

The Melody Line and the “Yukiyama Sanka” Folk Song

Vehicles driving downhill past the old Kazawa Onsen at around 40 kilometers per hour are likely to be filled with a familiar tune: “Oh My Darling, Clementine.”

This is the Melody Line, a “musical road” installed in 2010 on Prefectural Road 94. Musical roads use grooves on the road surface to produce sound when driven on at an appropriate speed. As of 2024, there are 38 musical roads across Japan, each with a unique song.

It may come as a surprise to hear the tune of an American folk ballad in the Japanese highlands. The melody itself predates the lyrics of “Oh My Darling, Clementine,” and is of unknown origin, but is believed to have its roots in an old Spanish ballad. The tune is well-known in Japan thanks to scientist and Antarctic explorer Nishibori Eizaburō (1903–1989).

Nishibori was a student at Kyoto Imperial University when he learned the melody of “Oh My Darling, Clementine” from his English professor. He was also in the university mountaineering club, and after an excursion in

February 1927, he and three friends found themselves snowed in at Kōyōkan Inn at the old Kazawa Onsen. With input from his friends, Nishibori wrote Japanese lyrics for the tune, creating “Yukiyama Sanka” (Snow Mountain Anthem), a song about climbing snowy mountains. Despite its composer being unknown at the time, the song gained popularity both among student climbers of the mountaineering club and among people living in the Kazawa Onsen area.

Many years later, the Dark Ducks quartet propelled the song to nationwide fame. In 1950, Kisō Tetsu, one of the quartet’s members, went on a ski trip in the Shiga Highlands in Nagano Prefecture. He learned of “Yukiyama Sanka” from a bus conductor who was humming the song. In July 1958, the Dark Ducks featured the song on their debut album, *Picnic*

Songs, and it was rereleased as a single the following year, in June 1959. Its place in the wider popular awareness was cemented in December the same year when the Dark Ducks performed “Yukiyama Sanka” on NHK’s nationally broadcast New Year’s Eve song contest.

Nishibori returned to Kōyōkan Inn several times. Around 1965, the innkeeper asked Nishibori to write down the lyrics to “Yukiyama Sanka,”

which are still on display at the inn today. The following year, a bas-relief of Nishibori's hand-written lyrics was installed at the old Kazawa Onsen to commemorate the song's birthplace.