Anime Music: Disorienting the Western Mindset

MUS211H1S World Popular Music

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Abstract

The domestic marketing approach and the global influence of anime music – in particular, opening and ending theme songs – suggests the acceptance of a modern westernised Japan. An analysis on the rise of anime music aludes to a shift away from orientalism in the western mindset.

1   Introduction

Since the popularity of Japanese animation (anime), Japanese comics (manga), and their related merchandise has increased and spread well beyond the borders of Japan over the recent years, it is conceivable that music associated with anime, in particular the opening and ending theme songs (OP/ED respectively), has gained fans worldwide. Strangely, its global influence on fans seems to be an unintentional result of the seemingly domestic approach taken by record companies like Sony Music Entertainment Japan, Geneon Universal Entertainment Japan (formerly Geneon Entertainment Japan), and Lantis. This phenomenon may be an indication of a shift away from "Orientalist" attitudes and practices of "westerners" (Said, 2003) and a shift away from "orientalist" attitudes and practices (Said, 2003) that were also well practised by the Japanese in regards to its presentation itself to the "west". This phenomenon may also be some form of intentional exploitation of the west's recent infatuation with Japanese products.

2   Background

The modernization of Japan was essentially the "westernisation" of Japan. The eclectic nature of Japanese culture has resulted in Japanese Popular Music being highly westernised and has also affected foreign policy regarding anime, manga, and their related merchandise. Despite restrictive foreign policy regarding anime and manga, it found a home in the west amongst East Asian immigrants and comic fans from the west.

2.1   Japanese Popular Music

The post-war period continued the "modernization" of Japan that started in the Meiji Restoration of the late 1800s (Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2008); however, the Japanese idea of "modernizing" was highly resemblant of "westernising". The westernisation of Japan is not surprising with its had a long history of borrowing culture from abroad (Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2008), this time, Japan would look to America for inspiration. Music is one of many fields that were greatly affected by this "westernisation".

The American Occupation of Japan may have directed the modernization of Japan in an American direction. Rock and roll originating from America had strongly affected Japanese youth in the 1960s (Junko, 1991). During the post-war period and before 1967, western pop – largely imported from the United States – held majority of the market in Japan (Launey, 1995) and gradually declined as local alternatives to "idol pop" (Launey, 1995) emerged; however, western pop still had a quarter of the music market share in Japan in 1980. With the market flooded with Western Pop, it is no surprise that that the sounds of Japanese Pop and Western Pop are very similar. However, one key difference between Japanese Pop and Western Pop is the emphasis placed on the chorus in Japanese Pop (Launey, 1995).

2.2   Ironic Japanese Foreign Policy Regarding Anime and Manga

Anime and manga are a unique form of animation and comics that were previously frowned upon by the Japanese government. The exportation of anime, manga, and their related merchandise was once restricted by the Japanese government (Morikawa, 2009). This may partly be because anime and manga did not meet the image of Japan that the Japanese government were trying to portray to the "west". This image that Japanese governments once tried to uphold fell in line with "orientalist" views (Said, 2003) from the "west". This suggests that there exists a "Japan for Japanese people" and a

"Japan for foreigners" (McGray, 2002). This duality is falls very much in line with the "hybridity" of Japanese culture (Berndt, 2009) where a modernized westernised Japan was the "Japan for Japan" while the "traditional" Japan was meant for the "west". During Sanrio's Hello Kitty's inception in the 1980s, Hello Kitty also experienced this duality where Hello Kitty was one colour in Japan, and another in America (McGray, 2002). This "hybridity" of Japanese culture (Berndt, 2009) may be ironic at first; however, with a history of borrowing from other cultures, it is highly possible that the Japanese have become too efficient at absorbing other cultures. That is to suggest that perhaps the Japanese sought to be western and adopted western attitudes and practices like "orientalism" (Said, 2003). This aspiration to be western may explain the concept of a westernised Japan being the "Japan for Japan" (McGray, 2002), while the ideas for a strong independent Japan may have pushed for the retention of things symbolic of traditional Japan. What is ironic however, is that Doraemon, an anime character, would be appointed "Anime Ambassador" by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the spring of 2008 (Anime News Network, 2008).

2.3   The Beginnings of Anime and Manga

In Japan, the initial demographic of Anime and manga fans were the "otakus". "Otaku", a derogatory Japanese term used to describe computer nerds in Japanese in the 1970s and 80s is now used to derogatorily describe persons who are obsessed with anime and manga (Morikawa, 2009). Morikawa suggests that the otakus obsessed over something different over time due to a "loss of future". The transformations of Akihabara in Tokyo, Otome Road in Ikebukuro, and the Yongsan in Seoul are illustrative of the change in obsessions by otakus (Morikawa, 2009) from computers to science fiction, then from science fiction to anime.

In the "west" however, the availability of anime was scarce. Based on the current demographic in attendance at various annual anime and manga conventions and the current demographic in the

membership of anime and manga clubs, it is likely its initial demographic of fans consisted primarily of persons of East Asian descent. The early fans of non-East Asian descent are likely to be (or have been) fans of comics as shops specializing in comics now carry an abundant collection of anime and manga. However, the demographic today is highly diverse in age, ethnicity, gender, and social status.

2.4   The Importance of Television Theme Songs

The distribution of Japanese Popular Music is strongly affected by television where very few shows featured Western Pop. By the early 1990s, music programs had been pushed back to late night time slots and were short programs lasting no more than 30 minutes (Launey, 1995). Thus, theme songs of television programs became an important means of music advertising. On radio, the AM waves, speech-based and traditional music programming can be found (Launey, 1995); whereas, on the FM waves, Western Pop is abundant (Launey, 1995). This abundance of Western Pop on radio and it's small market size relative to Japanese Pop demonstrates the importance of the television in the Japanese music market. With such an importance placed on television, one can easily infer that there exists high advertising potential for anime music within Japan.

3   Anime and Anime Music

The increased popularity of anime likely led to the rise of anime music (McClure, 2006). Initially, the broadcasts in the "west" did not air the Japanese voice tracks, nor were the Japanese theme songs aired. In its stead were English songs like *Gotta Catch'em All* by Jason Paige which was featured in *Pokémon*. This means meant that the rise of anime music in the west came later.

The positive response in the west to anime titles like *Dragonball Z* (1996) and *Sailor Moon* (1995) was likely one of the reasons anime became mainstream in the west. This positive response is evident when DBNL, a fansub group – a collection of fans who illegally reproduce anime with Japanese voice track

and distribute them over the internet – is currently working on the digitally remastered DVDs of *Dragonball Z.* In 1998, *Pokémon* and *Digimon* were popular amongst children in the west. A few years later, Mainstream Western Culture opened up to anime and manga in a New York Art Gallery Exhibition called *Buzz Club* (McGray, 2002). In 2002, Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* received an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature (Anime News Network, 2009). These events may have been the one of the signs of the west being ready to accept a modernized Japan. The positive response to anime in the west may have also triggered the rise of anime in Japan.

It would appear that anime music made its first breakthrough in the west in the early years of the new millennium. As current undergraduate students at the University of Toronto recall being first introduced to J-Pop due to watching anime in grades six through ten (UTAMA Forums, 2009). This suggest the first half of the first decade of the new millennium. Granted the students at the University of Toronto may not be the best representation of fans of anime, manga, and anime music; however, the demographic at various anime conventions today around the world illustrate a large presence of teens and young adults in their high school and university years; furthermore, these conventions also demonstrate a highly diversified demographic where a very small minority may be fluent in Japanese. During those years, anime titles like *Gundam Wing* and *Inu-Yasha* aired on television. In the anime titles that aired during this period, the theme songs that aired were either their original Japanese theme songs, or slightly modified English versions.

Today, anime distribution in the west is licensed to companies like Bandai Entertainment and FUNimation. It is also illegally distributed by fansub groups prior to the licensing of a series, and on occasion some licensed series continue to be illegally distributed by fansub groups. Regardless of its medium of distribution, the original Japanese theme songs are now distributed with the anime. Furthermore, DVDs of anime can be found at comic shops, and retailers like HMV, Best Buy, and

FUTURESHOP. However, singles and albums of anime music have yet to hit the shelves of stores. It is surprising that a chain like HMV that specializes in music carries the animation's DVDs but not the CDs that contain the theme songs from those anime titles. This leaves the fans of anime music to resort to downloading the music on the internet (UTAMA Forums, 2009) where scans of the album art may also be included. Some avid fans will also opt to import the singles or albums from online stores like yesasia.com; however, they too will maintain a collection of illegally downloaded media (UTAMA Forums, 2009).

4   Global Influence with a Domestic Marketing Approach

Despite the existence of fans abroad, it appears that the record companies in general do not cater to foreigners. This can be inferred from the websites of companies like Sony Music Entertainment Japan (http://www.sonymusic.co.jp/), Geneon Universal Entertainment Japan formerly Geneon Entertainment Japan (http://www.geneon-ent.co.jp/), and Lantis (http://www.lantis.jp/) where navigation becomes a challenge for those not fluent in Japanese. Furthermore, the official websites of anime titles where the release dates for singles, soundtracks, and Region 2 DVDs are announced also tend to be target an audience fluent in Japanese.

Beyond the virtual realm of the internet, the same approach to marketing seems to apply when you look at printed contents of a single or album of anime music where you will find additional art from the anime series, the lyrics to the song in Japanese, a track list in Japanese, and some photographic representation of the vocalist. On occasion, there are also limited print editions of the single – like the *Trust You* single by Yuna Ito which served as an ED to *Mobile Suit Gundam 00 Second Season* – where there may be an extra track or bonus DVD where you will likely find more art from the anime series instead of a photograph. Exceptions to these generalisations do occur on occasion, for example, Mami Kawada's *PSI-missing* single which served as an OP for *To Aru Majutsu no Index* shipped out with no

additional art from the anime. Another exception is the *Happy Material Return* single which served as an OP for *Mahou Sensei Negima Ala Alba* did not have photographic representations of the vocalist because the vocalists consisted of the entire voice acting cast of the series. Furthermore, in this marketing approach, the vocalists are the key figures in each band as indicated by the album art. Promotional music videos like those found on jpopasia.com also illustrate a focus on the vocalist.

5   Shift Away From "Orientalist" Attitudes Regarding Japan

The rising popularity of anime, manga, and anime music may be an indication that a paradigmatic shift is occurring in both the "west" and in Japan. The "Orientalist" would likely suggest that there are three to five esses that represent Japanese culture: sushi, Shinto, shamisen, samurai, sumo. Although Consulate General of Japan and the Japan Foundation continues promotes Kabuki and other aspects of Japanese culture, it is only recently that anime and manga has gained recognition with the appointment of Doraemon as "Anime Ambassador" back in March 2008 (Anime News Network, 2008). Recall that anime and manga were once restricted exports of Japan, the appointment of an Anime Ambassador is evidence that Japan is moving away from its formerly highly "orientalist" presentation of itself. Furthermore, the emergence of anime, manga, anime music, and their related merchandise into "mainstream western culture" may be a possible indicator that the west has accepted a modern westernised Japan alongside with other Japanese exports like cars and electronics.

6   Western Infatuation with Japanese Exports

Conversely, it is also possible that anime music is distributed worldwide solely through anime and internet downloads to exploit the infatuation foreigners have with the idea of the orient (Said, 2003). That is anime music is intentionally marketed with a domestic approach to further emphasize that it is a Japanese product. Thus broadening the "Japan for foreigners" whilst retaining its unique identity with a "Japan for Japan" (McGray, 2002). That is foreigners may not be able to fully enjoy the music due to

their inability to comprehend the text. However, if that were true, then fans have already overcome such an barrier with translations of their own in fansubs where the OP and ED songs are often now subtitled with a translation of the text, animated effects on romaji, and occasionally animated effects on the Japanese hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Furthermore, some online translations of lyrics can also be found on sites like jpopasia.com in addition to the translated Oricon charts, and promotional music videos. By overcoming this language barrier, it would seem that the west is truly curious about a modern Japan albeit a westernised Japan. However, if this were true, it is quite possible that the orientalist inside the western imagination is merely associating more aspects of Japan with the pre-existing ideas of Japan.

7 Conclusion

The global rise of anime music despite a seeming domestic marketing approach taken Japanese companies poses a very complex sociological phenomenon. Its rise may indicate the beginnings of a paradigm shift away from orientalist attitudes and practices as it serves as evidence that the "west" recognizes the existence of a modern westernised Japan, and that Japan is very much ready willing to share contemporary Japan with the west as opposed to a traditional Japan guided by orientalism.

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