

The Poetics of Sound in Classical Japanese Waka— A Case Study of Ogura Hyakunin Isshu

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ABSTRACT

Sound poetics constitutes a fundamental aesthetic dimension of classical Japanese waka poetry. In Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, many waka poems demonstrate a highly refined auditory structure, most notably through the fixed syllabic pattern of 5–7–5–7–7, which generates a distinctive rhythmic flow. In addition to metrical regularity, phonological iconicity—realized through vowels, consonants, and syllabic repetition—endows waka with a unique sonic texture. Moreover, the frequent use of the case particle no contributes not only to rhythm but also to what may be described as a form of “visualized sound,” enhancing the poem’s perceptual balance and aesthetic coherence.

By analyzing waka from the perspective of sound poetics, this paper seeks to illuminate how phonological structure interacts with meaning, emotion, and poetic intention. Through close readings of selected poems from Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, the study demonstrates that sound is not a secondary ornament but a central expressive mechanism in classical Japanese waka.

Keywords: Waka; Sound Poetics; Phonological Iconicity; Visualized Sound; Ogura Hyakunin Isshu

1. Introduction

Waka is one of the most ancient and distinctive poetic forms in Japanese literary tradition, serving as a primary medium through which Japanese poets articulated their reflections on nature, love, and human existence. While previous scholarship has largely focused on imagery, symbolism, and thematic interpretation, the auditory dimension of waka—its sound—has received comparatively limited attention, especially from a theoretical perspective grounded in sound poetics.

In Japanese culture, sound is traditionally regarded as an expressive medium imbued with

rhythm, emotion, and aesthetic resonance. This cultural sensitivity to sound is deeply embedded in waka poetry. The regulated syllabic structure, phonological harmony, and rhythmic pauses collectively shape a poetic experience that is simultaneously musical and semantic. As such, sound in waka is not merely a vehicle for meaning but an active force in emotional expression.

Most existing studies on Ogura Hyakunin Isshu tend to interpret waka through visual imagery or historical context, often overlooking the role of sound in shaping poetic affect. However, when examined through the lens of sound poetics, waka reveals a sophisticated system in which phonological form mirrors emotional intensity, temporal flow, and perceptual space.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing classical waka from the perspective of sound poetics. Focusing on selected poems from Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, it explores three interrelated aspects: (1) rhythmic beauty generated by syllabic structure and pauses, (2) phonological iconicity manifested through vowel quality and syllabic repetition, and (3) the aesthetic function of the case particle *no* in producing a form of “visualized sound.” Through this analysis, the study aims to demonstrate how sound operates as a core aesthetic principle in classical Japanese waka.

2. Rhythmic Beauty in Classical Japanese Waka

Waka occupies a central position in Japanese literary history and represents an invaluable component of world cultural heritage. From the robust simplicity of *Man'yōshū*, through the refined elegance of *Kokin Wakashū*, to the dreamlike and symbolic aesthetics of *Shinkokin Wakashū*, waka poetry has evolved into a diverse and multifaceted tradition. Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, compiled by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) in 1235, stands as one of the most widely circulated and influential waka anthologies, encompassing seven centuries of courtly poetic culture.

The anthology consists of one poem each by one hundred poets—seventy-nine men and twenty-one women—reflecting the remarkable participation of women in classical Japanese literary production, a phenomenon rarely paralleled in classical Chinese poetry anthologies. In terms of subject matter, love poems dominate the collection, accounting for nearly half of the total, followed by poems on the four seasons, particularly autumn.

The waka included in Ogura Hyakunin Isshu are *tanka*, composed of a bipartite structure: an upper verse (*kami-no-ku*) of 17 syllables arranged in a 5–7–5 pattern, and a lower verse (*shimo-no-ku*) of 14 syllables arranged in a 7–7 pattern. Unlike classical Chinese poetry, waka does not rely on tonal alternation or end rhyme to produce rhythmic beauty. Instead, its musicality emerges from the alternation between short (5-syllable) and long (7-syllable) phrases.

For example, the second poem in Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, composed by Empress Jitō (645–702),

vividly demonstrates this rhythmic alternation:

5[春過ぎて] はるすぎて (harusugite)

7[夏来にけらし] なつきにけらし (natsukinikerasi)

5[白妙の] しろたへの (sirotaheno)

7[衣ほすてふ] ころもほすてふ (koromohosutehu)

7[天の香久山] あまのかぐやま (amanokaguyama)

The alternation between five- and seven-syllable units generates a gentle yet dynamic rhythm, guiding the reader through successive visual and emotional images. This rhythmic structure, reinforced by intentional pauses, allows the auditory flow of the poem to unfold gradually, enabling the listener to mentally reconstruct the scene step by step.

2. Rhythmic Beauty in Classical Japanese Waka

Beyond the alternation between five- and seven-syllable units, the rhythmic beauty of waka is further enhanced by the use of what may be termed silent beats or extended sounds. Sakano Nobuhiko argues that waka rhythm is based exclusively on the numbers five and seven, and that, in principle, rhythm is organized into two-syllable beats. Within this framework, five-syllable phrases contain three silent beats, while seven-syllable phrases contain only one. These silent beats compensate for the numerical imbalance between five and seven syllables, producing an underlying four-beat rhythmic structure common to both phrase types.

Structurally, this rhythm can be represented as follows:

Five-syllable phrase : ○○|○○||○—|——

Seven-syllable phrase : ○○|○○||○○|○—

○○|○○||○—|○○

○○|○—||○○|○○

Applying this framework to Empress Jitō's poem, the placement of silent beats can be illustrated

as:

はる|すぎ|て—|——

なつ|きに|けら|し—

しろ|たへ|の—|——

ころ|も—|ほす|てふ

あま|の—|かぐ|やま

These pauses create perceptual space for the listener, allowing the scenic imagery to unfold gradually in the mind. Each moment of suspension invites imagination, enabling the reader to visualize the transition from late spring to early summer and the white garments drying on Mount Kagu. The rhythmic pattern of waka thus generates a distinctive musicality, in which regulated pauses play a crucial role in shaping aesthetic experience.

3. Phonological Iconicity in Classical Japanese Waka

Linguistic iconicity is a widely observed phenomenon, and phonological iconicity is particularly salient in Japanese waka. Through the strategic use of vowels, consonants, and syllabic repetition, waka poetry achieves a distinctive sonic texture that reinforces meaning and emotion.

Zhu Lixia (2010) has demonstrated that Japanese mimetic words exhibit iconicity through vowel quality, consonant type, voicing, special morae (nasal sounds, geminate consonants, and long vowels), and syllabic repetition. Inspired by this framework and by theories of sound poetics, this study argues that phonological iconicity also plays a significant role in waka, particularly in the use of vowel sounds and syllabic repetition. The following sections examine these two aspects in detail.

3.1 Vowel Quality and Referential Iconicity

Japanese has five vowels, each of which carries distinct acoustic properties. In waka, these properties contribute directly to what may be described as the "sound of poetry."

The vowel *a* involves a wide mouth opening and produces a resonant, expansive sound. It often conveys a sense of openness, extension, or grandeur. This effect is clearly evident in the seventh

poem of Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, composed by Abe no Nakamaro (698?-770):

天の原 ふりさけ見れば 春日なる

三笠の山に 出でし月かも

(Amano-hara / furisake mireba / Kasuga naru / Mikasa no yama ni / ideshi tsuki kamo)

The poem expresses boundless homesickness, as the poet gazes upon the moon in a foreign land and imagines it as the same moon that once rose over Mount Mikasa in Nara. In the opening phrase Amano-hara (“the vast heavens”), the vowel a appears four times within a five-syllable unit, establishing a sonic foundation of expansiveness and emotional depth. The repetition of a reinforces the vast spatial imagery and sets the tonal register for the entire poem.

By contrast, the vowel i involves a narrow mouth opening and produces a sharp, fine-grained sound. It is often associated with smallness, delicacy, speed, or emotional subtlety. In waka, frequent use of i tends to evoke refined, lingering emotions. This effect is evident in the twenty-first poem of Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, composed by the monk Sosei:

今来むと いひしばかりに 長月の

有り明けの月を 待ち出でつるかな

(Ima komu to / ihishi bakari ni / nagatsuki no / ariake no tsuki o / machi idetsuru kana)

This poem, written in a female voice, expresses disappointment and quiet resentment toward a lover who repeatedly promises to come but never appears. In the second line *ihishi bakari ni*, the vowel i appears five times within a seven-syllable phrase. The accumulation of i sounds conveys emotional restraint and inwardness, subtly expressing the speaker’s lingering disappointment and fidelity.

The vowels u, e, and o occupy an intermediate acoustic range between a and i. The vowel u often conveys heaviness or obscurity; e may evoke discomfort or negativity; and o, as a resonant vowel, frequently suggests weight, slowness, or solemnity. These vowels are therefore well suited to expressing sorrow, desolation, or melancholy.

An illustrative example is the twenty-eighth poem by Minamoto no Muneyuki (?-939):

山里は 冬ぞさびしさ まさりける

一目も草も かれぬと思へば

(Yamazato wa / fuyu zo sabishisa / masarikeru / hitome mo kusa mo / karenu to omoeba)

The final phrase *karenu to omoeba* contains frequent occurrences of *u*, *e*, and *o*. The word *kare* simultaneously signifies both “separation” (*hanare*) and “withering.” The cumulative effect of these vowel sounds draws the reader into a bleak winter landscape marked by isolation and decay, reinforcing the poem’s somber emotional tone.

3.2 Syllabic Repetition and Referential Iconicity

Syllabic repetition is another prominent feature in *waka*, commonly used to express continuity, duration, or repetition of actions and emotional states. In *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, seventeen poems employ syllabic repetition, underscoring its expressive importance.

The third poem, attributed to *Kakinomoto no Hitomaro*, provides a representative example:

あしびきの 山鳥の尾の しだり尾の

長長し夜を ひとりかも寝む

(*Ashibiki no / yamadori no o no / shidari o no / naganagashi yo o / hitori kamo nemu*)

The repetition in *naganagashi* (“long, long”) intensifies the sense of temporal extension, transforming the autumn night into an almost unbearable emotional duration. The repeated syllables enact the very length they describe, allowing sound to mirror experience.

A similar effect appears in the twenty-fourth poem by *Sugawara no Michizane*:

このたびは 幣もとりあはず 手向山

紅葉の錦 神のまにまに

Here, the repetition in *manimani* conveys an attitude of complete submission to divine will. The repeated syllables emphasize sincerity and reverence, reinforcing the speaker’s devotional stance.

In the forty-second poem by *Kiyohara no Motosuke*, syllabic repetition vividly animates physical action:

契りきな かたみに袖を しぼりつつ

末の松山 波越だじとは

The repeated syllable in shiboritsutsu evokes the continuous motion of wringing tear-soaked sleeves, lending dynamic realism to the remembered scene and intensifying the emotional accusation directed at the faithless lover.

Through such repetition, waka achieves heightened rhythmic clarity and memorability, enabling readers to internalize both sound and sentiment more deeply.

4. The Case Particle *no* and the Aesthetics of “Visualized Sound”

A survey of Ogura Hyakunin Isshu reveals the remarkably frequent use of the case particle *no*: eighty-nine out of the one hundred poems contain at least one instance. This frequency suggests that *no* plays a central role in waka composition.

Previous studies have focused primarily on the grammatical and semantic functions of *no*. However, from a phonological perspective, *no* contains the vowel *o*, which tends to convey heaviness or resonance. Its placement within waka lines often influences rhythmic pacing.

More importantly, *no* contributes to what may be termed “visualized sound”—a perceptual effect in which rhythm and visual balance converge during reading. The sixty-ninth poem by Nōin illustrates this phenomenon clearly:

[嵐吹く] あらしふく (arasihuku)

[三室の山の] みむろのやまの (mimuronoyamano)

[もみぢ葉は] もみぢばは (momidibaha)

[竜田の川の] たつたのかはの (tatsutanokahano)

[錦なりけり] にしきなりけり (nisikinarikeri)

The repeated appearance of *no* creates rhythmic pauses that guide the reader’s eye and ear simultaneously. Acting as a connective bridge, *no* links mountains and rivers, upper and lower

perspectives, producing visual symmetry and auditory continuity. The result is a richly textured image of autumn foliage transformed into brocade by wind and flowing water.

5. Conclusion

Classical Japanese waka is a poetic form in which sound constitutes a core aesthetic principle. Through regulated syllabic structure, rhythmic pauses, phonological iconicity, and the strategic use of particles such as *no*, waka transforms sound into an expressive medium that conveys emotion, temporality, and perceptual space.

This study has demonstrated that sound in waka is not merely ornamental but deeply intertwined with meaning. By examining vowel quality, syllabic repetition, and visualized sound, the paper highlights the sophistication of waka's auditory design. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of classical Japanese poetry but also contributes to broader discussions in sound poetics and literary aesthetics.

Future research may further explore consonantal features, voicing contrasts, and additional phonological dimensions in waka. By moving beyond image-centered analysis, scholars can continue to uncover the rich sonic architecture that underlies this enduring poetic tradition.

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