

Singing together in harmony

Karaoke is more than just an ironic night out with your friends; as a new exhibit hopes to show, it's also a means of social and cultural exchange

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So what if Madonna's divorcing, Janet Jackson's got migraines and George Michael's been caught with drugs again? No matter how dim pop stars' actual lives become, there's a place where they'll always be No. 1: on karaoke stages across North America. Now, a new Toronto art show, Empty Orchestra, is taking a fresh look at karaoke's power. Here, exhibit co-curator Maiko Tanaka sings the praises of this unusual genre to Leah Sandals.

Q What inspired you to create an art show about karaoke?

A It started as something for the Gembai Gallery at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. I was interested in the seniors' karaoke club there, where seniors sing Japanese songs, but they are second- or third- or fourth-generation Canadians, and don't actually speak Japanese in everyday life. Co-curator Heather Keung and I thought that an exhibit on this would be an interesting way to connect with the country and the history that karaoke evokes, as well as look at it as a means of cultural and social exchange.

Q People do karaoke in bars all over North America. What's lost in translation here given karaoke's Japanese roots?

A It's funny how when karaoke comes to North America it's seen as an ironic barroom activity. Karaoke lounges, which are more prevalent in east Asia, are private, more intimate spaces where people end up choosing the songs, organizing the event and consuming it with people they know and having a social exchange. In Japan it's seen as valuable not to be direct in social situations, so karaoke provides this safe place where businessmen are able to communicate with their colleagues. Middle-aged women go to afternoon karaoke shops to have attention paid to them outside of their everyday roles. These are roles that karaoke allows people to play with in Japan.

Historically, there's also a long tradition of group singing in social situations in Japan. In the late '70s, a lounge singer called Daisuke Inoue started to produce pre-recorded versions of his songs so groups could sing along. From that developed the karaoke machine, which gave the instrumentation minus the voice. "Kara" is empty and "oke" is orchestra-- the orchestra minus the singer.

Q Can people sing along in the gallery? A There's definitely opportunities to sing along. Karen Tam, Ichiro Tanaka and Christian Jankowski all provide a karaoke-lounge-type space with lyrics, songs and cheesy videos.

Jankowski's space has a really good selection of songs, and you can program it just like a karaoke lounge. He stars in four karaoke videos distributed to lounges worldwide, with all the videos playing off the soap opera

cliche of a "handsome German foreigner" and "disposable Asian women."

Tanaka's classical music karaoke offers three videos using the famous motif of tourism, focusing on buildings like the Taj Mahal and the Vatican while presenting nationalistic songs by Rossini and Strauss.

Tam's karaoke lounge looks at Western perceptions of China reappropriated by Chinese-Canadians. So her room has all these traditionally Oriental images, but the songs are North American golden oldies with Chinese lyrics that are actually quite popular in the community.

Q How does the karaoke theme translate into other artworks?

A Candace Breitz asked people whose first language was not English to sing Roberta Flack's Killing Me Softly on karaoke. Their videos are arranged in a circle, but the audio isn't synced up --it's a cacophonous concert with a kind of statement on imperfect unity.

Finally, Wong Gongxin's video has karaoke singers on each tooth in his mouth. Every time he thinks he's gotten rid of them they come back. I think he's commenting on how karaoke doesn't actually provide the creative freedom that might be thought in a place like his home city of Beijing.

Q Do you think shows like American Idol could exist without the karaoke phenomenon?

A No, there's definitely a connection. Particularly during the tryouts, there's this same draw to the amateur of being able to perform stardom for a moment. And it's the same kind of self-indulgent moment that's also a sharing with the community.

Q What's your favourite karaoke song?

A I feel I should change it up, but the default would be the Carpenters, because they're easy to sing and they're always crowd favourites. Any Mariah Carey ballad, too. Although they're extremely challenging, people are so supportive when you're trying to hit those high notes. - Empty Orchestra continues to Nov. 13 at Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. For more information visit jmbgallery.ca.