

## **“Resonating Across Oceanic Currents”**

### **Special Edition Editorial**

**Yuiko Asaba (SOAS University of London),**

**Amane Kasai (Kyoto University of the Arts)**

In pre-World War II and wartime Asia, transport infrastructure development and the global-scale colonial expansions led many musicians, singers, and creators to travel by sea in the forms of migration, settlement, study, touring, or exile, transforming subjectivities and international trends. This Special Issue, *Resonating Across Oceanic Currents: Maritime Histories of Popular Music in and from Japan, 1920s-1960s*, focuses in on the popular music circulations across the sea involving Japan spanning from the 1920s to the 1960s. The desire for financial gain and self-improvement as a cosmopolitan led many Japanese musicians and composers to travel by sea, while diverse forms of foreign popular music poured into Japan's global port cities. Whilst never entirely independent from Japan's political projects, the circulations of popular music via the sea were also motivated by human curiosity, all the while incorporating and mobilising the local ideologies and trends through the medium of the sea. The chapters in this Special Issue examine the diverse modes of such maritime exchanges and popular music cultures at this time: Japanese tango musicians in Manchuria between 1935 and 1946 in the frame of Japan's political imaginations surrounding Latin America and China; the politics of

musical differentiation in wartime Japan through linguistic imperialism; the political imaginations surrounding a Chinese popular song in wartime Japan; the collective experiences of Japanese popular music in the post-World War II South Korean society; Japanese and Japanese American transoceanic “rehabilitation” in the early Cold War era; and the transpacific circulations of Japanese popular songs alongside touring American military personnel in East Asia from the end of World War II across the span of the Korean War and up to the year of the American ground forces’ withdrawal from “mainland” Japan. Tangled with the changing geopolitics of each historical moment, each chapter highlights the transoceanic circulations of popular music that went beyond bilateral modes of cultural flows, demonstrating the diverse and multilateral ways in which these musics circulated through performance, listening, knowledge production, exoticism, imaginations, and memories. Seawater became the site of creativities as well as exoticism, the place where multiple empires and colonial projects intersected alongside the tensions and contradictions of everyone’s shifting historical positions. This Special Issue, thus, delves into the cross currents of seawaters through the perspectives of popular musics in and from Japan to deconstruct the historical narratives surrounding some of the most turbulent times of the twentieth century.

We use the term *resonating* to express the spaces in which such memories and personal voices are being told, as well as to point to the musical performances, listening, hearing, empathies and creativities that occurred across and on seawater. In many respects, therefore, while this Special Issue does not specifically take the sound study approach, the recent scholarly works that engage with resonances, concerning the intersections of sound and space (Abe 2018) as well as the study on the diverse modes of listening and hearing through affective “resonances” (Marsilli-Vargas 2022), have influenced the ways

we consider each resonance across the oceanic currents. Through the word *resonating* we also hope to break away from historical periodisation to suggest the oceanic approach in this Special Issue as one that highlights and complexifies the historical continuation of memories.

*Resonating Across the Oceanic Currents* contributes to the growing scholarship on the maritime histories of cultural circulations outside of the Euro-American West (Haneda & Oka 2019; Sivasundaram 2020; Villamar 2020), as well as studies of the circulation of ideas that draw on the oceanic analogy from above and below seawater (Jue 2020). *Resonating Across Oceanic Currents* is indeed a continuation of the recent scholarly works that have proposed the sea as the critical sites of deconstructing music histories (Chang 2018; Rao 2017). One key methodological move in this oceanic turn in music studies is the shift away from the area study approach which, in the recent years, is receiving critical re-considerations, challenging its historically West-centric standpoint,<sup>1</sup> and its focuses only on “the history of subcontinents and large landmasses” (Armitage, Bashford & Sivasundaram 2018: 19). Told through the lens of the local histories of the Philippine Archipelago, D. R. M. Irving has revealed the ways in which Filipino communities and the indigenous population adopted counterpoint since the late sixteenth century as a vehicle of local expressions that are interlinked with Latin America and Spain through trades and colonialism (Irving 2010). Illuminating the history of indigenous people’s jazz performances in Australia and Melanesia, Gabriel Solis has illuminated aspects of racialisation and racial politics as the key components of modernity by centering the previously marginalised histories of transpacific black connections (Solis 2014). Kendra Stepptat and Mohd Anis Md Nor (2019) have proposed the methodological frames to study the inseparable dynamics of “music” and “dance”—the two entities that

have often been studied independently from one another in the Western scholarship—through the perspectives of “Maritime Southeast Asia.” Turning our attention to the transpacific, Kevin Fellezs has revealed the ways in which Kanaka Maoli and non-Hawaiian slack guitarists in Hawai‘i, California and Japan construct and negotiate notions of Hawaiian aesthetics (Fellezs 2019). Listening as the key pedagogical and aesthetic means that connect and shape musicians’ discourses surrounding Kanaka Maoli authenticity, Fellezs has placed the Pacific Islanders as the central figures in the global circulations of the slack guitar performance. The most recent publication by Julia Byl and Jim Sykes (2023) demonstrates seaways that enable and disrupt connection and exchange, as well as the site of theorisation and “cultural seepage” (2023: 7). Precisely because seawater flows and leaks in multilateral directions, as Byl and Sykes argue, examining cross-cultural histories through the prism of the ocean enables the study of music that circulates across millions of boundaries, bypassing the limitations of—and often land-based and Western-centric, bilateral approaches of—“the areas.”

Sea as the place of “fluid ontology” and at the same time the arenas for “the negotiation of histories” (Armitage, Bashford & Sivasundaram 2018: 18-23), the contradiction of seawater offers a welcome tool for creating the epistemological spaces to decenter histories. Sea as a methodology, in other words, enables each author in this Special Issue to consider each history of circulations and exchanges multilaterally and in cross currents modes of flows that moved in between multiple directions between ever-changing politics, positionalities, ideas and subjectivities, mediated by shifting territorial borders, domestic politics and processes of internationalisation. Crucially and precisely because music can be intangible, it played subtle yet fundamental roles in orchestrating, shaping, and transforming global relations and each individual’s sense of self through the

medium of the sea. Preoccupied by the multiplicities of seawater, thus, *Resonating Across the Oceanic Currents* points to and privileges multilateral conversations, performance, and creativity enacted by musicians and music creators of diverse backgrounds in collaboration with individuals and musical cultures across the seas. Furthermore, looking closely at the maritime musical exchanges of the prewar and wartime Asia in conjunction with the music histories turn our attention to the individuals' sense of the world at each particular time and place, urging us to reconsider the ways in which the past relate to the understandings of the "global music histories" at present. Each article in this Special Issue, in this frame, seeks to scrutinize the methodological and ethical means to write about maritime histories of this era, and offers a renewed potential of maritime frames for engaging with the sea as a method in examining popular music histories in and beyond Japan.

So why Japan? Japan as a historically constructed "island nation" has maintained diverse and important relationships with the sea, islands, islanders and subcontinents through political and aesthetical projects and through trades. While the sea has played a fundamental part in shaping the country's internal and international politics, as well as in constructing its cultural connections with the world, seawater and the oceans as the sites of theorisation and connectivity in relation to Japanese history have received little scholarly attention in Japan itself (Haneda & Oka 2019). Through this Special Issue, therefore, we seek to centralise the sea as an integral component of ideology, interconnectedness, destructions, creativity and personal experiences that shaped Japan, its international nexuses, and Japanese people's ideas of "the global" in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, focusing on and around Japan as a site of musical practices across seawater from the 1920s to the 1960s—in other words, from the era of Japanese

imperialism to the aftermath of its defeat in World War II and into the Cold War era—illuminates the seas as the arenas of the complexly intersecting processes of negotiation between performers, composers, and audiences as each, in multiple locations across the sea, sought to manage the tensions and contradictions of their shifting historical positions. In these changing geopolitical imbalances, the sea became both the carrier as well as suppresser of memories, radically changing who can tell what stories in which moment, ultimately re-painting what voices can be included in the “global history.” As a way of unpacking such forgotten memories and to de-imperialise through adding historical narratives, this Special Issue casts a light on the personal voices of these individuals who were caught in the ever-transforming geopolitics of this time. *Resonating Across Oceanic Currents* hopes to open up a scholarly space for writing about histories that continue to challenge our understanding of colonialisms, the relationships between creativity, memory and war, and to continue to question the word “global” as we seek to deconstruct histories. By focusing on Japan and its musical connections with the sea between the 1920s and 1960s, in other words, *Resonating Across Oceanic Currents* seeks to position these histories in parallel with and in tension with “global music histories,” putting forward the key importance of understanding the shifting connotations of what “the global” meant at particular historical times for specific individuals in rapidly changing circumstances, and how those understandings might or may not differ from the present. Seawater as a metaphor and reality of power and place, as well as a place of fluidity and situatedness that can transform positionalities, subjectivities and ontologies, offers a frame ripe for rethinking popular music histories that are inherently global and at the same time that go beyond “the global.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Kim (2017) on the critique of area study and the West-centric approach on the study of "the global South".