

Tokyo: An Essay in Sound

By Laurel Colless

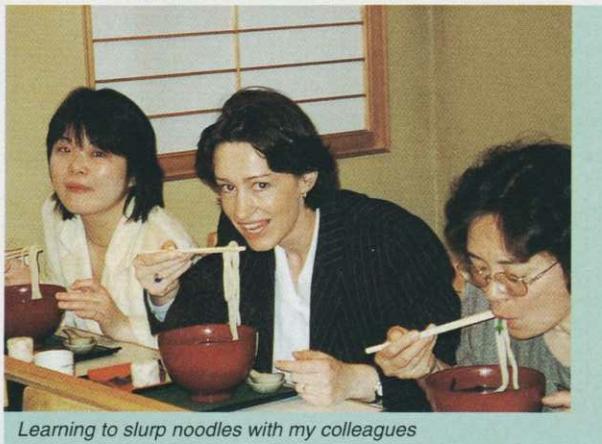
In Tokyo's Minato ward the day begins early, heralded at sunrise by the great black crows cawing and crying from their aerial vantage points. Further across the way in Tsukiji, fishy odors begin to fill the air as the dawn chorus of auctioneers leads off and Japan's prime frozen tuna is dispersed to the Tokyo fish-mongers.

In the small-town streets behind Tokyo's tall urban face, households begin to rise. The television sets are switched on and high-volume commercial messages begin to ride the walls of the small apartment houses. Outside one may also hear the traditional sound of older citizens and shop-owners watering their entrance stones and pavements. The delicate pitter and splash of fresh cold water (*uchimizu*) which cleans and cools the streets, is also for some a way to welcome the day's visitors.

Meanwhile, inside the city's stations, 12 million commuters are boarding their trains, as the spate of loud announcements, instructions and safety warnings approaches the frenzied pitch of the morning *ra-shu* (rush hour). The traffic also gains momentum, moving to a slow rising hum, as the six-lane expressways spanning the city pump more and more trucks and cars into its center. Ambulance sirens wail, while directly above, low-flying helicopters pedal across the morning sky, their engines droning and fading.

For many visitors to Tokyo the ongoing excitement and clamor of day-to-day life here seems a far cry from the traditional Western view of Japan as the land of silence and the elusive Japanese *wa*. In reality the average auditory experience of most Tokyoites is one of duality, where harsh aural assaults clash with the softer sibilance of traditional Japan.

"Too silent makes us nervous," explains my colleague at the foreign investment bank where I am working in Japanese equity research." At home even when we



Learning to slurp noodles with my colleagues

don't watch our television we still want it switched on," she adds.

Others of my colleagues would disagree, saying no, it is not that we Japanese crave noise, it is just that if it is all around us, then we have to be patient and tolerate it — *gaman shinakereba narimasen*. Some Japanese admit that they just learn to block the noise out. Certainly they have been conditioned from an early age to the daily dissonance of life in the big-city.

When I first came to Tokyo, in my 20's, I remember being surprised at the ability of the Japanese to fall asleep so easily in public, even in a crowded train or in the midst of great uproar. At that time I was working full time for a Japanese company while studying consecutively at an intensive Japanese language school. In short, I was exhausted on a daily basis, and I recall that it took me only a few weeks to master the art of dropping into a deep and pleasant sleep in a crowded train carriage, before waking effortlessly just as the train reached my stop.

But while time apparently stands still during these brief train naps, back in the outside world the noisy flux continues. A trip to Shinjuku confirms this, as the department stores open their doors and the shopping multitudes face a volley of feminine greetings, rising and falling with

the welcoming bows. Inside the elevators, I glide up and down to the sing-song sound of long, polite verb endings, expressing gratitude, servitude, general directions and safety instructions — nothing is left to chance.

Down from the department stores in the narrow Shinjuku streets, the loud-speakers are stepping up their volume, as high-pitched voice announcements spill out simultaneously from the discount stores, competing with the hired entranceway greeters who robotically shout discounts and product information at the

passersby. High above the crowds, thousands of neon signs and light boards scream for attention with their kaleidoscopic displays of garnish colors.

But then across the way at the west exit of Shinjuku station, almost lost in the aural fray, I suddenly hear the faint tinkle of a small golden bell. Head bowed, the robed buddhist monk is ringing to indicate someone has just given alms. Commuters and shoppers shuffle past.

At lunchtime, office workers spill out onto the already crowded streets of downtown Tokyo and then the dinner din begins. In the small eateries customers are greeted by the happy slurp and smack of noodle eaters as well as the congenial and healthy sound of pickle-munchers. These are both celebrated sounds in Japan and give accent to the Japanese culinary tradition.

The slurping is done moderately by holding up the rice or noodle bowl and slowly hoovering the food into a waiting mouth. And while to the Western world this could be interpreted as a show of rudeness or incivility, in the local noodle shop it is the best way to complement the master for food well done. It is also the swiftest way for salaried workers in Tokyo's business zones to quell their appetites before hurrying back to their

desks — well maybe leaving time for just one quick game of *pachinko*. In Akasaka Mitsuke where I work the pachinko parlors are filled to capacity during the lunch periods. As I walk past, the doors slide open to release wafting layers of cigarette smoke mixed with the burst of bell-ringing, tumbling ball-bearings and the noise of spinning dials.

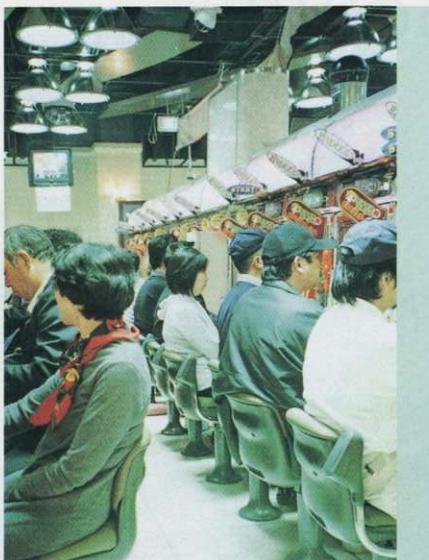
Further along on the main road nearby, the men in their dark armored trucks with mirror-glass shades are driving by in convoy and shouting their ear-shattering messages through microphones to the tune of up-tempo marching music. This all reverberates from the oversized speakers hooked to the back of their vehicles beneath the *hinomaru* flags.

This spring these trucks were forced to compete with the election noise, when the candidates for the gubernatorial races — and their assistants — all took to the roads in their sound vans. This election was followed closely by the mayoral campaigns and the nation-wide racket continued as the strident calls rang from microphones and megaphones throughout the city streets.

And with this aural confusion came the arrival of the cherry blossoms (*sakura*), and quite suddenly determined revellers began to fill the city's parks with the nightly noise of *hanami* parties, clapping, singing, dancing, shouting and snoring on tarpaulin sheets. In the afternoons, however, more sedate blossom viewers revered the *sakura* in relative silence, sketching, reading or talking in hushed tones, and many picnicking on Japanese sweet potatoes (*yaki-imo*).

This attests to the fact that even in Tokyo, amidst the cacophony, one can also experience rare and fragile moments of tranquility and silence. The pleasant euphony of the tea ceremony is another good example. We are comforted by the sound of the steaming water poured over the rich green tea powder, followed by the hypnotic swish-swish of the bamboo whisk around the ceramic bowl, and prolonged by the delicate wooing sounds of the ceremonial wooden implements.

And when in the small neighborhood backstreets the *yaki-imo* man makes his rounds in his pick-up truck singing out his trademark song (or at least a tape-recorded



Lunchtime pachinko in Akasaka

version of it), this is to me one of the happy and tranquil sounds of the long silent winter evenings. Another is the soothing ktonk ktonk of the *hyoshigi*, or wood-block clappers, of the nightly fire patrol. The resounding clapping is an old reminder for families to cover the embers in their small fireplaces as a guard against the sparks, which ignite so easily in the dryness of the Japanese winter. This wood-clapping is the same sound we hear at the *kabuki* theater, marking the beginning of each performance or as part of the sound effects to underline a dramatic pose.

But how quickly the sounds of winter and spring are replaced by the crashing rain of *tsuyu* (the rainy season) in June, as the sky opens almost daily and empties itself into the streets. Walking to the station I find myself ankle-deep in water and up to my neck in umbrellas (I am just the wrong height). The Tokyo water music then reaches a crescendo with the clap and roar of passing typhoons through to the end of September. This is a long way from the delicate waterfalls of a traditional garden pond or the faint soothing trickles of a *rotemburo* (outdoor bath) after a day's hiking.

With the passing of the rains comes the summer mating cries of the cicadas (*semi*), their ubiquitous throbbing and shaking waxing and waning in the heavy airless

heat. Later in the season the sound of the semi will be replaced by the soft tinkling of the bell-ring insects or *suzumushi*, with each small ring a reminder of the approach of autumn.

And with the autumn comes the cooler weather along with many of the annual *matsuri* (festivals) and the loud boom and bounce of the taiko drums. The streets near our home echo with the breathless but rhythmic shouts of festival-goers dressed in *yukata* and straining under the weight of the *o-mikoshi*. Others trudge alongside the group in their high-blocked wooden clogs, or *geta* making a happy chonk-chonk sound on the gravelled roads as they walk.

Like the clashing consonants and hissing sibilants in an endless colorful poem, the day-to-day experience of Tokyo life is unique and, arguably, we wouldn't want it any other way. The incessant wail of ambulance sirens may be tiresome but still we are always amazed by the courtesyness of the co-driver at the microphone kindly requesting motorists to make room. "Please move to the left, we will be passing through a red light, please watch out for us," he might say.

Similarly, even though it deafens us, we like it when the petrol station attendants or restauranters hail us enthusiastically with their ear-splitting shouts. It is a sign that we are going to be well looked after and receive good service.

And then of course there are the universal sounds of this city that one cannot imagine life without. For me the most cherished is the traditional 5 o'clock theme, which still plays in the Minato Ward. This daily music-box tune known as *Yuyake Koyake*, literally 'sunset sunset' ushers in the twilight, calling the children home to their families. I am temporarily reassured by its regularity.

Late one evening I pause at dusk in the silence of an empty shrine. A *salariman* in a tired suit, swinging a black briefcase strides past. He is taking the short-cut home from the station, passing between two worlds. I follow him out to the road and back to the friendly 90's din. **JTI**

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