ADVANCED STUDIES IN MUSIC EDUCATION: 1

SONGCHI AND SINGING DEVELOPMENT

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

EDITED BY
GRAHAM WELCH
AND
TADAHIRO MURAO

PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE
CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
IN MUSIC EDUCATION

THE ROEHAMPTON INSTITUTE

Onchi and Singing Development

a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Edited by
Graham Welch and Tadahiro Murao

David Fulton Publishers
London

Published in association with the Centre for Advanced Studies in Music Education, The Roehampton Institute

David Fulton Publishers Ltd
2 Barbon Close, London WC1N 3JX

First published in Great Britain by
David Fulton Publishers 1994

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1-85346-331-0

Typeset by RP Typesetters Ltd., Unit 13, 21 Wren Street, London WC1X 0HF.

Printed in Great Britain by the Cromwell Press, Melksham.

The Advanced Studies in Music Education Series published by David Fulton Publishers in association with The Roehampton Institute

The Roehampton Institute has a long and successful tradition for music education teaching and research. The Faculty of Education's Centre for Advanced Studies in Music Education (ASME) has been established to foster this tradition and to coordinate and promote postgraduate music education research. The *Advanced Studies in Music Education Series* has been created as a joint venture with David Fulton Publishers as a means of bringing this research to a wider audience. The first two titles, *Onchi and Singing Development: a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, and *South Asian Music Teaching in Change*, are representative of the wide range of local, national and international music education research initiatives being conducted by ASME.

List of Contributors

HAROLD FISKE	Professor of Music, University of Western Ontario, Ontario, Canada. Teaches courses in music psychology, and is the author of numerous papers and two books on music performance evaluation and music cognition.
JANINA FYK	Assistant Professor of Musicology, Institute of Music Education, Pedagogical University, Zielona Góra, Poland. Author of over fifty articles and a book in the areas of music cognition and the development of vocal accuracy in children.
YOKO MINAMI	Associate Professor, Music Department, Aichi University of Education, Aichi-ken, Japan. Research interests include the musical development of children.
RANDALL MOORE	Professor of Music Education, University of Oregon, Oregon, USA. Teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in music education and conducts research in music teaching and children's singing. Musical Director of the Oregon Children's Choir and Editorial Board member of the *Journal for Research in Music Education.*
TADAHIRO MURAO	Professor, Music Department, Aichi University of Education, Aichi-ken, Japan. Director, *Onchi* research project. Member, International Society for Music Education Research Commission.
YOSHIKO NORIOKA	Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Shiga University, Shiga, Japan. Research interests include sociological research in music education.
DESMOND SERGEANT	Research Fellow, Centre for Advanced Studies in Music Education, Roehampton Institute, London, UK. First editor of *Psychology of Music*, and author of numerous publications in the research area of pitch perception.
ROBERT WALKER	Professor and Head of Music Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada and author of four books and over sixty papers on various related topics. Main research interests include auditory-visual perception, the acoustic analysis of musical sounds in different cultures, music cognition and cultural perspectives on cognition.
GRAHAM WELCH	Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Education, and Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Music Education, Roehampton Institute, London, UK. Special interests are all aspects of singing development.

The contributors to *Onchi and Singing Development: a Cross-Cultural Perspective* at the final plenary session of the First International Symposium on Poor Pitch Singers, Nagoya, Japan, July 25, 1992.

Contents

Introduction

Singing is a ubiquitous human activity. It is a musical behaviour that is readily recognised even though it assumes many different guises across the world's cultures. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone is a singer. Singing competence is defined by each culture in its own way, drawing heavily on social as well as musical criteria. Our perception of ourselves as singers is coloured by the social context in which we sing, be it a physical location (kitchen, bathroom, car, football stadium, church, concert hall) or social event (getting the baby to sleep, birthday party, wedding, national festival). In some parts of the world, singing is a normal, everyday activity for the majority, interwoven into each individual's working life, play and social interaction. An example is Messenger's (1958 p20) account of the Anang Ibibo in Nigeria which reports that 'We were constantly amazed at the musical abilities displayed by these people, especially the children who, before the age of five, can sing hundreds of songs, both individually and in choral groups.' Similarly, Romet's (1992) research into West Javanese children's song development has revealed a rich social context in which young children are continually exposed to the singing of older children and adults so that, by the age of four years, they have developed and acquired a wide private and social song repertoire.

In contrast, Western-style cultures are characterised by significant numbers of people (child and adult) who regard themselves (and are perceived) as being 'singing disabled'. For more than sixty years, researchers have been focusing on, and reporting, the lack of singing competence in (mainly) school populations. It is only relatively recently that researchers have begun to discover, chart and celebrate the diverse range of singing competence that characterises children's singing development and to understand that singing 'disability' is often created by a mismatch between inappropriate adult expectation, élitist musical traditions (in which the majority are not expected to be competent) and inadequate pedagogy. One outcome of our traditional view of singing behaviours is that Western-style cultures have multi-million pound music leisure

industries that customarily foster listening as the main musical behaviour for the majority of the population rather than musical participation. This is not to decry the enormous pleasure that we gain from recorded music at home, in the car and in our leisure activities but to note a contrast with other cultures where music-making, including singing, is much more prevalent.

The recent growth of karaoke bars and clubs in Japan and exported elsewhere in the world has created a context in which adults (embracing the singing disabled) have new opportunities to demonstrate their current singing competence in public, albeit in rather more convivial surroundings than existed when the adults were in schools. Yet there is still the threat of failure for some, not least in Japan where karaoke singing is linked to social status within the workplace. Japan also provides a fascinating example of musical cultures sitting rather uncomfortably alongside one another, with traditional Japanese emphases on tone colour and monodic structure (such as demonstrated in the playing of the *shakuhachi* flute) being juxtaposed with the polyphonic and harmonic traditions of Western classical music in which 'in-tuneness' is a more prominent and obvious perceptual feature.

The growth of karaoke and an increasing research interest in children's singing development within a contemporary Japanese context provided the backcloth to the First International Symposium on Poor Pitch Singers which was hosted by Aichi University in Nagoya in July, 1992. The one-day national conference was designed to bring together a wide variety of international perspectives on the phenomenon of 'out-of-tune' or 'poor pitch' singing (*cf* Roberts, 1972). The event attracted widespread media coverage in Japan, with the invited presentations and subsequent question-and-answer sessions in the packed conference centre reflecting a deep-seated interest in singing behaviours.

This collection of papers from the symposium reflects a range of views on poor pitch singing and its significance within contemporary society. Tadahiro Murao's opening commentary sets the Japanese context, whilst Bob Walker's Canadian perspective is an appropriate reminder that our perception of being 'in tune' is relative and strongly influenced by culture. Yoko Minami offers an insight into Japanese pre-school singing development and this is complemented by Janina Fyk's Polish study of the role of memory in vocal pitch accuracy. Randy Moore provides a comprehensive overview of eighty research studies on children's singing, drawing

mainly on USA research literature, and his findings are echoed and extended in Yoshiko Norioka's detailed study of the incidence of poor pitch singing amongst three thousand Japanese school-children. Desmond Sergeant draws on the results from a major UK study of children's singing development to analyse the structure of young children's sung responses and the differences that tend to characterise those who are more skilled vocally. Hal Fiske offers a timely Canadian caveat concerning the potential inconsistency of our judgements on poor pitch singing and, in the concluding paper, Graham Welch examines the wide range of factors that define and influence singing development and suggests strategies for more effective teaching.

In summary, these papers demonstrate the complex nature of singing development and of the cultural relativity of our judgements on poor pitch singing. Taken together, they offer a broad international and contemporary perspective on a facet of musical behaviour that has long puzzled the curious researcher, challenged the ingenuity of the teacher and been a source of embarrassment for many adults in Western-style societies.

Graham Welch
Tadahiro Murao

Chapter 1

Concerning the *Onchi* in a Karaoke Society: Sociological Aspects of Poor Pitch Singing

Tadahiro Murao, Aichi University of Education, Japan

The Japanese concept of *onchi* can be translated into English as 'tone idiot'. In daily conversation, however, *onchi* is used to refer to poor pitch singers, or to singing out of tune. Accordingly, *onchi* can be regarded as embracing the same concept as 'tone deafness' in English or 'tone blindness' in Chinese. Tone deafness in English is, however, not used as a technical or educational term. Since the research on tone deafness started in 1930, various new labels such as 'tone dumb', 'monotone', 'uncertain singer', 'poor pitch singer' and 'developing singer' have been invented and used. In Japan, very little research has been conducted into *onchi*, and this term is still used in musical research. The English terms 'poor pitch singer' or 'developing singer' are more appropriate than *onchi* in Japanese. Unfortunately, the terms cannot be properly translated into Japanese so the use of *onchi* as a label persists. The direct translation of *hin-onko-kashyo* for poor pitch singing, and *hattentyu-kashyo* for developing singing are strange expressions in Japanese, with confusing implications. So at the First International Symposium on Poor Pitch Singing in Nagoya, Japan, we used the traditional term *onchi* as the equivalent of 'poor pitch singer' not as 'tone idiot'.

Because research is lacking (with the exceptions of Iwasaki, 1975; and Yonezawa, Ito and Hirano 1988), the term *onchi* is also still seen in some music education textbooks. The continued usage of the term *onchi* may lead some to believe that there is a lack of interest in the investigation of poor pitch singing, but this is simply not true. Since we started studying *onchi* at Aichi University in 1989, the mass media have been very interested in our research. In

1992, the auditorium of the First International Symposium on *Onchi* was filled with a surprisingly wide variety of media representatives, including television producers, newspaper reporters, and weekly and monthly journal reporters. Indeed, the public interest in *onchi* is anything but superficial. It would seem that the Japanese 'karaoke culture' is most likely to be the root of the flourishing interest in *onchi*.

With the invention of the karaoke laser disk and microphones, a new era of mass-musical activity has sprung into existence. Karaoke (singing to a recorded orchestral accompaniment) has become very popular in Japan. As a result, ordinary people have become increasingly concerned about the accuracy and quality of their singing voices. *Onchi* have become an embarrassing feature in Japan's karaoke culture. Let me briefly analyse the so-called karaoke society in Japan.

Literally, the meaning of 'kara' in karaoke is empty and implies no vocal solo. 'Oke' (orche) is the abbreviation for orchestral accompaniment. The karaoke laser disk system features an array of functions such as echoed sound, adjustable digital pitch control, lyrics printed on the video screen to sing along with, a practice mode in which a model vocal solo helps the singer, and singing evaluation. Theoretically, ordinary people can sing their favourite songs just like professional singers provided that their pitch is correct. In the early 1980s karaoke bars became very popular, mostly amongst the middle-aged. But since the late 1980s social groups of varying ages, including junior high school students and retired senior citizens, have enjoyed karaoke singing. Karaoke sets have become 'standard' equipment, not only in bars and pubs, but also in places such as hotels, sightseeing buses, restaurants, private houses and so-called karaoke boxes (small singing rooms which provide snacks and drinks). Karaoke boxes are getting to be especially popular because of their increasing numbers and easy accessibility.

In this so-called karaoke society, the *onchi* have a serious problem. They are frightened by karaoke. Before karaoke appeared, the traditional style of folk singing meant that only good singers tended to sing at parties or festivals, and others participated by clapping hands or softly joining in (or lip syncing). In this singing style, the *onchi* could escape from singing alone in front of audiences and therefore could conceal their '*onchi*ness'. But the recent karaoke boom has revealed the *onchi* with ruthless

efficiency. Although the karaoke-amplified microphone sound and the brilliant accompaniments can enhance poor vocal tone quality, karaoke cannot disguise poor pitch singing. Rather, it magnifies the inaccurate pitches. Worst of all, *onchi* are often forced into singing by their friends, colleagues and bosses who have become karaoke addicts.

It is no secret that the Japanese are a group-orientated society. A company is often regarded as a big family. Like family members, Japanese businessmen work and play together with their colleagues or bosses. A 'company tour' is a common occurrence and is a good example of the importance of group participation. After work on weekdays, employees are often expected to drop by a bar with their colleagues. Even at weekends, they often play golf with their company colleagues. Anywhere they go, they cannot escape from karaoke, at least at night. In such a group-oriented society, if someone refused to sing every time, he or she would be failing to act as a team member. The peer pressure to perform is tremendous and is now the prime reason for the increasing attention of the media. Media coverage of The First International Symposium on Poor Pitch Singers in 1992 was and is closely related to the karaoke boom.

In our initial research study of poor pitch singing, thirty people have identified themselves as *onchi* in a small scale letter and telephone survey. Interestingly enough, they are all adults, aged between twenty and eighty-one. Fourteen of this group have visited us and been interviewed. In the interview each has told us that karaoke really frightens them. An eighty-one year old female told us that she loves to travel with her senior group but, she complained, 'Even in the sightseeing bus the karaoke mike frightens me.' As a result, she has begun to travel less frequently. When we checked her singing she seemed to be a normal singer. Her relative pitch was accurate, but she could not match the key of an instrumental accompaniment. Her vocal pitch matching with my falsetto voice was quite good, including matching single notes, but during her life, the music that she participated in was not accompanied by Western musical instruments, and certainly not orchestral or electronic accompaniments. Therefore, it would seem that karaoke itself had made her an *onchi*.

On the other hand, karaoke can be quite useful for curing *onchi*-ness. Hatano and Ooura (1988) reported that the subjects who performed very poorly in their melodic experiments, where they

were required to sing without accompaniment, could sing surprisingly well with a karaoke accompaniment. We experienced the same phenomenon in teaching poor pitch singers at Aichi University. Most of our clients sang very poorly when they sang simple melodies with and without piano accompaniment. In contrast, when we asked them to sing their favourite popular music, which was usually far more complex in both melody and rhythm, their relative pitch improved greatly, but sometimes they sang in the wrong key. We found that they really enjoyed karaoke at the remedy session where their friends or colleagues were not audiences.

Because of our findings, we are now developing a karaoke-based *onchi* remedy program for the Macintosh computer. 'That which one fears is sometimes one's greatest boon.' We hope that this software will be the vaccine by which the *onchi* can develop accurate vocal pitch, so that they might enjoy karaoke. This karaoke program was completed at the end of December 1993. We hope that this will be helpful, not only for the Japanese, but also for people all over the world who are afraid of singing.

Chapter 2

Will Karaoke Teach the World to Sing in Tune?

Robert Walker, University of British Columbia, Canada

In this paper I try to examine different aspects of what is meant by singing in tune. The issues are complex and in order to unravel their nature I use karaoke as a vehicle for explaining and illustrating from everyday life. The difficulties of providing objective proof of being in tune and the highly subjective nature of human auditory perception are explained in scientific terms and cultural contexts. Singing in tune is explained as a cultural phenomenon, not an absolute standard. Measuring a cultural phenomenon such as this is, therefore, based on subjective standards, making the scientific measurement of singing in tune objective only in the sense that it relates to a particular cultural practice. The practice of karaoke is interesting for our purposes because of the way in which people voluntarily expose themselves as being able or not to sing in tune with the recorded backing music. Judgement on the singer's ability is instant, intuitive, and obvious to listeners who know the original songs. What is of interest to this paper is how one makes such judgements. Those who enjoy laughing at the discomfort of the karaoke singer as he or she tries in vain to imitate some well-known pop star are applying some internalised measure of accuracy. What is this measure and how do listeners to karaoke apply it? This paper describes the objective, scientific aspects of this process and provides examples in illustration from across cultures.

'The karaoke phenomenon has changed people's lives!', or so the popular press would have us believe. Whether or not lives are changed, there can be little doubt about the ubiquity of karaoke, its presence in so many countries is palpable. Diverse cultures and sub-cultures across the world are exposing their cultural idiosyn-

crasy by matching their singing against the electronic reproductions of Westernised pop music. Judgements by musically unsophisticated listeners in such circumstances can be harsh. In North America there are karaoke booths in shopping malls now so that, if you are weary of spending money, you can try singing like Elvis with a full backing sound. The same is true in Europe where people spend a lot of their leisure time trying to imitate their favourite artist. In Japan it is almost becoming a national pastime, as it is in some other Pacific Rim countries. Will we soon have all the world singing through karaoke? And will this start a worldwide movement for singing in tune? These half serious questions betray more profound issues which draw technology and culture towards confrontation.

Singing in tune means, at the moment, singing the Western tuning systems and the technology is geared solely to this single cultural end. This is where it gets rather confusing and where the different aspects collide. Karaoke is dependent on modern technology for easy sound production and on stars who are well enough known internationally to provide models for mass attempts at imitation. In other words, karaoke relies on the reality of a veneer of popular music culture which acknowledges no cultural variation. Its attraction is the opportunity to identify, through singing, with the very famous.

The idea and attraction for wanting to sing like famous stars is not new in modern society. The rich American opera lover, Florence Foster Jenkins, gave a recital in New York once a year until October 1944 when she decided to hire Carnegie Hall to give her first, and last, major public 'karaoke' recital of soprano operatic arias. She died, entirely coincidentally, a month later at the age of 76. The point is that she could not sing in tune but nobody dared tell her. So thrilled was she at doing her version of operatic karaoke that it completely escaped her notice when her top notes were flat and her bottom notes sharp. Never before or since has the Queen of the Night sounded so comic and so harmless. But why could she not tell that she was unable to sing in tune? And why did her audiences applaud her badly tuned singing with such rapture?

The answer lies in the nature of the imitation being tried by Florence Foster Jenkins and millions of karaoke singers worldwide. They are not actually imitating what we might objectively define as singing in tune. Instead they are imitating, respectively,

the special acoustic characteristics of the operative coloratura soprano or the individual pop star. And the attraction of these lies not in their ability to sing in tune but to sing with the same special individual style and character as their famous models. In fact, just imitating accurately the standard pitches of songs without the attempt at making the special sound would make very boring karaoke. Many pop stars do not sing in tune but they do make their special sound which approximates, often very loosely indeed, to being in tune in scientific terms. The fun in karaoke lies in trying to imitate these special sounds which can include excessive glissandi, portamento, and bad intonation generally.

Singing in tune, then, is not just a matter of getting the notes right, and enjoying a star's singing is not simply admiring their accurate singing but rather hearing them make their own special sound. The human ear is a very flexible and biased listening instrument. It does not operate in an objective manner at all. Even a highly trained musical ear can hear a sound as in tune when scientifically it is out of tune (Seigel and Seigel, 1977). The ear is rather like the eye in this respect (Gregory, 1966) in that we see not what is actually there but what our brains tell us is probably there. Both eye and ear will provide biased information to the brain. We hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see.

This is not to say that singing as badly out of tune as that of Florence Foster Jenkins can and will be perceived as being in tune: there are limits to what the ear will tolerate as Seigel and Seigel (1977) demonstrate. But it does illustrate the point about subjectivity. Audience response to Florence Foster Jenkins was probably as much to do with such things as her special personality, her singing and sartorial choices, and her physical presence, as with the fun of hearing someone singing very badly out of tune giving a public recital. Just hearing her singing in tune would have attracted no one.

If we can enjoy someone singing badly out of tune, and if highly trained musicians cannot readily tell sharp from flat (Seigel and Seigel, 1977), and if the ear, like the eye, does not provide objective information to the brain about being in tune, then how do we know when someone is in tune or out of tune?

This is a problem which has puzzled scientists and researchers into music for over a century now. But simply applying scientific methods of investigation to the problem does not get us very far. We have to apply such methods within the subjective context of