

Noise pollution: how the sounds of the city were redefined as ‘urban music’ in 1920s Japan

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In the early decades of the 20th century, people grappled with the sounds modernity wrought. Some heard only noise. Others found great beauty.

Contents

- [A changing soundscape](#)
- [Defining urban noise](#)
- [A global debate](#)

Cash machines, elevators and escalators that talk. Jingles in department stores, train stations, supermarkets and shopping arcades. Loud speaker warnings about the dangers of riding on the bus or train, overlaid by sirens, car horns, traffic and pedestrians. “For a culture that places a high value on quiet,” US journalist Daniel Krieger [once wrote](#), “Japan can get pretty noisy sometimes.”

Japanese anti-noise campaigner Yoshimichi Nakajima talks about people being [“pickled in noise”](#). He argues that at the core of his nation’s relationship with noise pollution lies passivity and ignorance. People in Japan pay no mind to the noise, he says – they barely notice it.

If [noise pollution](#) is a contemporary problem, however, quite how to measure, control and even define it has long been a subject of debate in Japan. My [research shows](#) that this was particularly evident in debates over the language used to discuss the urban soundscape in the 1920s and 1930s.

A changing soundscape

From the 1860s, as the Japanese government imported technologies from the west to create a modern nation-state, life in Japanese cities was rapidly mechanised, shaped by transportation and industry. This process transformed the [soundscape](#) – or aural environment – too.

In September 1902, one “Mr A Victim” wrote to the Japan Times to complain about the excessive amount of steamboat whistling and factory bells on and around the Sumida river in Tokyo. Noise caused by civil engineering projects increasingly impinged on everyday life, as city planners rethought the major cities, laying concrete foundations, building subways and dreaming up modern cityscapes.

On city streets, rickshaws, wagons drawn by horses and oxen, pull carts and pedestrians were increasingly competing with bicycles, trams, trains, cars and motorbikes. In Osaka – which, by the 1920s was the sixth largest metropolis in the world – the number of cars, trucks and motorbikes exploded from 39 in 1915 to 6,886 in 1935.

Media commentators were quick to denounce the resulting racket. The February 2 1929 edition of the Osaka Asahi newspaper described it as “a hell of modern sound” that had given birth to “the scream of civilisation sickness”. And the October 9 1931 edition of the Osaka Mainichi labelled the city’s noise “the barbarism of civilisation”.

Scholars took a more nuanced view. In journals such as *Urban Problems*, engineers, architects and acousticians discussed the pressing need for an agreed definition of urban noise if the problem was to be solved.

Defining urban noise

The Japanese writing system uses phonetic alphabets (hiragana and katakana) and Chinese characters (kanji). While different Chinese characters can often have the same pronunciation, their implication can differ significantly. For example, the kanji used for “sound waves” is 音, pronounced *onkyou*; it is a compound made up of 音 (*on*, “sound”) and 響 (*kyou*, “echo or reverberation”).

In early 20th-century discussion of the noise problem in the mainstream media, the compounds 騒音 and 雑音, both pronounced *souon*, were used interchangeably to imply “noise”.

For scholars, however, the problem in coming to an agreed definition of urban noise was that those two compounds inferred slightly different things. For physicists, 騒音 designates complicated sound waves that rarely repeat and can change in volume and timing. It is thus used to distinguish unappealing, unwanted sound and aural interference from melodious sound waves that are relatively constant in volume and timing – from music, in other words, or in Japanese, 音楽, pronounced *ongaku*.

But as physicist Kohata Shigekazu pointed out in *Urban Problems* in September 1930, this usage effectively cast as undesirable “noise” many common auditory aspects of daily urban life and the natural world. By virtue of their diverse, constantly changing frequencies, all manner of organic, random sounds could be termed 雑音: those of the wind and the water, footsteps, or the sounds of people milling about.

In an attempt to solve this dilemma, architect Satou Takeo proposed in the same journal that the first *souon* kanji – 騒 – be used to refer to any noise that had an unpleasant effect on daily life. His reasoning was that the first character of this compound – 騒, *sou* – implies “boisterous or turbulent”: taken as a whole, the compound literally means “turbulent sound”. Today 騒音 does indeed refer to noise which obstructs peace and quiet, interferes with the transmission of organised sound such as music or conversation, or damages hearing or health.

These scholarly debates continued, drawing in more and more experts. In 1933, architect Kinichi Hirose hoped to settle the matter by proposing *kensouon* (音騒喧), which added the symbol for “boisterous, noisy, brawling” (喧, *yakamashii*) to that first compound. Hirose’s point was that the problem of sound pollution was the sonic environment birthed by modern machinery: the discordant sounds of transport, civil engineering and construction techniques. This was “city noise” (音騒喧, *toshi kensouon*).

By contrast, those sounds that Hirose saw as integral to the aesthetic appeal of city life – footsteps, singing, radios blaring and tradespeople shouting in the street – should be understood as “city music” (音騒楽, *toshi ongaku*).

A global debate

Similar debates were underway across the newly industrialised world. Historian James G Mansell [has shown](#) how in the UK, people in the early 20th century deemed theirs to be the “age of noise”. In this context, class-based prejudices came to inform the definition of urban noise. Itinerant buskers and pedlars were targeted.

In the US, as historian Raymond Smilor [recounts](#) in a 1977 article entitled Cacophony at 34th and 6th, people from across all social classes banded together in anti-noise campaigning because, as he put it, “noise was a problem that affected everyone intimately”.

People weren’t just advocating for quiet, Smilor wrote. They were grappling with the complexities and uncertainties of what he termed an entirely “new and bewildering society”.

This, in turn, led to [a new economy](#). As acousticians developed soundproofing, the modern science of acoustics was posited as being able to provide solutions to the noise problem.

Even if this proved ultimately futile – cities only got louder – a similar rush to eradicate noise by experts, scientists, conglomerates, merchants and the state itself can be traced in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s. For some, though, cities were not cacophonous. They gave birth to music of a new kind: an urban symphony. <http://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines> —>

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