

Music and Sound in Japanese Religions

SSJR Roundtable at the AAS
March 17, 2023, 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM
Boston Sheraton Hotel - Independence West (2nd Floor)
Session B029

Organizer: Michaela Mross
Chair and panelist: Levi McLaughlin
Panelist: Mina Endo
Panelist: Jennifer Milioto Matsue
Panelist: Duncan Reehl
Panelist: Makoto Harris Takao

Session Abstract:

Music and sound have long played vital yet under-studied roles in Japanese religions. Rituals feature manifold soundscapes through a panoply of instruments and the vocalization of sacred texts, as well as ambient sounds. Soundscapes mark ritual time, transport participants to different worlds, and evoke the emotions that define immersion in religious communities. Sound serves as a vehicle for communication with the sacred, because sonic expressions carry cosmological significance. Outside ritual contexts, music plays crucial roles in the lives of practitioners, with some devotees interpreting the playing of secular music as a religious practice. However, scholars of Asian religions rarely include the aural dimension in their research.

In this interdisciplinary roundtable, five scholars will draw on their in-depth research to discuss how the study of music provides important insights to Japanese religions. Makoto Harris Takao works on Japan's global relations from the sixteenth century to the present day through the lenses of music, religion, and emotion. Jennifer Milioto Matsue explores iterations of the *Heart Sutra* in popular music, analyzing how this transliteration into secular idioms impacts its original sacred intent. Duncan Reehl discusses how priests of traditional Buddhist denominations use popular music genres to popularize Buddhism and negotiate their professional and personal identities. Levi McLaughlin considers ways Soka Gakkai members have shaped their individual lives and the religion as a whole through treating European classical music as a Buddhist practice. Mina Endo examines the significance of musical practices through the historical evolution and practice of Buddhist hymns sung by Japanese American immigrants.

Our roundtable will discuss how we may apply insights from perspectives we gain from studying intersections of music, the importance of sound, and religious practice. What methods and approaches are useful in this endeavor? Which challenges and limitations do we face? How can we communicate musicological research to scholars of Japanese religions with a limited music background? Following reflections by each panelist, the session will engage the audience in discussion. We hope to inspire more scholars of Asian religions to incorporate sonic aspects into their research.

Session Follow-up (Courtesy of Levi McLaughlin):

The Society for the Study of Japanese Religions dedicated their session at the 2023 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in Boston to a distinctive roundtable on the topic of "Music and Sound in Japanese Religion." The session comprised four scholars of music and one religious studies participant, and their discussions drew in fascinating ways on a tremendously broad range of research interests. Makoto Harris Takao, Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, brought to life the sonic world of the Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian missionaries who brought Christianity to Japan in the sixteenth century. He supplied us with a vivid example from the archives, of a description of an improvised ritual observed by the Portuguese missionary Luís Fróis in which a Japanese participant rang a "bell." Takao posited that the Portuguese word could have indicated the inclusion of hachitadaki (bell-ringing itinerant Buddhist ascetics), creating a distinctive soundscape for a Catholic mass. Discussion with the audience led into other postulations, including chimes and bells taken from Buddhist temple settings, demonstrating the vitality of interdisciplinary engagements and the need for more of this kind of exchange in our studies.

Duncan Reehl, a graduate student in ethnomusicology at Boston University, discussed vagaries surrounding the operative categories "sound" and "music" as they are taken up by Buddhist priests who, in the case of his research subjects, transform their temples into otherworldly techno spaces. Mina Endō, from Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts, attended to the importance of sectarian contrasts when it came to regarding definitions of, and appropriateness of, sound and music in ritual settings. Jennifer Milioto Matsue, Professor of Music at Union College, raised questions about intent and efficacy when it came to transforming sutra recitations into rendering texts like the Heart Sutra into popular songs. Levi McLaughlin, drawing on his experience playing European classical music with Soka Gakkai musicians in Japan, chaired the session. The audience provided valuable insights into the participant's suggestions and asked generative questions about how to interpret the category of silence in sonic settings and the role of commerce and status (such as national treasure designations) in sound- and music-making, among other concerns. Interactions between approximately fifty attendees and the roundtable participants enabled valuable insights into the aural dimensions of Japanese religion.