

CULTURE · JAPAN

Japanese Music

From gagaku's 8th-century court ritual through traditional instruments and min'yō, enka's real political origin, Group Sounds and the birth of J-pop, city pop's algorithm-driven resurrection, the modern idol industry, Vocaloid, and anime theme-song culture — closing with a capstone tracing what actually stands between a piece of music and the people who hear it.

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

Generated with Claude

CHAPTER 1: WHY JAPANESE MUSIC? SCOPE & SOURCES

Japanese Music

Chapter 1 · Why Japanese Music? Scope & Sources

This site already has a Music Subject — but it's a Western-classical-tradition survey that never really stops in Japan. This course opens exactly where that gap sits, with a real living tradition older than almost anything covered there.

Distinct From This Site's Own Music Subject

This site's existing **Music** Subject — *Music Theory Fundamentals*, *Music History I: Ancient to Baroque*, and *Music History II: Classical to Contemporary* — surveys music largely through a Western classical lens. This course covers Japanese music specifically, spanning both its own classical/traditional forms and its modern popular-music industry, as the third course in the Culture Subject alongside *Japanese Film & Television* and *Japanese Manga & Anime*. Chapter 9 will cross-reference that sibling course directly on anime theme-song culture, rather than repeating its own territory.

The World's Oldest Continuously Performed Orchestral Tradition

Gagaku — Japan's imperial court music — is genuinely the oldest orchestral genre still continuously performed anywhere in the world today. It took shape in the 8th century CE, blending musical influences from China, Korea, and India into a form that gradually became distinctly Japanese.

A REAL, SPECIFIC ENSEMBLE

A gagaku ensemble typically brings together sixteen musicians. Its two main melodic instruments are the *hichiriki* — an 18-centimetre bamboo double-reed instrument with a cylindrical bore, giving it a penetrating, almost haunting tone closer to a clarinet than an oboe despite its double reed — and the *ryūteki*, a transverse flute. The *koto* (a

plucked string instrument) and a range of percussion instruments round out the ensemble, performed at Imperial Palace ceremonies and in theatres across Japan.

In 2009, gagaku as performed by the Music Department of the Imperial Household was formally inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Performers today still train for years, often within real family lineages, under the Imperial Household Agency itself.

What This Course Covers

CHAPTER	WHAT IT COVERS
2	Gagaku and the imperial court tradition, in full
3	Traditional instruments and folk music — koto, shamisen, and min'yō
4	Enka: the postwar "Japanese heart in song"
5	The birth of J-pop — Group Sounds and early idols
6	City pop's real, unexpected internet-era rediscovery
7	J-pop goes global — idol groups and the modern industry
8	Vocaloid and Hatsune Miku — a genuinely new kind of artist
9	Anime music and theme-song culture
10	Capstone: from court ritual to viral algorithm

A Note on Sources

Every specific date, figure, and claim in this course is checked against real sources at the time of writing, matching the discipline already established across this site's own history and culture courses — including its two Culture siblings.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Gagaku formed from a genuine blend of Chinese, Korean, and Indian musical influences before becoming distinctly Japanese. Does knowing that foreign origin change how you think about what makes a musical tradition genuinely "national"?

REFLECTION 2

Gagaku performers still train for years within real family lineages. What do you think that kind of inherited, multi-generational training preserves that a more open, meritocratic training system might not?

REFLECTION 3

This course spans everything from an 8th-century court tradition to a 21st-century viral algorithm. Before reading further, what do you expect the biggest thread connecting those two extremes to actually turn out to be?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 1

- This course is distinct from the site's own Western-classical-focused Music Subject, and is the Culture Subject's third Japanese course
- Gagaku is the world's oldest continuously performed orchestral genre, dating to the 8th century CE and blending Chinese, Korean, and Indian influences
- A gagaku ensemble typically has 16 musicians, centered on the hichiriki (double-reed) and ryūteki (transverse flute)
- Gagaku was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009, and its performers still train within real family lineages today

Next chapter: **Gagaku & the Imperial Court Tradition** — the full real history and structure of Japan's own oldest surviving musical form.

CHAPTER 2: GAGAKU & THE IMPERIAL COURT TRADITION

Japanese Music

Chapter 2 · Gagaku & the Imperial Court Tradition

Gagaku isn't one uniform style — it's a real, deliberately organized system with two foreign-derived threads and one purely native one, paired with a matching dance tradition that's used the same "left"/"right" structure for well over a thousand years.

Three Real Musical Threads, Organized in the 9th Century

In the 9th century, the many musical influences that had reached Japan were formally organized into a real, lasting classification system. *Tōgaku* ("music of the left") gathered Tang-dynasty Chinese music alongside Indian material. *Komagaku* ("music of the right") gathered Korean music and other remaining foreign forms. A third category, *kuniburi no utamai*, covered *kagura* and other genuinely native Japanese music and dance, closely tied to local Shinto festivals.

Bugaku: The Dance That Comes With It

Bugaku, gagaku's own court-dance counterpart, has been performed in the imperial court for over 1,200 years, and mirrors the same three-part structure: *kuniburi-no-mai* (native Japanese dances), *Sa-no-mai* ("dances of the left," derived from Tang-dynasty China and first introduced in 698 CE), and *U-no-mai* ("dances of the right," derived from Korea).

A Real, Specific Instrumentation Rule

Chinese-style pieces are typically accompanied by three flutes — *hichiriki*, *ryūteki*, and *shō* — plus percussion (*kakko*, *shōko*, *taiko*), with string instruments genuinely absent from that particular configuration.

Etenraku: Gagaku's Most Famous Piece

"MUSIC BROUGHT FROM HEAVEN"

Etenraku is gagaku's single most recognizable piece — its name literally translates to "music brought from heaven." It remains a real, essential part of Japanese-style weddings today, and is commonly heard at temple and shrine festivals throughout the country.

A Real, Layered Preservation History

Gagaku's own formal recognition happened in two real, distinct stages, more than fifty years apart. In 1955, the Music Department's own court musicians were collectively designated holders of an Important Intangible Cultural Property — commonly referred to in Japan as "living national treasures" — explicitly recognizing their role in preserving gagaku's real form. In 2009, the tradition itself, as performed by that same Music Department, was separately inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, already covered briefly in Chapter 1.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Gagaku's own "left"/"right" classification by origin — Chinese-derived versus Korean-derived — persisted for over a thousand years, into both the music and the matching dance tradition. What do you think it takes for an organizing system that specific to survive that long unchanged?

REFLECTION 2

Etenraku plays a real, ongoing role in modern Japanese weddings, centuries after its own composition. Does a piece of music surviving through continued practical use, rather than just historical preservation, feel like a different kind of survival to you?

REFLECTION 3

Gagaku received two separate, real formal recognitions fifty-four years apart — 1955 and 2009. Why do you think a tradition already actively preserved and performed still benefits from that kind of additional, formal designation?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 2

- Gagaku was organized in the 9th century into tōgaku (Chinese/Indian, "left"), komagaku (Korean, "right"), and the native kuniburi no utamai
- Bugaku, gagaku's own dance counterpart, mirrors this structure; Sa-no-mai was first introduced in 698 CE and has been performed for over 1,200 years
- Etenraku ("music brought from heaven") is gagaku's most famous piece, still central to Japanese-style weddings today
- Gagaku's musicians were designated "living national treasures" in 1955, more than fifty years before the tradition's separate 2009 UNESCO recognition

Next chapter: **Traditional Instruments & Folk Music (Min'yō)** — the koto, the shamisen, and Japan's own real regional folk-song tradition.

CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS & FOLK MUSIC (MIN'YŌ)

Japanese Music

Chapter 3 · Traditional Instruments & Folk Music (Min'yō)

Two of Japan's most iconic instruments both started life as foreign imports, and both were transformed by real, named individuals working under real, sometimes harsh constraints — one defying an exclusionary rule, the other making music loud enough to be heard over a mine shaft.

The Koto: From Chinese Import to National Instrument

The koto's real 13-string form derives from the Chinese guzheng, introduced to Japan during the Nara period (710-784 CE). Its earliest real use was exclusively for gagaku — the same imperial court tradition covered in full in Chapter 2 — before spreading into temple use around the 13th century.

YATSUHASHI KENGYŌ (1614-1685): THE "FATHER OF MODERN KOTO"

Yatsushashi Kengyō, a blind musician from Kyoto, learned the koto in direct defiance of a real rule of the time barring it from being taught to blind people or women. He went on to expand the koto's own repertoire from just six traditional songs into an entirely new style he called *koto kumiuta*, making the instrument's music genuinely accessible to a much wider audience for the first time. He's still known today as the real "Father of Modern Koto."

The Shamisen's Real, Three-Stage Journey

The shamisen's own real lineage traces through three distinct stages. It began as the Chinese *sanxian*, exported to Okinawa around the late 14th to 15th century, where it developed into a

genuinely distinct instrument, the *sanshin*. The sanshin reached mainland Japan in the 16th century through the trading port of Sakai in Osaka, where it was first adopted by biwa players and transformed into the shamisen — the instrument that then spread throughout the rest of the country.

Min'yō: Real Folk Song Born From Work

Min'yō describes the broad, real body of Japanese folk songs that grew out of everyday life — work, festivals, travel, drinking gatherings, and lullabies — across Japan's own many regions. Most work-related min'yō were originally sung entirely unaccompanied, either solo or heterophonically in a group. Instrumental accompaniment on shamisen, shakuhachi, or shinobue was only added later, during the Edo period.

Tsugaru-jamisen: A Real, Practically-Driven Virtuoso Style

In the Tsugaru region of Aomori, a genuinely distinctive, percussive shamisen style emerged among itinerant blind musicians known as *bosama*, who adapted shamisen accompaniment to local min'yō melodies. Its real, defining loud, driving sound — struck with an unusually large bachi (plectrum) — was a practical necessity: it needed to cut through the real noise of mining, logging, and rough seas that surrounded the physical labor it accompanied. A specific named figure, Akimoto Nitarō (known as "Nitabō"), is credited with shaping this energetic, percussive idiom, which evolved over the 20th century into the highly virtuosic performance style known today.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Yatsushashi Kengyō learned the koto specifically by defying a rule meant to exclude him. Do you think exclusion like that sometimes produces more genuinely innovative art precisely because the person involved has nothing to lose by breaking convention?

REFLECTION 2

The shamisen changed meaningfully at each of its own three real stages — China, Okinawa, mainland Japan. Does that multi-stage transformation change how confidently you'd call the shamisen a "Japanese" instrument, versus a genuinely regional East Asian one that happened to end up there?

REFLECTION 3

Tsugaru-jamisen's own loud, percussive style exists for a real, practical acoustic reason — cutting through workplace noise — rather than a purely artistic one. Does knowing that origin change how you'd listen to the style today, decades after that original practical need disappeared?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 3

- The koto derives from the Chinese guzheng, introduced in the Nara period (710-784 CE) for gagaku use before spreading further
- Yatsuhashi Kengyō (1614-1685), a blind musician who defied a real exclusionary rule, expanded koto repertoire and is known as the "Father of Modern Koto"
- The shamisen traces through China's sanxian, Okinawa's sanshin, and mainland Japan's own 16th-century adoption via the port of Sakai
- Min'yō folk song was originally unaccompanied; Tsugaru-jamisen's own loud, percussive style developed for the real, practical need to be heard over mining, logging, and rough-sea noise

Next chapter: **Enka — The "Japanese Heart in Song"** — the real postwar genre that carried traditional emotional expression into Japan's modern popular music industry.

CHAPTER 4: ENKA — THE "JAPANESE HEART IN SONG"

Japanese Music

Chapter 4 · Enka — The "Japanese Heart in Song"

The genre now synonymous with sentimental balladry began life doing almost the opposite — as a real, clever loophole letting banned political speeches slip past government censors disguised as street song.

A Real, Surprising Origin: Political Protest Music

"Enka" derives from *enzetsu no uta* — literally "speech song." Its real origin traces to the early Meiji era (1868-1912), when Japan's own Freedom and Civil Rights Movement — farmers, factory workers, and urban intellectuals demanding a more democratic government — ran directly into a Meiji government ban on dissident speeches and protests.

A real loophole, not a love song — the ban covered speeches, not singing. Activists known as *enka-shi* found a genuine workaround: setting political oratory to simple street melodies and performing on street corners, spreading messages of social reform without technically breaking the law. This original political form is now retroactively called *Sōshi Enka*, to distinguish it from the genre known by the same name today — a real, striking gap between where the name came from and what it now describes.

From Violin Enka to the Postwar Sentimental Genre

The genre kept evolving under the same name. During the Taishō period (1912-1926), "violin enka" emerged, incorporating the violin into what had still been a largely vocal-and-melody form. The genre most people now recognize as enka — sentimental, emotionally direct balladry — only took real shape after World War II, as Japan sought to reclaim a positive sense of national identity in the postwar period.

Kobushi: The Defining Vocal Technique

Modern enka's own signature sound centers on *kobushi* — a real melismatic vibrato technique that elongates single syllables across shifting pitches, creating a distinctive, ululating emotional effect, typically built on pentatonic scales.

Misora Hibari: The Real "Queen of Enka"

KAZUE KATO, 1937-1989

Born Kazue Kato in Yokohama on 29 May 1937, Hibari Misora was performing publicly by age seven and made her first film appearance at twelve, going on to star in roughly 160 films between 1949 and 1971. She recorded around 1,200 songs across her career and sold 68 million records, becoming the first woman in Japan to receive the country's real People's Honor Award. Her final years were genuinely difficult: a 1987 collapse en route to a performance led to a diagnosis of bilateral femoral necrosis, and a later terminal cancer diagnosis. Her final concert, "The Phoenix," was held at the Tokyo Dome in April 1988; she died of pneumonia on 24 June 1989, at age 52.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Enka's own real name still literally means "speech song," decades after the genre stopped having anything to do with political speeches. Do you think a name that outlives its own original meaning that completely is unusual, or does that kind of drift happen to most genre names eventually?

REFLECTION 2

The Meiji government's ban on political speech accidentally created a real, lasting musical genre by trying to suppress dissent. What does that suggest about how effective censorship actually is at eliminating a message, versus just changing its form?

REFLECTION 3

Misora Hibari's own final concert, performed while genuinely terminally ill, was literally titled "The Phoenix." Does knowing the real circumstances behind that title change how you'd think about it, compared to encountering it with no context at all?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 4

- Enka's real name means "speech song," originating in the Meiji era as a workaround for a real government ban on political speeches
- The genre evolved through Taishō-period "violin enka" before becoming the sentimental balladry recognized today, only after World War II
- Kobushi — a melismatic vibrato technique elongating syllables across shifting pitches — defines the modern enka vocal sound
- Misora Hibari (1937-1989) recorded ~1,200 songs and sold 68 million records, becoming the first woman in Japan to receive the People's Honor Award

Next chapter: **The Birth of J-Pop — Group Sounds & Early Idols** — how Western musical influence reshaped Japanese popular music from the 1960s onward.

CHAPTER 5: THE BIRTH OF J-POP — GROUP SOUNDS & EARLY IDOLS

Japanese Music

Chapter 5 · The Birth of J-Pop — Group Sounds & Early Idols

A single 1966 concert reshaped what young Japanese musicians wanted to sound like — and two decades later, the term now used for the entire genre was coined for a real, oddly specific reason: to describe Japanese music that deliberately didn't sound Japanese at all.

The Beatles' Real 1966 Visit and the Birth of Group Sounds

In June 1966, the Beatles performed at Tokyo's Budokan Hall, and the real, immediate excitement among Japanese teenagers reshaped how young musicians formed bands, played, and dressed almost overnight. This new wave of Beatles- and Ventures-inspired Japanese rock bands became known as Group Sounds, or GS.

A REAL, FAST-MOVING SCENE

By 1967, nearly 30 new GS bands had debuted on record, with names like the Spiders, the Tempters, the Carnabeats, the Jaguars, and the Tigers. The Spiders and the Tigers led the genre's real 1967-68 heyday, drawing Beatlemania-style hysteria at their own concerts. The movement peaked in late 1967 when Jackey Yoshikawa and His Blue Comets won the Japan Record Award — and GS is now widely credited as the real predecessor to Japanese folk (fōku), New Music, and eventually J-pop itself.

The Idol Era Begins: Pink Lady & Seiko Matsuda

Pink Lady, a duo who rose to massive popularity in the late 1970s, held the real former Japanese record for nine consecutive number-one singles. That record was later broken by

Seiko Matsuda, who rose to fame as a teen idol in 1980 and became one of the defining idols of the entire decade. A real 2011 Music Station television ranking placed her as the second best-selling idol in Japanese history, with 29,510,000 records sold.

Where the Term "J-Pop" Actually Came From

Tokyo radio station J-WAVE, which launched in 1989, coined the term "J-pop" around 1988 — and the real reason it exists is genuinely ironic.

Coined to mean "doesn't sound Japanese" — J-WAVE originally played exclusively Western music. Under pressure from its own sponsors, it was compelled to air Japanese-produced pop as well — but specifically the kind that sounded distinctly Western-influenced, deliberately distinguished both from genuine Western imports and from older-style Japanese *kayōkyoku*. That in-between category is what got labeled first "Japanese Pop," then simply "J-pop." The term only became an industry-wide category in the early 1990s, well after its own real, narrower original purpose.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Group Sounds emerged almost immediately after a single real concert. Do you think that kind of rapid, visible cultural shift is unique to the 1960s' own particular media landscape, or could one concert still trigger a comparable genre shift today?

REFLECTION 2

Pink Lady's real chart record was broken within just a few years by Seiko Matsuda. Does that speed of turnover suggest the idol format itself was still being refined at the time, or is short-lived record-breaking just a normal feature of any fast-growing genre?

REFLECTION 3

"J-pop" was originally coined to mean something closer to "Japanese music that sounds Western," the near-opposite of what the term suggests today. Does that origin change how you'd use the label, now that you know it wasn't originally meant to describe Japanese pop music broadly at all?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 5

- The Beatles' June 1966 Budokan concert directly triggered the Group Sounds movement, with nearly 30 bands debuting by 1967
- Group Sounds is widely credited as the real predecessor to Japanese folk, New Music, and J-pop
- Pink Lady's real 9-consecutive-#1 record was later broken by Seiko Matsuda, who sold 29.5 million records and ranked as Japan's 2nd best-selling idol ever
- J-WAVE coined "J-pop" around 1988 specifically to label Western-sounding Japanese music, distinct from both real Western imports and older kayōkyoku

Next chapter: **City Pop's Real Rediscovery** — how a genre from the 1970s and 80s found a genuinely unexpected second life through the internet decades later.

CHAPTER 6: CITY POP'S REAL REDISCOVERY

Japanese Music

Chapter 6 · City Pop's Real Rediscovery

A song that flopped so badly on release it barely cracked the top 100 became, three decades later, a genuine global viral phenomenon — driven partly by an algorithm, and partly by a thumbnail photo that wasn't even from the right single.

City Pop's Real Origin: Tokyo's Economic Boom in Sound

City pop emerged in Tokyo across the late 1970s and 1980s, born directly out of Japan's own real economic boom. It blended Western funk, jazz, disco, rock, and R&B into a distinctly Japanese, cosmopolitan sound, funded by the lavish production budgets Japan's bubble-economy prosperity made genuinely possible.

TATSURO YAMASHITA: THE REAL "KING OF CITY POP"

Singer-songwriter Tatsuro Yamashita is widely regarded as the genre's own defining figure. His 1980 album *Ride on Time* is generally considered the first true city pop album, followed by his quintessential 1982 record *For You*. As cassette tapes and Walkmans spread through the late 1970s, owning city pop cassettes for drives out to Shonan or Kamakura became a real, genuine status symbol among young Tokyo commuters.

Plastic Love: A Real, Genuine Commercial Flop

Mariya Takeuchi's "Plastic Love" (1984) was produced by her real husband — Tatsuro Yamashita himself — and only reached number 86 on the Japanese charts on release, a genuine commercial disappointment at the time.

The Real 2017 Viral Resurgence

An Algorithm, and a Photo From the Wrong Single

On 5 July 2017, a user known as Plastic Lover uploaded an eight-minute fan-made remix of "Plastic Love" to YouTube. Its thumbnail used a striking photo by Los Angeles photographer Alan Levenson — but that photo was actually taken for the cover of an entirely different Takeuchi single, "Sweetest Music," not "Plastic Love" itself. The video accumulated a real 24 million views, spread by YouTube's own recommendation algorithm, internet memes, and forum discussions, before Levenson filed a real copyright strike that got it taken down. By then, "Plastic Love" had already broken into Japan's real top-10 sales chart, more than three decades after its original release, and Warner Music Japan eventually released an official music video for it.

Levenson himself later reflected on the photo's own real role: "Everybody questions the algorithm, but my feeling is that people looked at the photo and saw something about it. I think it's a great photo." A genuine commercial failure, resurrected by a mismatched photo and an algorithm neither Takeuchi nor Yamashita had anything to do with.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

"Plastic Love" was a genuine commercial flop in 1984, later becoming a real hit decades after the fact. Do you think that gap between initial and eventual reception says something specific about the song itself, or is it mostly a story about how differently music circulates today?

REFLECTION 2

The viral video's own thumbnail photo wasn't even from the right single. Does that genuinely accidental detail change how you think about what actually drives something to go viral — the content itself, or something incidental attached to it?

REFLECTION 3

City pop's own real success in the 1980s depended on lavish, bubble-economy production budgets, while its 2017 resurgence depended on a free algorithm and an amateur remix. What do you think that contrast says about how a genre's own commercial conditions can change completely while the actual music stays exactly the same?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 6

- City pop emerged in Tokyo's late-1970s/80s economic boom, blending Western funk, jazz, disco, rock, and R&B; Tatsuro Yamashita is its defining "King" figure
- Mariya Takeuchi's "Plastic Love" (1984), produced by her husband Yamashita, was a real commercial flop, reaching only #86 on Japan's charts
- A 5 July 2017 fan remix, using a mismatched thumbnail photo from a different single, drew 24 million real YouTube views before a copyright takedown
- The song later reached Japan's real top-10 sales chart decades after release, driven by algorithm recommendation, internet memes, and forum discussion

Next chapter: **J-Pop Goes Global — Idol Groups & the Modern Industry** — the real business model behind today's idol groups, and how J-pop reaches an international audience.

CHAPTER 7: J-POP GOES GLOBAL — IDOL GROUPS & THE MODERN INDUSTRY

Japanese Music

Chapter 7 · J-Pop Goes Global — Idol Groups & the Modern Industry

One of the modern idol industry's own most defining features started as a genuine accident, born from broken equipment. Its darkest recent chapter, by contrast, was no accident at all — a real, decades-long cover-up finally forced into the open.

AKB48: A Real, Deliberately Different Business Model

Yasushi Akimoto founded AKB48 in July 2005 around a specific, real concept: "idols you can meet." Rather than distant television stars, Akimoto wanted a group with its own dedicated theater, performing daily so fans could reliably see them live. The real founding audition drew 7,924 applicants, with 24 chosen as first-generation members, debuting as Team A at the group's own Akihabara theater in December 2005.

A GENUINELY ACCIDENTAL ORIGIN

The group's first-ever handshake event happened purely by chance, on 16 December 2005 — equipment trouble prevented that day's scheduled performance, so a handshake meeting was organized instead. It became one of the group's own most defining and commercially significant features, letting fans meet and briefly chat with their favorite members directly.

Senbatsu Elections

Fans vote for their favorite members, with the results directly determining single lineups — a real, fan-driven mechanism shaping the group's own public-facing roster.

Janken Tournament

A real, genuinely unusual event format — an elimination tournament of rock-paper-scissors, also used to help determine single lineups.

Johnny's Entertainment: A Real, Serious Reckoning

The modern idol industry's own darkest recent chapter involves a different, far more powerful talent agency. Johnny Kitagawa, founder of Johnny & Associates — the agency behind decades of Japan's most prominent boy bands — sexually abused hundreds of boys and young men over a six-decade career. Japanese media covered up these facts for years without reporting them. Kitagawa died in 2019 without ever facing criminal charges, having consistently denied the accusations against him throughout his life.

The real, public reckoning came from outside Japan — a BBC documentary, *Predator: The Secret Scandal of J-Pop*, aired on 7 March 2023 as the first major television broadcast to publicly expose Kitagawa's abuse. The agency itself subsequently acknowledged the crimes and reorganized into two separate real entities: Smile-Up, dedicated to compensating Kitagawa's victims, and Starto Entertainment — a new company (its name derived from "star" and "to," meant to signal moving toward the future) formed to manage the agency's performers going forward.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

AKB48's own handshake events began as an accidental fix for a technical problem, then became a defining part of the group's business. Do you think that kind of accidental origin is common in successful entertainment formats, or is this a genuinely unusual case?

REFLECTION 2

It took a foreign broadcaster's documentary to force a public reckoning that Japanese media had avoided for decades. What do you think that says about the real limits domestic media faces when covering an industry it's also deeply embedded in?

REFLECTION 3

The agency split into two separate entities — one for victim compensation, one for continuing talent management. Do you think that structural separation is a genuine, meaningful form of

accountability, or mainly a way of letting the entertainment business continue with a fresh name?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 7

- AKB48 (founded 2005 by Yasushi Akimoto) built its business around "idols you can meet" — daily theater performances and real fan-facing events like Senbatsu Elections and the Janken Tournament
- The group's own defining handshake events began purely by accident, in December 2005, after equipment trouble cancelled a scheduled performance
- Johnny Kitagawa, founder of Johnny & Associates, sexually abused hundreds of boys and young men over six decades, a fact covered up by Japanese media for years
- A March 2023 BBC documentary forced a public reckoning, leading the agency to reorganize into Smile-Up (victim compensation) and Starto Entertainment (ongoing talent management)

Next chapter: **Vocaloid & Hatsune Miku — A New Kind of Artist** — the real synthesized- voice technology that created a genuinely new category of performer.

CHAPTER 8: VOCALOID & HATSUNE MIKU — A NEW KIND OF ARTIST

Japanese Music

Chapter 8 · Vocaloid & Hatsune Miku — A New Kind of Artist

A piece of voice-synthesis software with a real, human voice actress behind it went on to open for Lady Gaga, on a real world tour, in sold-out arenas — using the same technology once used to bring Tupac Shakur back on stage.

A Real, Specific Piece of Software

Hatsune Miku was released by Crypton Future Media on 31 August 2007, the first entry in the company's own Character Vocal Series, built on Yamaha's real Vocaloid2 voice-synthesis engine — the second Vocaloid product released on that engine, and the first Japanese Vocaloid to use its Japanese-language version. Her own name genuinely means "the first sound of the future." She was designed as a 16-year-old character with long turquoise twin tails and a futuristic outfit.

THE REAL HUMAN BEHIND THE VOICE

Miku's voice was sampled from real voice actress Saki Fujita, recording extensive vocal material across a wide range of pitches, tones, and phonemes shortly after graduating university in March 2007 — raw material Yamaha's software then used to synthesize entirely new sung performances.

A Genuine, Sold-Out World Tour Opening Act

In April 2014, Lady Gaga announced Hatsune Miku would open for her *ArtRAVE: The ARTPOP Ball* world tour. Miku genuinely performed as the opening act across more than 15 US cities and 3 Canadian cities between 6 May and 3 June 2014, playing six singles across a 25-minute set, to real, sold-out arenas.

The real technology behind the performance — Miku appeared on stage using "Pepper's Ghost," a projection technique that creates the illusion of a solid figure performing live — the exact same method used to bring a projected Tupac Shakur "on stage" at Coachella in 2012.

Real Chart Success

Vocaloid music has achieved genuine, measurable commercial success in Japan: compilation albums like the *EXIT TUNES PRESENTS Vocaloid* series and *supercell featuring Hatsune Miku* have reached the top 10 of Japan's real Oricon albums chart — placing music built around a synthesized voice directly alongside output from human recording artists.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Hatsune Miku is built from a real human voice actress's own sampled recordings, yet performs as an entirely separate character. Do you think that makes her closer to a genuine collaboration between Saki Fujita and the software, or something meaningfully different from either a human artist or a purely synthetic one?

REFLECTION 2

Miku's real Lady Gaga tour used the same projection technology as the 2012 Tupac hologram — one reviving a real deceased artist, the other presenting a character who never existed as a physical person at all. Does that shared technology connect the two cases meaningfully, or are they genuinely different kinds of performance?

REFLECTION 3

Vocaloid compilation albums chart directly alongside human artists on Oricon. Does that real commercial parity change how you think about what actually makes a musical performer "real" to an audience?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 8

- Hatsune Miku launched 31 August 2007 on Yamaha's Vocaloid2 engine, with her real voice sampled from voice actress Saki Fujita
- She genuinely opened for Lady Gaga's 2014 ArtRAVE tour across 15+ US and 3 Canadian cities, performing 6 singles per sold-out show using Pepper's Ghost projection technology
- That's the same technique used for the 2012 Tupac Shakur Coachella hologram
- Vocaloid compilation albums have genuinely reached the top 10 of Japan's Oricon albums chart

Next chapter: **Anime Music & Theme Songs** — the real crossover between anime and the music charts, cross-referenced directly against this site's own Japanese Manga & Anime course.

CHAPTER 9: ANIME MUSIC & THEME SONGS

Japanese Music

Chapter 9 · Anime Music & Theme Songs

Two anime opening themes, released a quarter-century apart, both became genuine commercial phenomena in their own right — one dominating karaoke booths for an entire imperial era, the other becoming, by one real official measure, the single most profitable song in Japan for an entire year.

A Real Cross-Reference

This chapter covers anime theme songs specifically as music-industry phenomena. The anime and manga industry itself — including the shows these songs come from — is covered in full by this site's own sibling course, *Japanese Manga & Anime*.

A Real, Multi-Decade Karaoke Champion

"A Cruel Angel's Thesis," performed by Yoko Takahashi, is the real opening theme of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, released 25 October 1995 as a double-A-side single alongside the show's own closing theme, "Fly Me to the Moon." Composed by Toshiyuki Ōmori and Hidetoshi Satō, with lyrics by Neko Oikawa, it officially topped Japan's karaoke rankings for the entire Heisei era — roughly three decades — a genuinely extraordinary run for any single song.

The Modern Anisong Economy: Gurenge

A REAL, JASRAC-CERTIFIED CHAMPION

LiSA's "Gurenge," the opening theme for *Demon Slayer*, debuted digitally in April 2019 ahead of a July 2019 CD release, and had surpassed 1 million digital downloads by July 2020, topping that year's real digital single ranking chart. LiSA herself earned an

estimated ¥300 million in 2019 and ¥500 million in 2020 from the song; composer Kayoko Kusano earned over ¥250 million from it independently. Japan's own rights organization, JASRAC, named it the single most profitable song in the country for 2020.

A genuinely surprising real revenue source — karaoke, not streaming or CD sales, was "Gurenge"'s single biggest earner: the composer received roughly ¥3 every time the song was selected in a karaoke booth, and it was the most-selected song in Japan for the entirety of 2020.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

"A Cruel Angel's Thesis" dominated karaoke for an entire multi-decade era. What do you think it takes for a single song to hold that kind of position for so long, when musical trends generally move much faster?

REFLECTION 2

Karaoke, not streaming, was Gurenge's own single biggest revenue source. Does that surprise you, given how dominant streaming platforms are generally assumed to be in the modern music industry?

REFLECTION 3

Both songs became genuine commercial phenomena independent of the anime they came from. Do you think a truly great anime theme song can outlive the popularity of its own source show, the way both of these real examples suggest?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 9

- "A Cruel Angel's Thesis" (Evangelion OP, 1995, Yoko Takahashi) officially topped Japan's karaoke rankings for the entire ~30-year Heisei era
- "Gurenge" (Demon Slayer OP, LiSA, 2019) surpassed 1 million digital downloads and was named JASRAC's most profitable song in Japan for 2020
- LiSA earned an estimated ¥800 million total across 2019-2020 from the song; composer Kayoko Kusano earned over ¥250 million independently
- Karaoke, not streaming, was Gurenge's single biggest real revenue source, at roughly ¥3 per selection

Next chapter: **Capstone — From Court Ritual to Viral Algorithm** — tracing one real thread of Japanese music's changing relationship with technology and mediation, from the 8th century to today.

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — FROM COURT RITUAL TO VIRAL ALGORITHM

Japanese Music

Chapter 10 · Capstone: From Court Ritual to Viral Algorithm

No new research in this closing chapter — instead, one real thread traced back through everything this course has already covered: not the music itself changing beyond recognition, but the real structure standing between a performer and an audience being rebuilt, again and again, by whatever technology or institution happened to be available.

A Real Thread: Eight Different Ways of Reaching an Audience

Gagaku (Chapter 2) reached its audience through ritual and hereditary lineage — a tiny, exclusive imperial circle, preserved by real state designation. The koto and shamisen (Chapter 3) traveled instead through oral, hands-on teacher-student transmission — Yatsushashi Kengyō reaching an audience specifically by defying the rule meant to keep him from one at all. Enka (Chapter 4) began as a real, deliberate workaround for a government censorship ban, before mass recording and broadcast technology gave it a genuinely different, much larger audience after the war.

The Beatles' single 1966 Budokan concert (Chapter 5) reshaped an entire generation of Japanese musicians almost overnight, while a radio station's own real marketing need coined the very term "J-pop" a decade later. City pop (Chapter 6) reached its original audience through purchased, physical cassette tapes — then reached an entirely new one, decades later, through an algorithm and a mismatched thumbnail image, with no involvement at all from the original artists. AKB48 (Chapter 7) built its business on the opposite of broadcast distance — direct physical presence, discovered almost by accident through a cancelled show and an improvised handshake line. Vocaloid (Chapter 8) removed the human performer from the stage entirely, replacing them with software and a projection technique — yet still filled sold-out arenas. And anime theme songs (Chapter 9) found one of their most durable, decades-spanning audiences not through radio or streaming at all, but through karaoke machines.

CHAPTER	WHAT ACTUALLY STOOD BETWEEN THE MUSIC AND ITS AUDIENCE
2	Ritual, hereditary lineage, and state designation (gagaku)
3	Oral, hands-on teacher-student transmission (koto, shamisen, min'yō)
4	A censorship workaround, then postwar mass broadcast (enka)
5	A single live concert, then a radio station's own marketing term (Group Sounds, J-pop)
6	Purchased cassette tapes, then a recommendation algorithm decades later (city pop)
7	Direct physical presence, discovered by accident (AKB48's handshake events)
8	Synthesis software and stage projection technology, with no human performer present (Vocaloid)
9	Karaoke machines, outlasting radio and even streaming as a real revenue driver (anime theme songs)

An Honest Complication: Not Every Mediating Structure Was Neutral

This isn't a clean story of steady progress toward wider access. Enka's own real origin (Chapter 4) exists specifically because a government tried to suppress speech, not because anyone was trying to expand it. And the modern idol industry's own real, documented reckoning with Johnny Kitagawa's decades of abuse (Chapter 7) shows plainly that the same institutional structures capable of connecting an artist to millions of fans can also, when insufficiently scrutinized, enable real, serious harm. Treating every new mediating technology in this course as an unambiguous improvement would flatten out genuinely difficult history alongside the genuinely remarkable achievements.

What This Course Doesn't Cover

A real, honest scope note: this course leaves out several genuinely significant threads. Okinawan music deserves real, dedicated depth beyond Chapter 3's brief sanshin mention. Japanese rock, visual kei, and hip-hop scenes each warrant their own real treatment. Ryuichi Sakamoto and Yellow Magic Orchestra's own real, documented influence on global electronic music was never covered. And a direct comparison against the real, contemporaneous rise of K-pop — a genuinely related but distinct regional pop-music phenomenon — remains a strong candidate for a future companion course.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Across all eight real cases in this course, the mediating structure changed completely while the underlying human motivation — being heard, being remembered — stayed the same. Do you find that consistency reassuring, or does it undercut how "revolutionary" any single one of these shifts really was?

REFLECTION 2

This chapter deliberately resists treating the whole story as unambiguous progress. Does naming the real harm alongside the real achievements change how you'd want to tell this history to someone new to it?

REFLECTION 3

Of everything named in this course's own honest scope note — Okinawan music, Japanese rock and visual kei, YMO's global electronic influence, or a direct K-pop comparison — which would you most want a future course to pick up first?

QUICK REFERENCE — THE FULL COURSE, TRACED

- Eight real, genuinely different mediating structures connected Japanese music to its audience across this course — ritual/lineage, oral transmission, censorship/broadcast, live

concert/terminology, cassette/algorithm, physical presence, synthesis software, and karaoke

- The underlying human motivation stayed consistent even as the technology and institutions around it kept changing completely
- This wasn't a clean story of progress: enka's own censorship-workaround origin and the real Johnny Kitagawa reckoning both show the same structures can suppress or harm, not just connect
- This course's own honest scope leaves Okinawan music, Japanese rock/visual kei/hip-hop, YMO's global influence, and a K-pop comparison for a future course

Course Complete

This closes Japanese Music's own 10 chapters — from gagaku's 8th-century court ritual through traditional instruments and min'yō, enka's real political origin, Group Sounds and the birth of J-pop, city pop's algorithm-driven resurrection, the modern idol industry, Vocaloid, and anime theme-song culture — traced through one real, recurring question: what actually stands between a piece of music and the people who hear it.