skill remain. Kelly's study affirms this in his observation that in karaoke, the maintenance of a "good atmosphere" is crucial, and that this is accordingly constituted by a sensitivity to the likes, dislikes and most importantly, the expectations of others (Kelly 2005: 163).

An interesting parallel can be observed amongst the owners of karaoke bars. West (2005) introduces the case of fifty-year-old Hasegawa Junji, who had been running a karaoke bar in a small Kyushu town for fifteen years. Tight policing of his establishment including hefty insulation and well-observed closing hours have ensured his bar has never been a concern in terms of noise pollution for nearby residents, and as such, he has become a valued, trusted member of the community. "Everybody in this community knows everybody else. I see my neighbors at the grocery store. I play golf with the kindergarten principal next door. If I'm the neighborhood nuisance, who is going to respect that? Nobody would even talk to me," he tells West (2005: 115). His feelings are backed up by other members of the community, one of whom comments: "The owner knows everybody and doesn't want to cause trouble... About three weeks after we moved in, I saw him while I was taking out the garbage. He came right up to me and introduced himself" (West 2005: 115-116).

Hasegawa's careful efforts to play by the rules and 'take part' in his community have seen him greeted with the same kind of 'appreciation' reserved for participants during karaoke performances. By first being aware of, and then following, an objective set of 'good

manners' dictated by his peer group (the local residents), the success of his livelihood is preserved. It is possible to read here the same kind of "minutiae of performance" that Kelly sees in karaoke itself, where the value remains very much in the detail (Kelly 2005: 161). Here, Hasegawa has mastered the social codes of the community, and in his statements, makes open that which is implicit—codifying the 'rules of life' that largely go unwritten. By re-affirming the 'familiar' to both himself and the community that he has moved into, he assures a frictionless presence amongst the wider group. Brown, drawing on political scientist Robert D. Putnam, identifies the clear benefits to society that can result from "the collective membership of individuals in groups" (Brown 2015: 113). As in the case of Hasegawa, these groups do not need to be overt, but are instead organically generated through a sense of 'social capital' or 'civil society' by those living in or utilising localised spaces. In karaoke, as in the everyday life of the communities we inhabit, notions of practice or the accumulation of the knowledge of what to do or not do help provide a framework by which to better define membership of these communities, and the familiarity that comes from knowing those codes of conduct are observed in common.

Local music on a national stage—Karaoke as contest, and the 'potential' to improve

The opening pages of Brown's *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* turns the spotlight on how previous work on karaoke has frequently taken an ethnographic approach (Brown 2015: 6-7) in an attempt to better understand the construction of identity enacted by performers through their engagement with the medium. However, this continuing focus on the performer throws into stark contrast the relative lack of material linking this performative aspect with the role karaoke takes within the wider music industry, and leaves open the question as to why it has achieved such ongoing durability as a medium of popular entertainment. This question of durability, of karaoke's continuing perpetuation, is key to moving toward a clearer systemisation of it. Why are people who have never before attempted karaoke drawn to it, and more importantly, why do they keep coming back? What is it that, years after the medium's advent, keeps the simple concept of amateurs singing along to a backing track so viable? When we engage with the act of performing karaoke, we do so at our most vulnerable—presenting ourselves on a public or semi-public stage, all in an attempt to inject a sense of 'meaning' into our wider social sphere (Drew 2001: 70). Again,

discipline provides a potential answer here, via the feedback mechanism present in a constant sense of improvement; the idea that by investing time and effort now, we open the possibility to an imagined future self that is superior to where we currently stand.

Central to this dynamic, Drew suggests, is the distinction between local and national music scenes. For him, the concept of "local music" is defined by music that touches our "daily lives and relationships", our "personal affiliations" (Drew 2001: 16). Put simply, it is the difference between seeing a famous, untouchable pop idol on the TV screen, and watching your best friend sing a version of their song at the karaoke venue ten minutes down the road from your house. In the US, Drew suggests that the kind of local music scene characterised by bedroom producers plugging away on a Casio keyboard, small town bar circuit bands and karaoke 'stars' are something to constantly get 'beyond'. Local music is nothing more than an "appendage to the national" (Drew 2001: 13) and karaoke offers merely a short-lived fantasy of being a real star. But in Japan at the turn of the millenium more than half of the population performed karaoke at least once a year, and 80% of Japan's 350,000 bars were equipped with karaoke systems (Drew 2001: 12-13). More recent figures, discussed later in this chapter, suggest some degree of change in these habits, but at the dawn of the 21st century, the local and national could very much be said to occupy a shared space. Drew explains that "karaokists and all local musicians must deal with the sense of redundancy that comes from making local music in a culture dominated by mass music" (Drew 2001: 17), but once again, what if—as in the case of Japan—it is precisely that kind of personally affiliated local music that becomes the 'mass music' of a nation at large? I would suggest that here, the transposition of the self from the local to the national level, when audiences engage in a karaoke performance, holds more tangibility in Japan, precisely because it occupies a majority space as a social activity. By engaging in karaoke, a Japanese audience inherently move into, and further swell, that majority.

This backdrop of creating a 'national' stage for the performance of karaoke plays into what Drew sees as a potential arena for not only "validating personal and social identities" but also "performing and testing those identities before others" (Drew 2001: 120). The friction created by this 'testing' can manifest itself in a number of ways. For Drew, and his study of karaoke in the US, an increasing trend toward contest-like "competitive karaoke" formats brings karaoke far closer to the "winner-take-all world of pop stardom" (Drew 2001: 122). Audiences watch the performers with quiet, rapt attention before bursting into applause at the end of each song, and there is an "edgy seriousness to proceedings"; a model that bears marked similarity to the kind of karaoke seen in Japan. Viewed negatively, this edgy

seriousness can be seen as stemming from potential feelings of 'vocal inadequacy', the reminder that someone else is *better* than us. Drew points the finger at "classically trained vocalists", at those with time, effort and money to invest in bettering their performances and at those "concerned with standards" (Drew 2001: 120). This sense of objective standards, of a distinction between the trained and untrained, falls in line with the earlier observations regarding the discipline of majority in Japan; for standards to emerge, they rely on a majority to first form a clear consensus on what they actually are. Likewise, what if, instead of these contest-like elements provoking feelings of inadequacy in us, it is precisely this competitive spirit that drives us, en masse to get better at singing? In other words, inadequacy is only inadequacy if we believe we cannot improve, that each and every one of us cannot be idols ourselves. Do we fully acknowledge and adopt the idea of objective standards, buckle up for some serious practice and 'play the game', or do we 'opt out', leaving the serious business of song to the real stars?

Karaoke as the ordinary un-ordinary—authentic simulations of reality

The 'serious' approach to karaoke outlined above—the idea that karaoke is about something more than just enjoying a good time singing with your friends—can best be framed within the lens of the degree to which the act of singing exists as something 'ordinary', as opposed to something professionalised—limited to the domain of pop superstars and those whom society dubs 'singers'. It is important to note here that the everyday-ness of singing does not imply lack of application or discipline, rather, it is precisely because singing is 'ordinary' (and thus expected) as part of everyday life that application and discipline become part and parcel of it. If the practice of karaoke outlines the method of correctly performing it within a social context, and the notion of improvement outlines a route to do so more effectively, then the next vital ingredient is the solidifying of these concepts as something normal and in keeping with a person's character. In essence, karaoke, and by association, public singing in general, needs to become routine.

To throw this distinction into better contrast, it is useful to observe Drew's analysis of how singing has become 'un-ordinary' in contemporary North America. He paints a picture of an American world of song, withered away and lost to time—a world where, 150 years ago, "singing was the centre of social life" (Drew 2001: 119). Here, piano-side singalongs were a staple ingredient of middle-class home life, as was the piano itself. Choral societies

and other such groups were prolific, and singing could be expected at school, work and—most obviously—at religious services. These days, "public singing has become a rarity to many of us, limited to clumsy iterations of 'Happy Birthday' and 'Auld Lang Syne'" (Drew 2001: 119). Drew sees the causes of this decline as manifold, but suggests that "our own feelings of vocal inadequacy, as well as our vague sense that music making is alien to the real business of life" are chief among them (Drew 2001: 119). In other words, we, collectively, have decided that we are just too bad at singing to sing, preferring instead to opt-out entirely, or if we do choose to sing, to do so ironically, occupying the conveniently prescribed larger-than-life role of "karaoke performer" (Drew 2005: 378). Ill-prepared for public performance, Drew sees us as "touristic" onlookers viewing with ironic detachment—"as if from behind glass" —the karaoke spectacle as remote and exotic (Drew 2001: 73).

The question of irony—as placed in direct opposition to authenticity, or the sense that our actions and self are not only genuine and congruent with our beliefs, but that they remain relatively consistent despite varying external forces—recurs frequently in discussions of karaoke. This opposition can be read alongside questions of coolness, highbrow versus lowbrow culture, and even a certain dismissiveness from middle-class audiences toward the lower classes (for whom karaoke is seen to primarily belong to). Drew's imagined put-down from a snooty onlooker: "These guys think they're on TV" (Drew 2001: 69), is typical of this attitude—the idea that karaoke performers are somehow 'acting up', breaking out of the humdrum of their small, local everyday lives and donning the guise of a nationally famous musical star. But to read a karaoke performance in this manner is to oversimplify the dynamic at play here. Adams gets closer to the heart of the idea: "karaoke is thus not a representation but a simulacrum of fixed and singular authenticity. This does not mean the performance is not real. On the contrary, it means that the simulation is the reality" (1996: 510-511). In essence, when we perform, it is not that we are really 'thinking' we are on TV, but that by engaging in the medium of karaoke, we are comfortably fulfilling one part of a wider system (or simulation) that naturally engenders this kind of behaviour. TV *is* our reality, so it is only right and proper that we should exist within its extended periphery.

I would suggest that a Japanese model of karaoke thrives in a nested layering of these 'versions' or ways of life. If karaoke is to be seen as a performative manifestation of the self, it is one based on an idealised vision of that self; part of the everyday, but also apart from it. Karaoke is selling a dream—one created and fashioned by members of a moneyed higher class (the music industry), to members of a lower class who desire to be part of that higher

echelon (by becoming a pop idol, if only for a short while) (Brown 2015: 89). This economic 'rift' is perhaps better envisioned as a kind of looped conveyor belt, one where the simulation engendered through the karaoke performance perpetuates itself into a kind of never-ending 'present' in which the user finds themselves inhabiting a very particular kind of middle-class life halfway between the lowbrow and highbrow. To a Japanese audience, these versions of selfhood can comfortably co-exist without giving rise to questions of an inauthentic engagement with the world around them. Sone draws on Barthes' famous discussions of *honne* (true) and *tatemae* (facade) to suggest that "a Japanese individual is conscious of these two selves coexisting in oneself and in others in social situations. The Japanese are expected to alternate these two 'faces' according to circumstances" (Sone 2014: 203). Of course, a varying of the 'presented' self, depending on the social context, is certainly not unique to Japan, but it is the self-consciousness of this presentation that Sone alludes to that is particularly relevant to my argument here, contributing to a kind of hyper awareness of constant re-calibration, depending on the self that is 'needed' at that point in time. Thus, the highly coded, performative actions of karaoke are implicitly understood as by no means false, imitative or inauthentic, as they already exist within a situation where this 'self' is socially expected. Once again, the simulation becomes the reality.

The rise of this kind of upward mobility-via-song evidenced in the global popularity of TV talent show franchises like *The X Factor* and *American Idol*, or Japan's *Sutā tanjō!* (lit. a star is born!) and *Nodo jiman* (lit. proud of my voice) has historically had the capacity to horrify some audiences precisely because it thrusts this dynamic into the spotlight (Raftery 2008: 43). The cultural democracy of song—the allowance of "all members of society equal access to a cultural space" (Brown 2015: 89) was terrifying because it offered a voice to all, giving everyone—rich or poor - the 'permission' to sing, no matter how bad they were at it. It was not so much a question that passive consumers had suddenly become active, but that we could *see them doing it*, and had to reconcile these seemingly inauthentic selves with the concrete social reality of the world around us. For some, the karaoke performance is, and always will be, thoroughly inauthentic; an 'acting up' of the self that takes us too far from the material, concrete, knowable world. It is a canned, borrowed imitation of the genuine, authentic article. But at the same time, one could argue—as Wong does—that by performing karaoke, we seek to reclaim the same hegemonic force that the mass-media nature of karaoke seems to so wholly represent (2004: 72). Karaoke, at its most basic level, is something above and beyond a passive, sit-back engagement with popular music; it is utterly reliant on us as users, as performers, to place ourselves within it and fill its emptiness. The backing track

might be canned, but through our voice, we inject liveness back into it and—by extension—our own lives and their place within the mass-media system.

Drew grapples with the question of the "imitative" quality of a specifically "Japanese karaoke" and how this can easily become a hastily trotted out, mechanistic stereotype of Japanese conformity, including humorous appellations of a karaoke-*dō* (way of karaoke) where imitation is a necessary phase in the path to mastery. More interesting though is his analysis of the wider Japanese music scene, which he sees as having benefited from a much-needed boost in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the mass popularisation of karaoke via the advent of karaoke boxes increased demand for singable pop music. Suddenly, million-plus selling singles were no longer the exception to the rule, but common-place, with over ten hitting the charts every year (Drew 2001: 19-20). The implication is clear; karaoke, and the need it engendered for catchy pop hits had been thrown into a symbiotic embrace, not only feeding off each other commercially, but laying down a framework by which its users could fit themselves. As Drew rather neatly puts it, "In Japan, songs are for singing, the tools through which one learns to sing, displays singing competence, adopts singing roles" (2001: 20). It is the last of these that perhaps warrants the closest examination, recalling as it does the earlier comments about the functions of *honne* and *tatemae* in the presentation of the self in Japan. In attributing 'singing roles' to Japanese karaoke-goers, it is not simply the pop-idol versions of themselves that are seen, but also the *role* this slippage between selves plays in their own lives. In Drew's statement, there is clear use-value for the song, and singing, and it is this value—this incentive—that has not only made karaoke an indispensable social tool in Japan, but also made millions for the country's music industry.

Incentive—karaoke as service, and moving beyond technological one-upmanship

West frames his history of the rapid rise of karaoke's popularity in 1980s Japan as premised by two driving factors: a wider selection of songs and lower cost (West 2005: 93). In essence, both operate on presenting the user with the freedom of choice. Freedom to choose whatever song they desire (and thus to perfect their performance of favourites) and freedom to choose which locale they perform in, selecting from one amongst countless karaoke venues. West goes on to explain that the advent of the karaoke box format (small, dedicated private rooms in which to perform amongst friends or colleagues) saw the focus shift from drinking as the

primary focus of the social gathering (with the singing as a sideshow) to the reverse, which in turn engendered a shift in the demographic of people drawn to karaoke. Now, all—young and old alike—felt included, when previously they would have felt hesitant about spending time in drinking establishments. The karaoke box experience offered music-as-service. Now it was not only the drinks that were on tap, but the music too, via an hourly charge (West 2005: 93-94). The concept of the karaoke box, what Ogawa (1998: 47) calls "enclosed" karaoke space, is so prevalent within Japanese karaoke culture that it can even be read as having semantic significance in how the Japanese refer to karaoke—namely, that it is something that you go to (*karaoke ni iku*) (ALC Press Inc. n.d.), not just something that you do. All this helps frame another key component in the conceptualisation of karaoke as discipline and system: the question of incentive. The kinds of feedback loop explored earlier regarding the self-validation of karaoke consumers in terms of their perceived improvement and accrued social capital is on its own not enough to explain the perpetuation of the medium. For that, it is crucial to also consider the commercial forces behind the production of karaoke, and more importantly, the symbiotic relationship of supply and demand they engender amongst consumers.

The effect the transformative changes, outlined by West above, had on the Japanese karaoke industry (for it was by the turn of the millennium, an industry) cannot be underestimated. West's (2005: 96) headline figure, taken from a 2000 White Paper on the leisure sector, sees total annual revenue from karaoke at $10 billion USD, split between $3.8 billion USD in bars, $5.6 billion USD in karaoke boxes and $560 million USD in other assorted sites including hotels, tour busses and restaurants. The picture at the turn of the millennium seemed rosy, but there is a bitter sting in the tail. From the mid-2000s onward, karaoke was becoming, in some ways, a victim of its own success—61% of karaoke businesses cited competition from others as a major concern—and West (2005: 96) details the number of users falling slowly each year. By the end of the decade, things look far more nebulous, and Brown's 2015 study openly acknowledges the difficulty in finding accurate, up-to-date figures for the economic impact of the medium (which also often fail to include food and drink sales at karaoke booths, as well as the royalties generated for artists by the performance of their songs). Nevertheless, like West, he sees the industry maintaining its status as a multi-billion-dollar earner in Japan, albeit with a turnover in 2010 in the region of $10 billion USD, one that has flatlined to a degree, unable to move beyond its early 2000s peak (Brown 2015: 34). More recent figures from an All Japan Karaoke Industrialist Association report (2017) indicate revenue has since declined to an annual total of around $5

billion USD, split between $1.4 billion USD in bars, $3.5 billion USD in karaoke boxes and $416 million USD in other establishments.

Commercial pictures of the karaoke industry and their emphasis on the physical, real-world space in which karaoke happens—in which performances are made possible via the assembled technology of microphones, TV screens and databases of songs—is born out in much of the existing writing on the medium. As early as the mid-1990s, Kelly aired his frustrations at how "contemporary constructions of karaoke's history [...] are invariably concerned with identifying the first authentic karaoke system [...] This is generally accomplished by defining what exactly constitutes karaoke and then christening the earliest system which fits this definition as the first karaoke machine" (Kelly 1997: 72-73). Part of the trouble in rooting histories of karaoke in this technologised space is that they age fast. For example, Zhou and Tarocco's *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon*, first published in 2007, already sounds hopelessly outdated with its talk of then-cutting-edge "polyphonic karaoke songs" and how in 2003, 80 billion JPY ($729 million USD) was made on ringtones and mobile karaoke in Japan (Zhou and Tarocco 2013: 174-175). At the time, these downloadable tunes proved particularly popular with 20-something women and middle-aged men, and were perfect for users that "like to rehearse before heading for the karaoke box" (Craft 2003). Here there is an echo of similar discussions around the earlier advent of TV screens with scrolling lyrics replacing printed songbooks and how it was claimed this helped "ease the tension" of the singers, whilst simultaneously proving more engaging for those watching too (they had something else to look at as well as the singer themselves) (Wong 2004: 76). In this manner, each new technological advancement is met with enthused accolades that it enhances the karaoke experience, adds further steps to the ritualistic dance of performance. We are sucked further in—the singer, gazing at the lyrics on the screen, performing, their audience, watching too, each in their own way, performing.

Instead of attributing narrative primacy to technological 'precedence', the importance of 'defining' exactly what karaoke is, and when it 'first' emerged, perhaps it is better to envision karaoke in its current state—delivered via high-speed data cable—as a new chapter in the medium's story, linked to, but also fundamentally 'beyond' what has come before. Brown (2015: 90) sees the beginnings of this kind of shift in Tim O'Reilly's Web 2.0 and the success of internet behemoths like Google and Amazon in the decade following the Dot Com crash of the early 2000s. These companies thrived because, unlike others, they delivered services rather than software; harnessing the collective energy of millions of users and their aggregated consumer habits (Brown 2015: 90). Leonhard and Kusek develop this idea further

in their discussion of a 'Music 2.0' (2005: 55), in particular relation to the emergence of streaming services, where, just like the rise of the net service economy seen in Web 2.0, we have seen a shift from music as 'software' to music as 'service'. We no longer purchase music on a CD, insert it into our hi-fi or computer and press 'play'. Instead, the music is, quite literally, never-ending—an almost infinite library of genres and songs are made available to us via streaming service catalogues, aided by clever recommendation algorithms that will continue to suggest further material that fits our tastes. All this for the simple cost of a monthly subscription fee.

Thus, in a theoretical 'Karaoke 2.0', the conversation moves away from a constant 'one-upmanship' of technological progress and becomes more about how karaoke seamlessly integrates itself into a person's life, how it might systematically (and continuously) deliver value and drive consumer habits. For Drew, this shift has seen us arguably lose our status as 'audiences'—we are now users, "actively incorporating bits and pieces of media content into our personal and social lives" (2001: 25). Likewise, Brown sees clear evidence of this in social media, where the likes of Facebook and Twitter allow consumers to become producers (or rather, the pro-sumers first suggested by Toffler (1980) in his classic study *The Third Wave*). He looks also to the popularity of interactive karaoke-esque videogames like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* (Brown 2015: 34) that allow players to both mentally and physically envision themselves as rockstars, not only singing along to their favourites but playing along too. Hindsight has, of course, shown us that consumer tastes for both social media and these kinds of videogames can also be incredibly fickle (Stuart 2011), but they highlight how the incentive for users to engage in these forms of technology is not necessarily inherent on the technology itself, but rather the absorption and routinisation of those technologies into daily social practise. If this disappears, then so too does the incentive to engage with them.

Karaoke, in all its iterations, has survived for so long not because of its technological platforms, but *in spite* of the technology. Viewed in this way, it is clear that the value of karaoke is not in the delivery mechanism itself, but in the social capital conveyed via its performative aspect. When commentators observe the technological peculiarities of engagement with karaoke depending on the locale, it presents an image of bubbles of frenetic activity, rising to the surface at any given time before eventually bursting. Crucially, while the stream of bubbles might ebb and flow, it continues on nonetheless. Japan, through its endemic karaoke box format, has arguably already mastered the nature of karaoke-as-service, a wholescale enveloping of the medium's value and self-validation system into everyday, local, ordinary life. For Japanese audiences, there is a clear incentive to perform karaoke;

through its morphing into a nationally prolific service-style medium in the form of the karaoke box, it becomes more than a technological mediator of entertainment, and begins to take on the form of a designated destination 'space' that enables and lubricates social interaction. By visiting karaoke space, Japanese audiences are offered a constantly evolving opportunity to engage as active consumers in the output of the country's music industry; this 'closeness', this blending of countless interstices of local engagement with national output firming up a symbiotic relationship that benefits both parties.

Conclusion

Karaoke as a 'global phenomenon' continues to have impressive staying power precisely because of its ability to manifest in a multitude of manners within any given local context. In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight the centrality and importance of singing not only as a pastime, but as a specifically *public* pastime—and how this creates important changes in how we view the practice authentically or ironically. Through our engagement with karaoke, we not only shape our social interactions with the world, but also how we define ourselves in relation to both our immediate peers, members of our class, and— ultimately—the nation as a whole. When we sing karaoke, what face is it that we present to the world? Ours, or the face of the star we are emulating? What happens when karaoke becomes a competition, and was it always one to begin with?

The relentless impetus behind the karaoke system in Japan is best viewed against the backdrop of the medium's remarkable commercial success in the country. While the growth seen in the late 1980s and 1990s has since flatlined and now begun to decline, the sheer scale and proliferation of spaces in which to participate in karaoke in Japan remains impressive. The karaoke box format provides a useful way of framing wider shifts in how the experience is delivered to its users, going beyond a procession of technological upgrades toward a more holistic understanding of karaoke-as-service; fundamentally plugged into the everyday-ness of its participants' lives.

By engaging with both the idea and *ideals* of karaoke, as opposed to the delivery mechanism in isolation, it is possible to move closer to an understanding of karaoke in Japan as not only fundamentally driven by the structures and systems of social capital, but also a useful lens by which to observe these played out on a national level, both informing and informed by its symbiotic relationship with the Japanese music industry and its

corresponding flow of financial capital. The karaoke box exists because it *needs* to exist. An empty box, much like the titular *empty orchestra* of karaoke itself, waiting to be filled.

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