Self-discovery through sound recording: the aesthetics of Namaroku in 1970’s Japan

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Abstract

When the hi-fi portable cassette recorder became popular in 1970’s Japan, audio enthusiasts enjoyed recording sounds of not only music but also nature, events, and surroundings. These activities were commonly called Namaroku, which means “live recording” in Japanese. In many introductory books, magazine articles, and radio programs concerning Namaroku, professional sound recordists and audio critics informed an amateur audience about the nature of sound recording and how our ears listen to sounds. Thus, Namaroku seems to be a significant movement in understanding the history of Japan’s aural culture.

This presentation focuses on the aesthetics of sound recording in the Namaroku movement and tries to relate it to the major cultural context of 1970’s Japan. In introductory explanations of the basic skills of Namaroku, many professional sound recordists often referred to the difference between our ears and the microphone. They said our ears select sounds that are meaningful and create a perspective of our hearing, whereas the microphone picks up every ambient sound automatically. Therefore, sound recording has to be aware of the methods used to operate microphones to eliminate unwanted sounds just as our hearing does. While listening to excessive environmental sounds through microphones, sound recordists try to discover how our ears work to give a perspective to recorded sounds.

This aesthetics of Namaroku has an interesting resemblance to a famous concept of tourism of the same period. Japanese National Railways launched the Discover Japan campaign in 1970; this is regarded as Japan’s biggest commercial campaign at the time and a turning point in Japanese tourism. One of the initial concepts of the campaign was “Discover Myself,” which encouraged consumers to reflect on themselves while travelling. Therefore, the concept of Discover Japan and aesthetics of Namaroku relate to a re-examination of the self in unusual situations. This presentation attempts to identify further connections between these ideas and thus gain more understanding of self-image in the aesthetics of Namaroku.

INTRODUCTION

Sound recording using Hi-Fi portable cassette recorders gained popularity as a hobby in Japan in the 1970’s. The sound sources were not only homemade music but also surrounding sounds like the sounds of trains, nature, and social events. This practice of sound recording was generally called Namaroku in Japanese, which means “live recording” (Namare means “live,” Rokku means “recording”) and it is similar to “sound hunting” or “field recording” in English. There were many magazines, articles, competitions, radio programs, and guidebooks regarding the Namaroku boom.

This study considers how people listen to sounds through microphones in a particular period and place. In other words, it discusses the history of the relationship between the ears and technology. Japan’s Namaroku culture in the 1970’s is a good example for understanding this history because various texts informing amateur audiences about the techniques of sound recording were published at that time. Thus, this study attempts to find from such texts the essential ways of listening through microphones. Furthermore, I will compare Namaroku to another commercial movement of the period, the Discover Japan campaign, with the Japanese Namaroku in 1970’s Japanese culture.

1. THE AESTHETICS OF NAMAROKU

In early 1970’s, Hi-Fi portable cassette recorders became popular in Japan. Some audiofilies took them outdoors to record diverse environmental sounds for pleasure. As mentioned before, various articles and guidebooks, wherein professional sound recordists instruct beginners, were published at the time. This section examines these texts to understand the normative ways of sound recording in this culture.

The most impressive feature of the instruction of sound recording in the Namaroku culture seems to be the diagrams of microphone arrangements. Professional recordists demonstrated examples of microphone arrangements for each specific sound source. As people used a cassette tape that was difficult to cut and splice, normative instructions tended to focus on spatial aspects of sound recording rather than temporal aspects. Microphone arrangements were considered as the key factor to shape perspectives of recorded sonic spaces. To explain radio dramas in interwar America, Neil Verma coined the term “audioscopic.” According to him, audioscopic is an element of auditory fields. Similar to “viewpoint,” it denotes “the place of the listener that is carried by coding foregrounds and backgrounds.” Therefore, audioscopic is associated with a perspective of the auditory field. In addition, Verma indicates “it is always fabricated.” This concept may be used to generalize my arguments about Namaroku. Namaroku recordists fabricate audioscopic through microphone arrangement. The question arises as to what are the normative rules of fabrication in the Namaroku culture.

In introductory explanations regarding Namaroku techniques, professional sound recordists often referred to the difference between our ears and the microphone. They said our ears intentionally or unintentionally select sounds that are meaningful to create a perspective of our hearing, whereas the microphone automatically picks up every ambient sound. Therefore, to eliminate unwanted sounds just as our ears do, sound recordists need to be familiar with the arrangement of microphones. While listening to excessive ambient sounds through microphones, they attempt to discover how our ears work in order to provide a perspective to recorded sounds, in other words, to fabricate audioscopic. This argument could be termed as the aesthetics of Namaroku because it is concerned with the sensitivity of the microphone and the judgment of sound recording qualities.

This study thus far has discussed ideal recording practices in normative instructions of Namaroku. Needless to say, there were many texts that mentioned difficulties or failures in actual sound recording. Many amateur

Figure 1. A front cover of a leaflet published by Japanese motorcycle maker, Honda. The rider is recording the sound of a steam locomotive.

Figure 2. Examples of the diagrams of microphone arrangements, which instruct how to fabricate audioscopic through microphone positioning.

Figure 3. “Mobile audio room” from “Sound recording journeys across Japan.”
recordists talked about the difficulty in making others recognize the sound sources of their recordings. They often mentioned that such obscure recordings vividly reminded them of their experiences of recording the sounds, even though others could not understand what the sound sources were. In another case, a writer collecting Namako culture spoke as follows: “I have never listened to my recordings again nor did I as sound materials. The act of sound recording itself was my hobby.” It is considered that these comments were, in some way, the results of Namako’s normative instructions.

2. SOUND RECORDING AND TOURISM

This section demonstrates the significant connection between Namako and domestic tourism in 1970’s Japan. Domestic tourism was one of the significant Japanese cultural attributes at the time. The Namako movement was actually linked with it in various ways. Further, it appears that the aesthetics of Namako has an interesting resemblance to a famous concept of tourism during the same period, “Discover Myself.” This resemblance will be discussed in the next section.

An audio critic, Shujii Kasagi, discusses the pre-Namako sound recording movement around 1970. According to him, radio-cassette players gained popularity at the end of the 1960’s and people often carried them. People used them to listen to the radio or music cassettes while traveling. Some people used the recording function like a camera. At the beginning of the Namako movement, a Japanese audio maker, Sony, organized local sound recording bus tours throughout Japan to promote the movement. Magazines and radio programs also held Namako tours for enthusiasts. For example, an audio magazine, Play ‘Tapes featured a series of articles, “Sound recording journeys across Japan” in the late 70’s. Travelogues in fact, became one of the popular topics of magazine articles concerned with Namako. In this way, the Namako culture was tightly connected to domestic tourism at the time.

Kasagi mentions the following two huge domestic travel booms in the 70’s: EXPO 70 in Osaka that more than half the population of Japan visited and the Discover Japan campaign, which was the biggest commercial campaign of the time. The latter was organized by the Japanese National Railways and is regarded as one of the remarkable turning points of Japanese tourism. It is often said that the campaign was a revaluation of the “good old Japanese homeland,” and it promoted personal travel among youths and women after a period of high economic growth in Japan.

The chief producer of the Discover Japan campaign, Wakuji Fujisaka, developed the initial concept of the campaign, “Discover Myself.” In the campaign’s first proposal, he said “This is not to see to but to create myself—to achieve a feeling of fullness in discovering Japan and rediscovering myself.” He distinguished this travel campaign from existing campaigns that stressed the promotion of the destinations. Fujisaka also contrasted the traveling with watching television to gain and share information. His concept “Discover Myself” emphasized the process and experience of traveling and recom- mend self-reflection in unusual situations to travelers. In my opinion, this concept has certain similarities to the aesthetics of Namako.

Visual images of Discover Japan campaign embodied Fujisaka’s initial concept in their own way. The designer of early posters for the campaign, Keiichi Matsuda, deliberately eliminated picturesque landscapes of travel destinations from his works. He sometimes used blurred photographs to make the location unidentifiable. In doing so, he attempted to focus on a traveler’s experience during contacting to unusual situations.

3. SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH SOUND RECORDING

This last section compares the aesthetics of Namako and the concept of the Discover Japan campaign to place the former in 1970’s Japanese culture. In fact, there seems to be remarkable resemblances between Namako and Discover Japan.

Namako was deeply related to domestic tourism at the time in various ways. Here, I will demonstrate the similarity of Namako as a commercial campaign to the Discover Japan campaign. Sakiko Kusumoto argues that the campaign involved not only the general public but also railway employees and private corporations in the boom. It blurred boundaries between the producers and participants. As a commercial campaign, the Namako movement seemed to share the same character. For example, Sony initially held Namako contests only for its staff to make them aware about its enjoyment. In addition, there were also similarities in the assumed subjectivity of participants between Namako and Discover Japan.

As mentioned above, the main concept of Discover Japan was “Discover Myself,” which encouraged the participants to reflect on themselves while traveling. Namako instructions also advised beginners to discover how our ears work while listening to everyday ambient sounds. Therefore, both of them suggested that participants reexamine themselves in unusual situations. These suggestions were not concerned with any specific objects, that is, with any specific destinations or sound sources, but rather they were concerned with the individual participants’ subjectivity. Therefore, Namako’s participants often could not make others recognize sound sources of their recording. Furthermore, some of them found pleasure only in the act of sound recording itself. Makoto Fujisaka, a Japanese sound recording engineer, asserted, “Technology alone cannot settle everything around sound recording. The basis of sounds recording is rather ethnomusicology, the way people can understand sounds.” There are remarkable similarities in participants’ subjectivity between the aesthetics of Namako and the concept of one of the major cultural movements in Japan. These similarities imply the significance of Namako in both the history of sound recording in Japan and 1970’s Japanese culture.

CONCLUSION: REMOVING A FILTER FROM THE EARS?

This study first focused on Namako’s normative instructions and the contrast between the ears and microphones. Professional recordists advised their followers to eliminate excessive ambient sounds through microphone arrangements to facilitate audiomorphism in their recording. Subsequently, the aesthetics of Namako was compared to Fujisaka’s concept of the Discover Japan campaign, the biggest commercial campaign at the time, to place Namako in the seventies Japanese culture.

This study focuses on Namako’s normative instructions and the contrast between the ears and microphones. The advice of professional recordists that the actual practices of Namako must be more diverse than the instructions is quite reasonable. Some professional recordists concentrated on specific sound sources and researched their conditions in detail. Other amateur recordists equipped with various editing devices entered the Namako contests. The realities of domestic tourism at the time were equally diverse.

Nevertheless, it is meaningful to recognize normative aspects of these cultures. For example, an editor who participated in “Sound recording journeys across Japan” reported that his experiences of the journey made him remove a filter from his ears, so every ambient sound became fresh to him. It is certain that his comments sound like a cliché or sounds similar to Murray Schafer’s concept of “ear cleaning.” However, in Namako culture’s context, his comment might be radical because it could mean the removal of the ability of discriminability from the ears.

REFERENCES


