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# Performing Community:

Japan's 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku* Song Contest

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VOLUME ONE

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Elder Conservatorium of Music  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
The University of Adelaide  
April 2006

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# Abstract

Japan's traditional performing arts have long been of interest to ethnomusicologists, yet contemporary forms have, until recently, received comparatively little attention. The nationally televised *Kōhaku utagassen* ("The Red and White Song Contest") is one neglected topic of scholarly research despite being a thriving contemporary tradition firmly centred in the popular consciousness. By way of addressing this gap, the following study considers the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku*, held on New Year's Eve 1999, as a landmark but yet representative edition of *Kōhaku*.

In this light-hearted contest, Japan's most prominent teen idols, middle-aged rock stars and elderly ballad singers are divided into men's and women's teams, alternating performances until one team is declared the victor at the end of the evening. Although the rivalrous, 'battle of the sexes' format is intriguing in itself, the most captivating aspect of the programme is the sense of unity, congeniality and camaraderie conveyed by the song performers. Taking this observation as a starting point, the study considers the performers as members of a community—the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku* Community—and argues that song performance provides a key to understanding this group and the broader implications of community at a significant moment in *Kōhaku* history at the turn of the millennium.

The thesis is presented in two volumes. Volume One consists of two parts, the first of which establishes the *Kōhaku* tradition and provides the context for the song performances of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku* Community. It begins with a chronological overview of *Kōhaku*'s developments throughout its history, interpreted from sources such as archival television footage and official publications. The focus then narrows to the milestone 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku* and the various activities held before and after the broadcast, in order to demonstrate the contest's sense of occasion and status as an important event. Having established the context, the second part looks closely at the song performances of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōhaku* Community. Using fieldwork observations from the live setting in conjunction with television footage, key aspects are examined: the performance of the

music and lyrics, lyrics themes, staging, and performing relationships. This analysis offers insight into the 'performing community', revealing how the singers simultaneously retain their status as individuals, as members of the collective and as alumni of the historical *Kōbaku* tradition while ultimately promoting national unity through this 'song contest for Japan'. Volume Two contains extensive appendices pertaining to *Kōbaku*, including a variety of television ratings data, profiles of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōbaku* song performers, an overview of the televised programme and the song lyrics in translation. A DVD of selected song performances from the 50<sup>th</sup> *Kōbaku* is also provided.



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April 2006

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## Volume Two

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