

THE RISE OF KARAOKE

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Karaoke box ©DAIICHIKOSHO CO., LTD

The advent of karaoke was a timely fusion of technological developments in hardware and software that enabled the public to experience the thrill of performing their favorite songs in a fully immersive way.

MICROPHONE, lyrics, melody—the key elements for karaoke are simple enough. But in just half a century karaoke has become a ubiquitous part of Japanese culture and morphed into a high-tech industry with global presence. Indeed, the word “karaoke”—a compound of the Japanese words *kara*, or “empty,” and *oke*, or “orchestra”—has been adopted into English and other languages around the globe.

Karaoke has clearly come a long way, yet this new form of entertainment did not emerge overnight. According to Shiro Kataoka, the managing director of the All-Japan Karaoke Industrialist Association, it was a logical advancement in the world of entertainment following key developments in audio technology.

Toshiharu Yamashita, the founder of Taiyo Record, started selling eight-track* accompaniment

tapes in 1970- the first “karaoke software,” so to speak. Japanese musician Daisuke Inoue then incorporated these accompaniment tapes when he invented the first karaoke machine “8JUKE” in 1971.

Karaoke started as a primitive system that combined microphones with an eight-track cassette player, Inoue’s device stocked ten cassettes for a total of forty songs. He rented this out to bars and clubs, which in turn charged customers 100 yen (about 330 yen in 2018, US\$3) per song, and the karaoke industry was born. Kataoka says bars quickly adopted karaoke systems after discovering they offered a winning combination: an additional income stream while reducing staff.

Sophisticated as it was, karaoke still made aficionados rely on lyrics printed in special books.



The joy of singing is truly universal

Thankfully the early 1980s saw the addition of TV screens, allowing singers to follow timed lyrics superimposed over pictures and then later videos. The underlying technology advanced as well, as karaoke machines began utilizing new recorded media including laser discs, CDs and DVDs.

Singing in public motivated people to practice, and the market quickly adapted to meet this need. Private karaoke booths were created in the mid 1980s. The first were made out of modified shipping containers-and tucked away in remote locations to minimize disturbance. When the concept proved to be a hit with the younger generation, karaoke booths started to spring up in urban centers.

One of the most significant technological changes to karaoke occurred in the early 1990s with the advent of online karaoke. Although data connection

speeds were slow, karaoke machines no longer were constrained by the limits of recorded media and continuous updates became possible. Today, high-speed broadband allows Japan's state-of-the-art facilities to stream audio and visual data for hundreds of thousands of songs.

According to Kataoka, karaoke equipment is finding new life these days, for instance being brought into welfare facilities to help prevent dementia in the elderly. The future applications of karaoke may play a different but still valuable role. **7**

* Eight-track refers to a magnetic tape sound-recording technology that was common in the U.S. from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s.