

Traditional and Western Japanese American Musical Practices

Before and During Internment

Joy Yamaguchi

University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Advisor: Erika Lee

Introduction

This paper will focus on two main genres of Japanese American music making - traditional Japanese music and western music – between two time periods – before and during internment. Prior to the internment, the demographic will highlight the lifestyle of Japanese Americans residing on the west coast, particularly those living within the four major Japanese American hubs: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento and Seattle. Within these cities, three major functions of musical activity will be highlighted prior to internment: Recreation, unification, and education. During Internment, this paper will utilize personal narratives of Nisei internees from four internment camps - Minidoka, Poston, Manzanar, Tule Lake – in order to depict changes in musical function and meaning. Within these camps, four major functions of musical activity will be highlighted: Recreation, Function, Control, and Resistance.

In addition to the exploration of the evolution of musical function, this paper will also exhibit how changes in intergenerational relationships (*Issei*, first generation Japanese Americans, and *Nisei*, second generation Japanese Americans) are reflected in the changing function of musical practices, the specific circumstances leading a surge of in musical activity within camps, the role of musical activity for both generations of Japanese Americans, as well as the types of musical activities that existed before and during camp. Since the availability of resources regarding music making before and during the internment are limited due to the nature of the internment – a lost and erased history – I have drawn my information from a small range of sources, including camp newspapers, interviews of Nisei found in the Densho archive, and the few articles written on Japanese traditional and non-traditional arts during this time period.

A Brief History

The Japanese internment, which was the mass removal and incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry, had a dire effect on the progression of social, economic, and cultural practices of Japanese Americans residing on the west coast. This mass removal, which was prompted by the bombing of an American naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1941, led to the incarceration of over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, most of who were American citizens. Under executive order 9066 by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942, first and second generation Japanese Americans were forced to relocate despite a lack of evidence supporting any claims of espionage. Instead, these claims were based on a pre-existing anti-Japanese bias rampant within American society, leading to a public suspicion of all Japanese Americans. These views were prolific, stemming from a xenophobic fear of Japanese economic takeover consequent to the success of Japanese immigrant farmers in the early 20th century. As xenophobic stereotypes surrounding the Japanese American community worsened in response to the call for incarceration, popular slogans, such as “Once a Jap, always a Jap” deemed the Japanese community as an inassimilable and un-American race (Yoshida, 1997, p. 123).

However, while the internment negatively affected the socio-economic progress of Japanese Americans, it inadvertently led to the growing participation of Japanese Americans in traditional and non-traditional Japanese musical activities during camp. In fact, the internment is often believed to be a major contributor to the survival of traditional Japanese musical practices to this day. This surge in Japanese musical practices can be attributed to a number of factors stemming from the nature of camp life,

such as the high concentration of Japanese Americans, camp ennui, and the War Relocation Authority's attempt to "Americanize" internees.

Music Prior to the Internment

Prior to World War II, the Japanese American community was predominantly located along the continental west coast, with small niches within San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento and Seattle. Towns such as "Li'l Osaka" of San Francisco, and "Li'l Tokyo" of Los Angeles, provided locations where Japanese Americans were able to live comfortably in ethnic solidarity. Within these small towns, Japanese American cultural activities thrived through means of education and performance, within venues such as the Nippon Kan of Seattle, Washington, and within the many Buddhist and Christian churches scattered across the west coast. Residents of these towns lived in isolation from their white counterparts, and although Nisei attended "American" school during the day, they were often forced to attend a secondary Japanese school by their Issei mothers and fathers in the evenings.

As Issei, many of whom were farmers, were able to obtain socio-economic stability in the 1930s, they began to invest their time in education and recreation based musical practices. Many Issei were immigrants came from peasantry, which led a desire for many to take part in musical practices associated with the distinct class of Japanese society now that they were financial capable (Yang, 2001, p. 397). Issei utilized Japanese traditional arts as a means of ethnic cohesiveness, by preserving "the power of the culture they had brought with them, reinforcing who they were and binding their communities" (Asai, 1995, p. 430). The preservation of their culture, therefore, was reflected in the education of Nisei, the sons and daughters of Issei, in the traditional arts. As a result,

individualized Japanese traditional music education became prevalent between both generations, with teachers and performers in traditional Japanese instruments, such as the *shamisen*, *koto* and *biwa*, existing across the west coast. Additionally, Japanese Americans were involved with *engei-kai*, *kabuki*, and celebrated Japanese holidays with festive, traditional music. However, although Issei strove to achieve ethnic solidarity through the preservation of Japanese culture, they also needed Nisei to be acknowledged as Americans. This was accomplished through an increased involvement in Christian congregations. “Benefit programs for various community organizations and churches, Christmas programs, annual recitals sponsored by music teachers for their pupils, and concerts organized by social groups such as the Gardena Young Women’s Association all featured music. Benefit and Christmas programs are examples of new contexts for music that reflect a departure from Japanese ways to new life in the United States” (Asai, 1995, p. 431). Similarly, Issei encouraged Nisei involvement in western classical music as a means of assimilation. This led to the inception of musical groups such as “The Oakland Sons and daughters Orchestra (OSDS),” created by Issei for Nisei (Yoshida, 1997, p. 23).

In response to a similar desire for assimilation to western culture, Nisei lived in a hybridization of both Japanese and American culture – they were heavily exposed to Japanese traditions but desired assimilation to western culture. Despite this desire, Nisei were deemed foreign and unbelonging due to their racial background within American schooling and as a result, were unable to achieve assimilation. Due to their dual identity, Nisei musical interests encompassed a large range of musical genres that reflected both their Japanese cultural identity and their American upbringing. Roy M. Hirabayashi, a Nisei from San Jose, CA, recalls his mother and father’s love of traditional Japanese folk

songs, as well as his older brother's interest in popular western groups. "Actually, my older brothers were getting, they were more into, when, they were starting to listen to, naturally, the Beatles and there was all the folk stuff like Peter, Paul and Mary, the Kingston Trio and all this kind of stuff" (Ikeda & Isuzu, 2011). The duality of the Nisei identity, therefore, led to the creation of Nisei specific musical organizations, groups, and clubs across the west coast, in which Nisei could practice and perform western influenced tunes free of racial discrimination. In many ways, Nisei were determined to assert themselves as "American" through an embrace of American popular and jazz music, and often neglected the traditional musical education that their Issei parents had worked hard to obtain. Ultimately, differences in agenda created a generational rift between Issei and Nisei. Musical groups such as the Nisei Melodians, the Mikados of Swing, and soloists such as Willie Ito, were popular amongst the Nisei community. According to Minoru "Min" Tsubota, a late member of the Nisei Melodians, musical genres at Nisei social events were predominantly of western influence: "There, most of the music were Glenn Miller music and included, we went to the oldies, the oldest one were like "Blue Heaven" and "Downtown Strutters Ball." I think our, last music we were playing "I Love You Truly." I don't remember too many of 'em but there were, belonged to the Glenn Miller styling that we played" (Ikeda & Kashima, 2003).

In response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the thriving Japanese American music scene halted its practices and grew silent. Traditional Japanese musical activity became taboo within American society, due to a fear of association with the enemy country. In response to the inception of World War II, a generational rift grew deeper between Nisei and Issei, and Nisei became further adamant about asserting their

“American” lifestyle through diminishing the Japanese culture that Issei had so carefully cultivated. Additionally, in order to erase any suspicion of espionage, many Japanese Americans destroyed personal items that could indicate alliance to Japan, many of which were records, books, and manuscripts of Issei musicians. George Yoshida, a Nisei internee of Poston, recalls burning and destroying his family’s musical items in order to prevent suspicion: “What we did was we had some Japanese records like the Waseda University or some children's songs and Japanese records. Again, we did not want to be associated as being Japanese. Oh, no, it's bad. Enemy. So we destroyed records as many families did, and whatever personal things that we couldn't take we just burned or whatever” (Ito & Pai, 2002). Similarly, Mary Nomura Kageyama, the daughter of an Issei piano teacher, shared a similar memory: “Yes. We thought having books written in Japanese might be subversive. So we, that's what my brother did, just gathered them all and threw them all, bonfire, backyard. I remember that; I could still see it” (Ikeda, 2009). The destruction of Japanese musical items, manuscripts, and instruments, as well as the taboo culture surrounding traditional Japanese music practices, led to a near extinction of traditional Japanese musical arts prior to internment.

During Internment

After the implementation of executive order 9066, over 120,000 Japanese Americans residing on the west coast were stripped of their rights and sent to one of ten internment camps. The Japanese socio-economic progression that Issei had worked for, since their immigration in the early 1900s, was diminished, as Japanese Americans were forced to spend as many as three years within the confines of a barbed wire fence. However, while the negative consequences of the Japanese Internment would presumably

have a detrimental effect on musical activity, it instead created unique opportunities for music making and performance. Musical activity allowed for a normalization of the camp experience for many Japanese Americans, and in fact, many Nisei recall camp life as the height of their musical involvement in the Japanese American community. As recalled by George Yoshida, a former internee of Poston: “Here was a camp, had all the time, all the instruments, all the music, all the support from the community. So it was really a wonderful time of my, my life in terms of playing the music we dearly loved. We played more for ourselves than for the entertainment of others” (Ito & Pai, 2002).

The surge in musical making of both Japanese and western genres can be attributed to a number of factors unique to the camp lifestyle. First, due to the isolative nature of the internment camps, Japanese American adults were deprived of their everyday work duties and the necessity to provide for their families. Instead, camp lifestyle was boring for many internees, causing a desired escape from reality through music participation. Second, the high concentration of Japanese Americans in the internment camps allowed for an increased number of opportunities to collaborate, teach, and perform with other Japanese Americans. In fact, many Japanese Americans were participating in these activities for the first time during internment. Third, due to the homogenized racial demographic within the internment camps, Japanese Americans were able to freely participate in musical activities without fearing discrimination. Lastly, musical activity surged within the internment camps as a result of the policies implemented by the War Relocation Authority in an effort to regulate internee’s thoughts and behaviors. This resulted in each camp location having a music center, equipped with pianos, practice rooms, and music appreciation classes taught by western teachers. Each

music center also had an intensive schedule with numerous western activities planned out by the WRA. Consequent of these unique circumstances, four areas of musical function became prevalent: Education, Recreation, Resistance, and Control.

Traditional Music Through Recreation and Education

The confines of camp life allowed for the prosperity of Japanese traditional arts. In fact, the internment itself may be attributed to the survival of many traditional musical practices after war, such as *Kabuki*. Since there is a large crossover between music education and recreation, I will focus on a comparative analysis of the two main genres - traditional and western music making - in regards to these categorical roles. First, cross-generational Japanese music education remained pertinent amongst Issei and many Nisei. In similarity to pre-internment times, Issei utilized traditional music education as a means of upholding tradition and maintaining ethnic cohesion, despite the American government's pre-war belief of music as a symbolic tie to Japanese patriotism. Due to the high concentration of Japanese Americans within camp, there were many teachers and performers of traditional instruments present, but very few instruments. A few Nisei internees, such as Shirley Nagatomi Okabe recall taking lessons with her sister in Manzanar on the Koto that her father brought to camp (Lynch, 2013). Similarly, Helen Mori, and Nisei internee of Manzanar as well, recalls studying the Biwa with a teacher named Mrs. Takamura (Postashin, 2010).

For some Japanese Americans, the internment allowed for a fresh, never before experienced, glimpse into Japanese culture. For instance, George Nakata, a Nisei internee of Minidoka, recalls receiving group lessons on the Japanese traditional from Issei. As part of an introduction to Japanese culture, Nakata recalls "hearing instruments of their

flute of their two string or three string instruments, hollow sounding bamboo things that produced the greatest sounds. We'd see dramatic plays and the clapping of two sticks,” referring to *Shibai* and *Kabuki* (Hintasu, 2004).

The prosperity of traditional music within camp can also be attributed to a loosening of governmental regulations on Japanese cultural practices during internment, in comparison to pre-war times. Strangely enough, despite the American government's opposition to any activity related to Japan prior to the internment, camp authorities tolerated Japanese cultural activities within internment camps. In fact, these activities allowed for governmental surveillance of these never before seen activities, and allowed for traditional activities to occur in segregation from America society. In an article published in the *Manzanar Free Press*, titled “Japanese Music Policy Explained,” the WRA's views on the teaching of Japanese music in the music center were iterated.

“The WRA does not intend to promote ideals and cultures of nations with which we are at war,” he explained. “So long as patriotic music is not played, Japanese music may be placed in the center but it will not be sponsored by the government. Paid teachers or special rooms or quarters cannot be provided for them.”

Western Music as a Form of Recreation and a Means of Control

In response to internment, many Nisei abandoned their interests in traditional Japanese music, hoping for a chance to prove their loyalty to their country. The generational gap between Issei and Nisei widened, as Nisei denounced an interest in traditional arts that Issei had carefully fostered for so long. Due to a desire for Nisei to assert their patriotism, Nisei were highly susceptible to the influence of the WRA, who encouraged involvement with western musical activity in camp as means of assimilation and control. In fact, each camp had a music department that employed music educators from outside of camp and offered classes in music education, as well as private and group

classical music lessons on instruments such as the violin and the piano. Internees were offered a great number musical activities that were organized by the WRA. For instance, in the article “Instruction Begins for Music Lovers,” published in the *Manzanar Free Press*, a rigorous weekly music schedule was highlighted as follows:

A weekly schedule for musical organizations meeting at the music hall, as released by A.G. Nielsen, chief of Community Activities follows: Monday, 7-8:30 p.m., glee club; Tuesday, 7-9 p.m., mandolin and guitar orchestra; Wednesday, 7-8:30 p.m., community band; Thursday, 7-8:30 p.m., swing band; Friday, 7-8:30 p.m., concert orchestra; Saturday, 2-4 p.m. mandolin and guitar orchestra, and 7-8:30 p.m., swing band.

Additionally, internees, specifically Issei, were encouraged to attend music appreciation classes. These classes would highlight “American” classical music such as Dvorak, further attempting to “Americanize” Japanese Americans. As stated in the *Manzanar Free Press*:

Music Appreciation Class Conducted

Music appreciation class is now open to the general public on Wednesday night from 7 to 9 p.m. at 7-4-2, announced the Adult Education Department. Isseis are particularly invited to attend. Mrs. Blanch Chester, Secondary School teacher of music, will be the instructor.

Evaluation of music will be studied through recordings. Studies of music elements will be also made on the works of composers as diversified as Bach and Gershwin.

Due to the WRA’s encouragement of western music activity within camp, musical activity maintained a high level. According to Nisei internee of Manzanar, Yo Shibuya, western music education for young Nisei was comparable to education in American schools outside of camp (Postashin, 2010). Additionally, in adherence to the WRA’s main intention– the Americanization of Japanese internees – music was utilized as a way to regulate thought and activity of internees. In fact, recreational activity in general was highly encouraged by the WRA as means of preventing complications. As stated in the article “Necessity of Recreation,” published in *Manzanar Free Press*:

The necessity of proper recreation in camp life cannot be stressed too much.

Recreation presents the finest means of building morale. It is the antidote for restless fatigues and the real bottleneck to troubles. Without recreation, ingrowing ennui may lead to complications. Hoodlums are born of idleness, of misdirected energies. It is to corral this unbounded energy that recreation plays such an important part.

Realizing this all-important work, the recreation department is working to increase its various branches of activities. Covering a wide range of activities which should embrace all interests the department now fosters arts and crafts, victory gardens and horticultural landscaping, music, social activities, scouting, public address system and all forms of athletics.

The regulation of thought and behavior is also evident through the employment of *hakujin* (white) music educators and their curriculum, as well as the types of classes offered to Issei and Nisei. Arnold T. Maeda and Bruce T. Kaji, Nisei internees of Manzanar, recall a music teacher named Louis Frizzell, who “formed choral groups, different classes and musicals that he created for different seasons. He involved everyone in Christmas, singing messiahs and Japanese, Christmas songs. The choral group also sang ‘America,’ which was about the history of the United States in choral form” (Nakagawa, 2010; Yamato, 2012). Evidentially, Frizzell encouraged patriotism and Christianity through the use of these specific works. However, it is due to Frizzell’s involvement in formation of these music groups that Nisei were able to successfully participate in musical recreation. Bruce T. Kaji, a Nisei internee of Manzanar, recalls: “I don't think that the *Niseis* that were in our class would've ever been involved in any of these things had they stayed at the schools they were in, because they were too timid, or kind of reserved kind of people, not the outgoing like the Jewish kids or other kids, but they were exposed to Mr. Frizzell, who used their talents and brought it out” (Nakagawa, 2010; Yamato, 2012).

Due to the lack of racial discrimination held by internees, camp life created opportunities for Nisei to hold semi-professional musical careers that would otherwise be impossible outside of camp. Nisei, who were adamant about asserting their “American” identity through participation in Nisei specific jazz, blues, and popular music groups prior to internment within Nisei specific niches, took advantage of these opportunities, participating in big bands. Groups such as “The Music Makers” and “The Jive Bombers” performed for dances and talent shows around camp, playing Glenn Miller’s repertoire. George Nakata, a Nisei internee of Minidoka, recalls the Norakura Band – A Nisei band made up of two singers, Mary Nakata and Betty Nakashima, a pianist, Henry Matsunaga, and a few others on the clarinet and harmonica. The band performed renditions of music by Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, and Henry James, and was often asked to perform at talent shows and dances. Although the band was popular within the confines of camp, Nakata postulates that semi-professional groups such as the Norakura Band would be unpopular and unsuccessful outside of camp due to discrimination (Hinatsu, 2004). On a similar note, Bruce T. Kaji recalls a vocalist named Mary Nomura Kageyama, who became regarded as the sweetheart of Minidoka (Nakagawa, 2010; Yamato, 2012). Her fame was also held to the confines of camp due to lack of opportunity for Japanese Americans in the arts during this time period.

Unification and Resistance in Tule Lake Camp

In 1943, the WRA administered loyalty questionnaires called “The Application for Leave Clearance,” which assessed internee loyalty to the U.S and allowed those who proved loyal to leave camp or to be drafted into the army. This questionnaire resulted in the segregation of 12,000 “disloyal” internees who were sent to Tule Lake from other

camps. Very few of the internees were actually radical, but instead the demographic comprised of Issei and Kibei, who were more conservative in their beliefs and held stronger ties to Japan due to their upbringing and wavering identity as Japanese Americans. The radical internees were in favor of segregation, and carried their pro-Japan beliefs strongly within Tule Lake. “United under the title of the “resegregationists,” *Saikakuri Seigan*, they agitated and petitioned constantly for the fulfillment of a more complete segregation which would physically separate them from those whom they suspected of stool pigeon activities, the pro-America loyals – a clear-cut separation which they insisted the government originally intended in setting aside Tule Lake as a camp for disloyals” (Weglyn, 1996, p. 230).

As a major part of their pro-Japan agenda, radicals promoted the traditional Japanese arts in preparation for the likelihood of internees being sent back to Japan. The suspicion of deportation back to Japan became common among non-radical internees who suspected that their actions and loyalties within camp would not change the outcome. Due to this common belief, taking part in traditional Japanese music and dance became a preparatory means of assimilation back to Japanese cultural customs. Classes on standard Japanese cultural practices including Japanese etiquette, *yokyoku* (vocal accompaniment in *no* theater), and poetry became extremely popular and vital to the camp experience. “For the aesthete, there were *senryu* poetry clubs, *utai* singing and classical drama societies” (Weglyn, 1996, p. 232). These activities allowed for Japanese cultural practices to function as a uniting feature among the internees of Tule Lake.

However, due to the radical beliefs of pro-Japan internees, the function of music for some assumed a role of resistance. A group called the “Association for Serving the

Mother Country” (*sokoku ho shidan*), encouraged pro-Japan militaristic activity, which was reflected in the music produced (Waseda, 2005, p. 195). “It did not take long before Tule Lake’s cultural revivalism entered an out-and-out patriotic phase. Under resegregationist influence, early morning calisthenics metamorphosed into militaristic marching and drilling to the fanfare of a bugle corps, with Rising Sun emblems stenciled on sweat shirts and sweat bands” (Weglyn, 1996, p. 233). Japanese nationalists, therefore became increasingly extremist, leading to a re-segregation of internees once again in 1945.

Conclusion

The Japanese internment, and its relationship to the development of Japanese American cultural practices (specifically musical activity), is an important and often overlooked part of Japanese American history. The context of camp life allowed for the preservation and rebirth of the traditional Japanese arts, as well as a growing interest in western musical activity by Nisei. The relationship of Issei and Nisei, ennui of camp life, and mass concentration of Japanese Americans allowed for an increased participation in musical activity during camp, and has led many Nisei to recall camp life with fond memories. These factors, in addition to implementation of western music education and recreation programs by the War Relocation Authority, allowed for a surge in musical activity. The musical practices of internees exhibit four possible functionalities of music in response to war – education, recreation, control and resistance – and exhibited how these functionalities allowed for the interconnection and development of a new and old culture.

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