

# Exploring Hybridity: Kanno Yôko, Takarazuka Revue and the Subversive Dynamics of (Soft) Power in Late-Modern Japan

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Since its inception in 1914, the extremely popular Takarazuka Revue, the Japanese all-female musical theater in Osaka's North-West, has proven throughout the decades both a faithful mirror of the Japanese society and a fine compass of its tendencies, subtly providing impulses for the future. This paper focuses on the dynamics of entertainment in the interplay of power and seduction as creatively displayed in Takarazuka Revue's show *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* from early 2021: its most particular feature is the music partially composed by Kanno Yôko 菅野 よう子.

Born in 1964, Kanno Yôko is a Japanese composer, arranger and musician best known for her work on the soundtracks for numerous video games, animation movies and TV series, live-action movies, and mass-media advertisements. Both Kanno Yôko's compositional style and vision and her close cooperation with the band The Seatbelt<sup>1</sup> actively contributed to the emergence of refreshing musical worlds within the framework of the Japanese visual industries, which led subsequently to the

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<sup>1</sup> The Seatbelts was a Japanese blues and jazz band led by composer and instrumentalist Kanno Yôko, active between 1998-2004 and since 2020; it performed the entire soundtrack of the TV animation series *Cowboy Bebop* and produced a total of seven albums and one live DVD. Their style is very diverse and ranges from straightforward big band jazz, blues, acoustic ballads, hard rock, country, funk to electronic, hip-hop and experimental compositions.

formation and development of a new identity structure based on cultural artifacts in late modernity, given the increasing popularity of Japanese everyday cultures worldwide.

As already proven in the animation productions *Magnetic Rose* (『彼女の想いで』 *Kanojo no omoide*, literally “Her Memories”, animation short-movie, director: Ôtomo Katsuhiro 大友克洋, 1995), *Cowboy Bebop* (『カウボーイビバップ』 *Kaubôï Bibappu*, TV animation series, director: Watanabe Shin'ichirô 渡辺 信一郎, 1998) or *Wolf's Rain* (『WOLF'S RAIN』, TV animation series, director: Okamura Tensai 岡村 天齋, 2003), among many others, of which *Cowboy Bebop* is unanimously regarded both by fans and by experts as encompassing the best music soundtrack of all times, in *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels*, Kanno Yôko gloriously employs a great variety of tunes and compositional techniques as well as stylistic strategies to convey subtle interactions of longing and belonging, ecstasy and rage, love and betrayal, envy, indifference and passion, while painstakingly building up irresistible tensions between the instances involved in the performative process: actresses, administrators, audiences. In line with Robert Greene's pragmatic elaborations in his seminal works<sup>2</sup> on the interchangeability of subject and object within the balance of power and seduction, entertainment appears as an interactive game, governed by the pursuit of joy in overcoming challenges and finding ingenious solutions, evading the apparently processual linearity between “producers” and “consumers”. The way Takarazuka Revue's ideologues integrate this strategic thinking in their public policy becomes, ultimately, the way they relate to

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<sup>2</sup> Greene, Robert: *The 48 Laws of Power*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998; *The Art of Seduction*, New York: Penguin Books, 2001; *The Laws of Human Nature*, London: Profile Books, 2018.

audiences and educate them to come back, eternally, faithfully, for more reinforcement of the same familiar existential models.

In a phenomenological approach to Takarazuka Revue's *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels*, the current analysis proceeds in three steps: firstly, the brief overview of Takarazuka Revue as a symbolical institution in culturally corporative Japan, followed, secondly, by the general presentation of *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels*'s performative context and, rounded-up, thirdly, by critical insights into its historical and systematic concatenations. Methodologically, we take into account the multiple layers of the Takarazuka Revue's administration and self-orchestration such as performance politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of actresses and fandom (fans and fan communities) as well as the performances themselves and their meta-narrative relevance. The sources consist of extensive archive research of Japanese documents and interviews with Japanese producers and composers as well as with Japanese and Western consumers.

Takarazuka Revue (宝塚歌劇 *Takarazuka Kageki*) is a highly popular musical all-female theater in Japan – a dynamic institution with a strictly stratified corporative structure. Founded in 1914 by Kobayashi Ichizô (小林一三, 1873-1957), one of the most important entrepreneurs in prewar Japan, as part of an economic-political project to develop the North-Western area of Osaka within the rapidly emerging industrialized society, Takarazuka Revue (Company) developed swiftly from the initial small organization of 16 teenage girls who had their first performance at a theater converted from an indoor swimming pool in a building attached to the main hot-spring resort, into an increasingly successful enterprise carrying various denominations throughout the decades, until 1940, when it became Takarazuka Revue Company (宝塚歌劇団 *Takarazuka Kagekidan*) – the name under

which it is currently registered.<sup>3</sup> Since 1919, the exclusive, very competitive two-years Takarazuka Music School (宝塚音楽学校 *Takarazuka Ongaku Gakkô*) has delivered yearly 40 (female) graduates who have joined the team of ca. 350 actresses performing on Takarazuka Revue's stage. Similarly to Takarazuka Revue (Company), Takarazuka Music School changed its official denomination several times since its outset, its current one dating from 1946. In tandem with *otokoyaku*'s (男役, female impersonators of male roles in Takarazuka Revue) representation of masculinity on Takarazuka Revue's stage and public advertisement, *musumeyaku* 娘役 (literally: "daughter-role" with the subliminal image of "maiden") refers to female impersonators of female roles in Takarazuka Revue. Both *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* are subsumed to the category of "actress", while their designation within the Takarazuka Revue Company and its related contexts is *seito* (生徒 pupil) or *takarasienne* タカラシエンヌ, introduced by the director Shirai Tetsuzô (白井鐵造, 1900-1983), who compared the cute Takarazuka Revue actresses with the beautiful Parisiennes at Moulin Rouge.<sup>4</sup> Within the extremely strict hierarchy of Takarazuka Revue's educational and

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<sup>3</sup> Tsuganesawa, Toshihiro (1991): *Takarazuka Kageki senryaku: Kobayashi Ichizô no seikatsu-bunkaron* [The Takarazuka Revue Strategy: Ichizô Kobayashi's Existence Culturology], Tokyo: Kôdansha, pp. 22-36; Watanabe, Hiroshi (1999): *Takarazuka Kageki no hen'yô to Nihon kindai* [Takarazuka Revue's Metamorphose and the Japanese Modernity], Tokyo: Shinshokan, pp. 29-33.

<sup>4</sup> Iwahori, Yasumitsu (1972): *Isai Kobayashi Ichizô no shôhō: Sono taishû shikô no rejû keiei shuhô* [The Specific Business Strategy of the Genial Ichizô Kobayashi: His Mass-Oriented Leisure Enterprise Methods], Tokyo: Hyôgensha, pp. 56-87; Ueda, Yoshitsugu (1976): *Takarazuka ongaku gakkô* [The Takarazuka Music School], Osaka: Yomiuri-Life, pp. 35-42.

performance system, the concept “golden combination” refers to the *otokoyaku-musumeyaku* pair (in Takarazuka Revue jargon: “topstar[s]”) at the top of each of the five actively performing ensembles. It is important to mention that, while the acting staff is exclusively female, the administrative staff is to a great extent male, and was exclusively male from Takarazuka Revue’s inception to 1999. As to be shown further below, this clear-cut separation of functions has been playing a fundamental role in Takarazuka Revue’s evolution and its preoccupation with orchestrating masculinity at the core of the Japanese social stratification in the mysterious, ambivalent, athletic stature of the *otokoyaku* throughout its history.

Originally scheduled to run from 17<sup>th</sup> July to 17<sup>th</sup> August 2020 at Takarazuka Grand Theater and from 4<sup>th</sup> September to 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020 at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, and staged, after its cancellation during the coronavirus crisis, at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 26<sup>th</sup> February to 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021, *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* (『シルクロード～盗賊と宝石』 *Shiruku Rôdo: Tôzoku and hôseki*) is the second part of a typical Takarazuka Revue performance consisting of two segments: one segment is a theatrical-musical play, with coherent plot and proper characters, and one segment is an exuberant show without a real narrative line, but instead with spectacular display of choreographic and choral scenes juxtaposed with individual demonstrations of singing and dancing virtuosity – all compounded by sparkling orchestral tunes with dazzling, vertigo-inducing stage architectures, gorgeous – and quickly changing – costumes as well as hairstyles. A gradual culmination process leads towards the classical finale with the line-dance (or rocket-dance) of several actresses, the rigorous group dancing reuniting the entire ensemble, the “golden combination”’s impressive duo-

ballet and the final parade in which all performers of that respective performance descend the big staircase – one of the hallmarks of Takarazuka Revue’s stage – in a cascade-like choreographic design on the major tunes of the show while greeting audiences with elegance, gratitude and joy.

The first part of the performance - in which *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* was the second section - dealt with the life and creation of Ludwig van Beethoven and was meant to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of the larger-than-life composer, who was born on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1770. In the “musical sinfonia” *fff – Fortississimo* (『*fff – フォルテ イッシッシモ*』 *fff – Forutisshishshimo* –), the Snow Troupe’s Nozomi Fûto 望海 風斗 as Ludwig van Beethoven and Maaya Kiho 真彩 希帆 as a Mysterious Woman, who both challenge and inspire the composer, deliver a visually and musically impressive reconstruction of the tumultuous era at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, backed by the ca. 75 members of the ensemble. (The “Mysterious Woman” has no particular historical attestation, but unmistakably carries subliminal elements of Maetel, the female lead-character in *Galaxy Express 999* 『銀河鉄道 999』 *Ginga tetsudô surî nain*, Matsumoto Reiji’s 松本零士 hugely popular Japanese comics and TV animation series belonging to the *shônen* space-opera genre aimed at teenage boys in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.) What will become even more obvious in *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* is, however, the careful choice of this specific troupe among the five performing troupes (the other four being flower, moon, star and cosmos) to portray on-stage the ideological upheaval which led to what is nowadays celebrated as modernity: inaugurated in 1924, simultaneously with the opening of the first Takarazuka Grand Theater, the Snow Troupe (雪組 *yuki-gumi*) is considered the upholder of Japanese traditional dance and musical

plays for the whole company, which rather tends towards Western material in more than two thirds of its performances; it also has the reputation of being the vanguard of classical Japanese drama.<sup>5</sup> On this backdrop, the fact that it premiered in Japan, in 1996, Michael Kunze's and Sylvester Levay's Vienna-original musical from 1992 *Elisabeth: The Rondo of Love and Death* (『エリザベート：愛と死の輪舞』 *Erizabêto: Ai to shi no rondo*) has symbolical underpinnings, with (cultural) “appropriation” and “Japanisation” being at the top of the main concepts. Coincidentally, 25 years after *Elisabeth: The Rondo of Love and Death*'s sensational success with Takarazuka Revue, which resulted in numerous re-stagings throughout the years both as cross-gender and as mixed-gender performances under Tôhō's patronage<sup>6</sup>, Austria's capital turns once again into the center of the

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<sup>5</sup> Kotake, Satoshi (2003): *Takarazuka Academia*, Tokyo: Seikyûsha, pp. 12-17.

<sup>6</sup> Created in 1932 by Kobayashi Ichizô, the founder of Takarazuka Revue and of Hankyû Railway, as *Tokyo-Takarazuka Theater Company Ltd.* (株式会社東京宝塚劇場 *Kabushiki gaisha Tôkyô Takarazuka Gekijô*), Tôhō Co., Ltd., is a Japanese movie, theater production and distribution company with its headquarters in Chiyoda, Tokyo. Tôhō is one of the four members of the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan (MPPAJ), and is the largest of Japan's top Big Four movies studios. Outside Japan, Tôhō is known as “Toho”, the producer and distributor of many *kaijû* (怪獣, monster) movies, with Godzilla being its most famous character, which featured in 36 of the company's movies so far, together with Rodan, Mothra, King Ghidorah and Mechagodzilla being regarded as “Toho's Big Five” due to their repeated appearances in numerous works released throughout the decades. Movies by cult-directors such as Kurosawa Akira, Ozu Yasujirô, Mizoguchi Kenji, Kobayashi Masaki were released, (co-) produced and/or distributed by Tôhō as well as many animation blockbusters, e.g., Studio Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001) directed by Miyazaki Hayao, Studio Chizu's *The Wolf Children Ame and Yuki* (2012), *The Boy and the Beast* (2015), *Mirai from the Future* (2018) directed by Hosoda Mamoru, and further cult-animation movies: *Steamboy* (2004, director: Otomo Katsuhirô), *Ghost in the Shell 2:*

quest for identity of a man who will metamorphose into a symbol of the genius-artist, forsaken and ridiculed by contemporaries, but visionary in his exacerbated sensitivity, complex mental-emotional formation and crushing loneliness. In the explosive instability of Beethoven's appearance as embodied by topstar-*otokoyaku* Nozomi Fûtô, Hippocrates' *ars longa, vita brevis* meets *mono no aware* もののあわれ, the Japanese existential paradigm commonly translated as "the pathos of things" which intrinsically connects beauty with inexorable ephemerality.

What has started as the ideology of existential impermanence in Beethoven's fragile emotionality and volatile temperament contrasting with the solidity of his musical legacy finds its aesthetic counterpart in *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* with its lavish display of *joie-de-vivre*: Kanno Yôko composes roughly one third of the show, with the in-house composers Ôta Takeshi 太田 健 and Takahashi Megumi 高橋 恵 delivering the remaining two thirds; they also conduct the orchestra during the recordings which replace the customary live performance due to preventive measures taken by Takarazuka Revue Company to diminish the number of people involved on-stage. Described by the performance programme as "revue arabesque", *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* draws first and foremost on Takarazuka Revue's decades-old tradition of mixing up wildly the greatest variety of

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*Innocence* (2004, director: Oshii Mamoru), *Your Name?* (2016, director: Shinkai Makoto) in recent years.

Currently, Tôhô belongs to Hankyû-Hanshin-Tôhô Group, a typical Japanese *keiretsu* (系列, association of businesses), which includes three categories of companies: Hankyû-Hanshin Holdings (railways, hotels, real-estate; among others, Takarazuka Revue Company and affiliated enterprises as well as Hanshin Tigers, a Japanese professional baseball team playing in the Central League, are included), H2O Retailing (department stores) and Tôhô (theatre – as buildings and as performances, movies/animation and cinema locations).

musical styles, in a rainbow-like spectrum: from heavy-metal to ethno-pop, from Western classics to Eastern modalisms, from jazz and blues to folk music. To this, Kanno Yôko adds her own brand of hybridizing strategies: as expressed during an interview in 2006 with Maria Grajdian, rather than being a conscious choice towards eclecticism, hers is a compositional attitude which reflects every composer's emotional dilemma in late-modern Japan, relying, on the one hand, on one's own cultural heritage, and striving, on the other hand, for international recognition due to economic factors. Moreover, Kanno adopts a syncretic approach with emphasis on the alternation between the visual and the auditive levels, which gave her the edge in the Japanese animation and video games industry in the past: in the previously mentioned interview in 2006, Kanno Yôko repeatedly refers to the fact that she always does her best to adapt her compositional vision to the overall-design of the leading director, without ever losing sight of the function of music as a counterpart to images. "Syncretism" means in this case a generous communication between different expression levels within the artwork, and less a conscious juxtaposition of representational techniques within the artistic discourse.

It might not have been the Takarazuka Revue's administrators' intention that the performance encompassing *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* and *fff – Fortississimo* would become a turning point in the history of the company – and potentially in the history of Japan's mass media and entertainment industry: what appears as simply a typical *sayonara kôen* (サヨナラ公演, farewell performance) of a popular "golden combination" of the conventionally conservative Snow Troupe metamorphosed into the spear-head of a fresh paradigm reflecting the new normal and the new era about to arise in and from the chaos of the coronavirus global crisis. The ambivalent instrumentalization of phenomena of

popular culture with the purpose of reinvigorating the classical Japan-reputation in times of the ubiquitous Cool Japan symptomatics has (in)famously and consistently brought to the forefront of the producers' and consumers' perception the idea that Takarazuka Revue, like *manga*, *anime*, video games – as genres, as expression modes, as identification mechanisms – mediate, facilitate, propagate glimpses into Japan as the reputed monolith of modernity, thus revealing insights into tomorrow's world. In *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels*, Kanno Yôko keeps an ironic approach towards cultural artifacts by disclosing in full honesty the ideological clichés and aesthetical stereotypes dominating the artistic discourses while at the same time playfully tackling the problematics of self and other as mutual reflections leading, eventually, to mutual transcendences – within a pragmatic pursuit for authentic compositional development. This compositional endeavor includes, in addition, the creative repetition of musical structures under the sign of cultural differences: that is, the transformative quoting within the compositional process, in which irony is the foundation and sincerity is the super-structure – in a paraphrase of Marxist parlance –, results, ultimately, in the economic success of cultural products, compounded by social impact and political relevance. The employment of ideological clichés and aesthetical stereotypes becomes a fundamental means within the marketing process implying a creative game with familiar structures with the simultaneous use of alienating patterns in unexpected contexts as well as stylistic permutations and non-conformist combinations.

At the ideological and aesthetic crossroads between orientalism, eclecticism and nostalgia, Kanno Yôko's so-called "gendered sincerity", repeatedly highlighted both by fans and by experts of Japanese popular products, clashes once again against stylistic pragmatism, providing astonishing market-relevant

insights: what Takarazuka Revue has done for decades – at least since the world-premiere of its hugely acclaimed *The Rose of Versailles* (『ベルサイユのばら』 *Berusaiyu no bara*, 1974, based on the equally immensely popular *shôjo* manga [少女漫画, comics for female teenagers in Japan] of the same title by Ikeda Riyoko [池田理代子, born 1947], published by Shûeisha between 1972-1973 and 2013-2018) –, Japan is starting to diligently probe into now: it no longer defends itself against the clichés and the contradictions imposed upon it by outer factors, but rather self-confidently absorbs these very clichés and contradictions, and creates its own new identity, according to late-modern standards and ideals. This new identity paradigm combines neo-traditionalism and anti-orientalism as well as the infamous intellectualization of lifestyles and everyday cultures.

It is both pointless and futile to try to resist the power of seduction supplied by the endless repetition of familiar patterns, both visually and auditive, to imagine that they are evil or ugly. Within the mechanical system of the entertainment industry, the power relationships between producers and consumers, between performers and audiences yield, at a closer look, the practical tools in extrapolating theoretical concatenations to real-life actions with successful results: like business management, the management of emotions pertains acumens into the seductive power of education and indoctrination which bypasses the rational processes of distance and re-calculation. In the extremely ruthless psychology of Japan's cultural consumption, only two elements could revitalize the postwar humiliation: the repeated acknowledgement of the failure of the American dream due to the loss of faith and the intensive reiteration of family as core-entity of the society within the framework of a seemingly progressive wrapping of national ideals. Takarazuka Revue's *otokoyaku* has

been proving a vital mechanism in this process of reformulating history and geography.

Eventually, *Silk Road: Bandits and Jewels* reiterates prewar *Mon Paris*' imperialist ethos and its overtly paternalist message from 1927, embedded within a thick emotional fabric of *otokoyaku*'s cool reticence and *musumeyaku*'s cute submission, which transcend the cliché of the disempowered human being into a hero of longing and, paradoxically, belonging. In cognitive consonance with *fff* – *Fortississimo*, generosity and spiritual enlightenment underscore, according to the axiological ideal promoted by Takarazuka Revue, the re-evaluation of humanity from a competitive undertaking towards a playful togetherness: the desire to situate itself (Takarazuka Revue Company) and as such Japan at the credible center of a new world order transpires from deep within and inoculates itself into the audiences' subconscious. Beneath this stylistic cacophony, ideological inconsistency and aesthetic contradictions, Takarazuka Revue as a historical phenomenon arises as a romantic world – and first of all, a world full of longing for romantics, with the *takarasienne* as a *Lichtgestalt*, an athletic, slender “angel of light” profiled on the background of a rigorous, disciplined lifestyle as the pathway to individual fulfillment and national supremacy.

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