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Musicalizing the Heart Sutra: Buddhism, Sound, and Media in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract: In Japan, explicitly religious content is not commonly found in popular music. Against this mainstream tendency, since approximately 2008, ecclesiastic and non-ecclesiastic actors alike have made musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra. What do these musical arrangements help us to understand about the formation of Buddhist religiosity in contemporary Japan? In order to answer these questions, I analyze the circulation of these musical arrangements on online media platforms. I pursue the claim that they exhibit significant resonances with traditional Japanese Buddhist practices and concepts, while also developing novel sensibilities, behaviors, and understandings of Buddhist religiosity that are articulated by global trends in secularism, popular music, and ‘spirituality’. I suggest that they show institutionally marginal but publicly significant transformations in affective relationships with Buddhist religious content in Japan through the mediation of musical sound, which I interpret as indicative of an emerging “structure of feeling”. Overall, this essay demonstrates how articulating the rite of sutra recitation with modern music technologies, including samplers, electric guitars, and Vocaloid software, can generate novel, sonorous ways to experience and propagate Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhism; music; media; Buddhist ethics; Japanese modernity; secularism



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1. Introduction: Mediating Buddhist Religiosity

The Heart Sutra is one of the most widely known and recited Mahayana Buddhist texts. It arrived in Japan as early as 732 CE (Tanahashi 2014, p. 40). It is recited daily in multiple languages around the world at meditation gatherings and Buddhist ceremonies by ecclesiastics and devout laity of Shingon, Tendai, Zen, and other denominations. Within Mahayana teachings, the sutra provides a discourse on *prajnaparamita*, commonly translated into English as the ‘perfection of Wisdom.’¹ Emphasizing the concept of *śūnyatā* (Jp: *kiū*)—commonly translated as ‘emptiness,’ ‘voidness,’ ‘zeroness,’ or ‘boundlessness’—it expounds a non-humanistic, ethically-oriented metaphysics that teaches that all phenomena—forms, sensations, perceptions, mental activities, and discernments—are void of essential, self-existence (Tanahashi 2014, pp. 10–11). It begins with an invocation to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, called Kannon in Japan, who is known within Mahayana Buddhist cosmology as a personified deity of compassion (Jp: *jihī*). Among religious individuals, reciting the sutra is widely believed to have a powerful ritual efficacy to cultivate ‘transcendent wisdom’ into the empty or boundless nature of reality. Devotees believe that by petitioning deities such as Kannon through sutra recitation, there may be liberatory, salvific effects that free living beings from anguish, as well as practical, this-worldly benefits (Reader and Tanabe 1998, pp. 30–31, 67; Tanahashi 2014, p. 9).

Heart Sutra recitation is an important sonorous practice within Buddhism. As anthropologist Charles Hirschkind writes, sonority is a crucial site for investigating how human senses develop “in accord with the demands of a religious tradition” (Hirschkind 2015, p. 166). Sonorous practices may generate forms of “attunement” to divinely constructed worlds, guide ethical actions, and mediate “one’s relation to a practical and moral world, with both natural and supernatural dimensions” (ibid., pp. 167–68). Within Buddhism,

the voice is believed to have spiritual effects: according to the doctrine of the Vimalakirtinirdesa sutra, it may “perform or accomplish Buddhist practices” (*koe butsuji o nasu*) (Ōuchi 2021, p. 211). In Japan, chant is used in Buddhist ceremonies in order to guide souls into their next incarnation and ensure a prosperous rebirth in the Pure Land, for generating merit, for affecting listeners’ salvation, for attaining enlightenment, and for securing different types of this-worldly benefits (ibid., p. 210). In these ways, sutra recitation and audition generates ethical attunements to both the practical world of everyday life, as well as to a Buddhist moral universe of karma and rebirth.

In traditional, ritual settings, Heart Sutra recitation is frequently accompanied by percussion from *mokugyo* fish-shaped woodblocks, *rin* bells, and sometimes *taiko* drums. *Mokugyo* and *taiko* typically maintain an even rhythmic pulse, and *rin* bells demarcate certain intervals in the chant. The vocal recitation involves a conventional, orally-transmitted rhythmic pattern with a mellifluous quality. Memorizing and internalizing texts such as the Heart Sutra through repeated recitation is an important part of monastic training for priests, and one of the basic, common practices of Buddhist monastic and lay-communities. The sutra is not always recited with percussion; the voice alone may suffice. As a form of humanly-organized sound (Blacking 1973), sutra recitation (*dokyō*) in general may be considered to be a form of cantillation with musical characteristics (Beck 2006, p. 18), but it is not conventionally considered to be ‘music’ (*ongaku*) in and of itself. While the voice reciting sutras—as well as certain aesthetically pleasing sounds—are historically an important part of ritual efficacy in Japanese Buddhism, *ongaku*—a universalistic and Eurocentric concept with the lexical capacity to refer to all humanly-organized sound, which came into common colloquial use through Meiji-period modernization efforts undertaken in the 1880s (Hosokawa 2012)—tends to be embedded within a secular epistemology that abstracts musical aesthetics from issues of ritual efficacy. Therefore, despite the thorough indigenization of Western-derived music styles in Japan since the late 19th and early 20th centuries—first through state-supported educational institutions since the 1880s and then through the development mass-media and popular music industries since the 1920s (Fer-ranti 2002; Wade 2014; Nagahara 2017)—distinctions linger between Japan’s institutionally preserved, traditional sonic practices—which are often glossed as *hōgaku* (lit. “national music”)—and the popular forms of *ongaku* that have developed over the past century-and-a-half (Tokita and Hughes 2008, pp. 1–34). For these reasons, sutra chant—framed within the purview of traditional temple religious institutions as *dokyō* rather than *ongaku* or *hōgaku*—is distinguished conceptually and practically from music making.

As ethnomusicologist Jennifer Milioto Matsue observes, in Japan, explicitly religious content is not commonly found in popular music (Matsue 2018, p. 160). Sonorous attunements to Buddhism, therefore, have conventionally been generated through traditional rites, mediated by texts and ecclesiastic authorities. The line between *dokyō* as sacred Buddhist sound and popular *ongaku* as secular sound has been institutionally demarcated and is historically overdetermined. While Japanese Buddhism has adapted to the vicissitudes of modernity in various ways since the mid-19th century (see, e.g., Josephson 2006; Shields 2017), its sonorous practices have been largely preserved in cloistered settings in contradistinction to the sonorous sensibilities of secular musical modernity. This has contributed to a normative sensibility of the sound of Japanese Temple Buddhism. However, against this normative tendency, since approximately 2008, ecclesiastic and non-ecclesiastic actors alike have made musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra, which adapt various sonorous elements of its ritual recitation into popular music forms. The recent development undertaken by individuals within Japanese Buddhist institutions to supplement traditional sonorous practices with idiosyncratic musical fusions as a form of public mediation and outreach is remarkable.

This essay pursues the claim that the circulation of mediated musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra indicate transformations in the public representation, sensibility, and understanding of Japanese Temple Buddhism. It shows how combining Buddhist practices with popular music is a crucial technique for priests to reconcile tension between their pub-

lic/professional/ecclesiastic identities, and their private/personal/musical sensibilities, as well as for reaching out to young people who increasingly shun organized religion. Musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra, among other compositions, generate novel, technologically and musically mediated ways to attune to Buddhist teachings. This essay suggests that these transformations can be well understood as a ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1977, pp. 132–33) that emerges from processes of sonic circulation and audition between the cloistered setting of the temple, and the technologically mediated sonic sensibilities of Japan’s secular musical modernity, facilitated by the global network assembled by the world wide web. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams formulated the term ‘structure of feeling’ to discuss “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”—processual, emergent “social experiences in solution” that “do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures” (ibid.). Musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra are affective elements of a structure of feeling that is characterized by articulating sacred techniques with modern musical forms in order to affect novel, hybrid modes of attuning to Buddhist Dharma and to reach new audiences. These articulations are made within the broader cultural context of trends towards secularization, religious disaffiliation among youth, an aging population, and increasing economic upon temples following economic deflation and recession (Reader 2012; Nelson 2013). For the purposes of the present essay, I provisionally name this structure of feeling ‘Buddhist musical mediation.’ This structure of feeling is specifically related the institutions of what Stephen Covell (2005) refers to as ‘Temple Buddhism,’ which denotes “the Buddhism as lived by the members of the sects of Japanese Buddhism that were founded before the 1600s” (Covell 2005, p. 4). This distinguishes “Temple” forms of institutional Buddhism from modern Buddhist-derived “new” religious organizations such as Soka Gakkai, which in some cases do infuse Western-derived music practices with Buddhist chant as part of their religious practice (McLaughlin 2003).

Religious practices may be understood, as scholars have argued (Vries 2001; Moors and Meyer 2005; Stolow 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Ugoretz and Baffelli 2021), as intertwined with practices of mediation. Through the analytic of ‘media,’ the musicalization of the Heart Sutra may be interpreted as part of a long history of the mediation of Mahayana Buddhism, which spread throughout Asia as a “cult of the book” (Lopez 2016, p. 14) through common mediated practices such as scripture-copying, recitation, and interpretive exegesis. For example, Kōbō Daishi Kūkai (774–835 C.E.), the founder of the Shingon sect of Buddhism in Japan, seminally interpreted the Heart Sutra as holding the “secret key” to all teachings of Buddhism (Thomas 2011). In this sense, the textually mediated practices of reciting, copying, and interpreting the sutra have constituted bases for the performance, reproduction, and sectarian differentiation of Buddhism in Japan for well over a thousand years.

How do musical settings of the Heart Sutra fit into this history? They emerge from a milieu of modern, electronic media and communications technologies such as the internet, computers, smartphones, which has greatly affected human sensibility and sociality and contributes to contemporary globalization. Scholars of Japanese religions Kaitlyn Ugoretz and Erica Baffelli observe that “advancements in technology, such as the invention of the printing press, satellite broadcasting, and the internet, often precipitate transformations in the mediation of religious discourses and practices” (Ugoretz and Baffelli 2021, p. 137). As Ugoretz and Baffelli point out, transformations in practices, sensibilities, and understandings of Japanese religions induced by the mediation of the internet and computer technologies have been relatively understudied. Despite how media technologies affect the sensoria of everyday life in Japan, scholarly representations of religious practices are often ‘purified’ of the effects of media. Within the ethnomusicological literature on Buddhist sonic practices, scholarship tends to privilege traditional repertoires and forms of practice, and does not engage with Buddhism’s integration into Japanese technological modernity (e.g., Weisgarber 1968; Berger 1969; Harich-Schneider 1973, pp. 42–45; Arai 1995; Malm 2000, pp. 66–74; Nelson 2008a, 2008b). In addition—as ethnomusicologist Jeffrey Dyer points

out regarding prior studies of Southeast Asian Buddhist sonic practices—this scholarship focuses on issues of aesthetics and philological history through “secular epistemologies that isolate musical characteristics from ritual efficacy” (Dyer 2020, p. 3). Against this background of scholarship, musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra might seem like outlandish hybrids, essentially detached from their sacred, traditional roots. Popular music aesthetics might appear to be inappropriate for achieving traditional religious goals. However, for music-making ecclesiastics, these arrangements may be serious performances of their individual religious sensibilities, articulated with respect to Mahayana metaphysics and worldviews. For lay people, these musical arrangements might lead them to engage with Buddhist religious content with genuine interest for the first time in their lives. Therefore, these musical arrangements should be taken seriously by scholars of music and religion in Japan.

Naming and investigating “Buddhist musical mediation” as a structure of feeling draws attention to ways that Buddhist content circulates through communications media and practices of audition in order to present a more holistic sense of how Buddhism is propagating and developing through mediated sonorous practices. While practices of musical arrangements of Buddhist texts are marginal and have not yet settled into institutional norms, their widespread circulation on media such as the internet seem to have induced transformations in how Buddhist cosmological and ontological systems may become knowable through the practices of audition, given the technologically mediated sensoria of musical modernity. Towards these investigative ends, this essay discusses how the musical mediation of the Heart Sutra generates novel forms of attuning to Buddhism, or just engaging with Buddhist content, through a hermeneutic study of the online circulation of these musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra, attending to media discourses, and drawing on ethnographic fieldwork experiences and interviews with Japanese Buddhist music-making ecclesiastics.²

This essay contributes to recent scholarship on the intersection of Japanese Buddhism and popular culture. Scholars including Jolyon Baraka Thomas (2012) and Elisabetta Porcu (2014) have attended to intersections within visual media and marketing. Jonathan Nelson’s *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan* (Nelson 2013) provides an important background for this study. ‘Experimental Buddhism’ refers to the creative, usually individually-located labor undertaken by Buddhist priests in response to the social, cultural, economic, and ecological complexities involved in adapting Temple Buddhism to the conditions of late modernity in contemporary Japan. The individually-located, affective labor of ecclesiastics’ music making with Buddhist themes is a technique of experimental Buddhism. Notably, Nelson discusses music in his survey of ‘experimental’ techniques for revitalizing Buddhist institutions (Nelson 2013, pp. 164–65, 176–77). Regarding the topic of music and Buddhist orthodoxy, he helpfully addresses the seventh precept from the Pali sutras that states that monks should “refrain from dancing, singing, music, [and] going to see entertainments [. . .]” (ibid., p. 164). He points out that while Theravada Buddhist sects are more “circumspect” in their usage of music, the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions which were established in Japan understand “the transformative powers of music” to be useful for purposes including “serving to focus attention, deliver parables, and evoke emotions and images conducive to awakening” (ibid., p. 165). His study of experimental Buddhism provides extensive and indispensable context regarding challenges facing Buddhist institutions today, although his methodology attends more to behaviors and discourses, rather than to sound, conceptualized as an affective, organizing element of social formation and human experience. This essay extends these analyses of Japanese Buddhism and popular culture by emphasizing the sense of sound and hearing.

2. Musicalizing the Heart Sutra: Modern Musical ‘Prayer Machines’

What happens to the religious functions of the sutra when it is turned into technologically mediated music? In order to answer this question, in this section, I discuss how musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra mediate idiosyncratic sonic performances of Bud-

dhist religiosity to a globally networked audience, and generate novel forms of attuning to Buddhism through the process of circulation. I begin with a general survey of these musical arrangements.

My chronology of these musical arrangements traces back to 2008, when MC AMIDA (a.k.a. EVISBEATS) released “Han’nya Shingyō RAP” (“Heart Sutra Rap”) (EVISBEATS 2008, 2:01). Ethnomusicologists Noriko Manabe has interpreted this as a non-devout performance of religious content that represents a ‘national style’ to the international world of music (Manabe 2013, 42). In 2010, Onyū, a user of the Niko Niko Dōga social media and video-sharing platform, uploaded a composition called “Heart Sutra Pop” (Onyū 2010) ‘performed’ by the virtual Vocaloid idol Hatsune Miku.³ Within a week of the video’s premiere—between 3–10 September 2010—Niko Niko users had uploaded more than 214 derivative versions. These included re-arrangements of the track featuring Hatsune Miku reciting the sutra in other musical styles such as rock (Apple41 2010), hardcore (UtsuP 2010), and ballad (Saphone 2010). There were also vocal and instrumental covers, including a popular *mokugyo*, *taiko* and *rin* cover by a Shingon priest who goes by the online moniker SemimaruP (2010). SemimaruP later collaborated with the composer and arranger Fukushima Yorihide in a “Japanese Music” (“*wagaku*”) orchestration of Onyū’s composition for an ensemble of *shamisen*, *koto*, *shakuhachi*, *shinobue*, *taiko*, *mokugyo*, and *rin* that featured a Buddhist priest reciting the sutra in the place of Hatsune Miku (Purapura 2014). Additionally, in 2010, the Jōdō-shin priest Zennen founded the VOWZ Band as an offshoot of the VOWZ Bar, which he spearheaded ten years prior. Making a musical arrangement of the Heart Sutra was one of their first projects (Zennen 2021, p.c.). In 2015, they uploaded a video of a live performance of their rock arrangement to YouTube (vowzband 2016); since then, they have uploaded numerous performances of the sutra, including a beatbox arrangement (vowzband 2020). In 2016, the Rinzai priest Kanho Yakushiji arranged a ‘chorus’ version of the sutra featuring acoustic guitar and soul-music inflected chant techniques (Yakushiji 2016). He has also recorded and released multiple musical arrangements since then, including a jazz piano version (Yakushiji 2019a), a techno version (Yakushiji 2019b), and a collaborative ‘telework’ version (Yakushiji 2020) that assembled a network of 60 priests from around the globe as a religiously motivated response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ In addition, he began uploading a series of videos called “1 minute Zen,” intended to introduce Japanese Buddhism to a global audience (Yakushiji 2021). In 2020, Akasaka Yōgetsu uploaded a version that features live-looping and beatboxing that quickly gained traction and became a global media sensation (Akasaka 2020a). Afterwards, as another religiously motivated response to COVID-19, he embarked on a 108-day project of live-streamed concerts on YouTube, where he chanted sutras and mantras using techniques such as live-looping and beatboxing, and also provided talks on Buddhist topics (Akasaka 2020b). This chronology provides only an overview survey of musicalizations of the Heart Sutra and other sonorous practices of Buddhist Musical Mediation.

Two transformations are involved in the process of musicalizing the Heart Sutra. First, through various composition techniques, signifying aural elements of the sutra’s ritual recitation are transposed onto a system of musical signs that we may gloss as ‘global popular music.’ Second, the sutra is transduced from its silent, textual mediation into an audible, reproducible form of mediation facilitated by electronic and computer technologies, rather than facilitated by the verbal practice of reading and recitation. Mediated musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra represent sonic and—as they are often accompanied with videos—visual characteristics of its ritual form as repeatable sonic objects that circulate online and become accessible through computer and internet technologies.

How does this mediation and musicalization affect the religious function and value of the sutra? The philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin famously argued that the “aura” of a work of art, or a religious ritual, is destroyed when it is disassociated from “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 2007, p. 220). He remarked that “the technique of reproduction detaches

the reproduced object from the domain of tradition," (ibid., p. 221) and in the process, removes the mediation of religious authorities, and may democratize the work of art. Is this the case with musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra? May this differ depending on whether they are performed by self-authenticating Buddhist ecclesiastics, or by the pseudonymous composers and remixers who use Hatsune Miku as their digital avatar? Scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Trine Brox (2019) took up similar questions *vis-à-vis* Benjamin, writing about a 3D-printed statue of Amida Buddha in Qingdao, China. While I concur with Benjamin that the technique of reproduction does open up possibilities for multifarious personal interpretations of the reproduced object—and online circulation amplifies these possibilities—following Brox, I suggest that the ways that reproducibility “detaches” musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra from the realm of tradition are not as absolute as his rhetoric implies. Reproducibility does not foreclose an object’s religiously meaningful reentry into traditional systems of signs and practices. Brox writes that “we cannot judge the value of [. . . a . . .] mechanically reproduced, religious object [. . .] unless we know how people interact with it” (Brox 2019, p. 107). An “aura can be produced in different ways and at different points of an object’s life” (ibid.). Based on my ecclesiastic interlocutors’ comments and audience engagements, it seems that musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra are able to generate a Buddhist aura through the sonorous qualities of sutra recitation and listeners’ practices of audition, as well as through the deployment of visual Buddhist iconography that authenticates priests and places them within the sacred environs of Buddhist institutions.

At the same time, we may note that these musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra emerge from a media environment that *has* reduced the necessity of religious elites to mediate sonorous aesthetic experience. Jolyon Thomas’s research on the usage of Buddhist content in the popular visual media of anime and manga discusses how religious content can become popularly accessible through techniques of play and have “hortatory or edifying” effects without the mediation of ecclesiastic authorities (Thomas 2012, p. 11). ‘Heart Sutra Pop,’ for instance, emerged and developed through social media platforms and inspired people to engage with and even learn the sutra, with no explicit connection with institutional religion. As we will see, ecclesiastics publicly intervened in its circulation in order to channel its popularity into sympathy for Buddhist institutions by authenticating it through performances that involved sacred sonic techniques and ritual implements, and, I suggest, affirmed its potential auratic qualities in the process. In addition, by drawing listeners into their social media channels through appealing music, priests may re-inscribe their exegetical authority by posting explanations of Buddhist teachings targeted at lay-audiences, such as Yōgetsu’s live-stream Dharma talks, and Kanho Yakushiji’s “1-minute Zen” videos.

Much more so than the media of Benjamin’s era, computer technologies and social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Niko Niko video afford users the capacity to link their mediated representations with their real and authorial identities. The appreciation of the capacity of technologically and musically mediated sound and video to generate a Buddhist aura and to affect attunements to Buddhist teachings is a defining component of ‘Buddhist musical mediation’ as a structure of feeling. While the auratic quality, or lack thereof, of sonic experience is ultimately decided by the audition of a listener, my research suggests that an aura may be generated through the sonorous reproduction of an acoustic environment that is reminiscent of Buddhist sacred spaces and occasions and through the visual encoding of signs of ecclesiastic authority. While not everyone will accept the religious value of mediatized musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra because of their departures from normative ritual traditions, others embrace the affordances of media technology to spread a Buddhist message and ethically affect listeners through sonic experience.

We may first consider how visual component of representation may place a mediated performance within the purview of tradition. Music-making priests represent themselves as ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ through iconic, visual and audible, signs, techniques, and modes

of comportment. Priests emphasize their iconic Buddhist garb (*sōi*) in videos of them performing music, encoding themselves as real or authentic priests. The VOWZ Band, for example, self-brand as “real” (*riaru*) monks.⁵ In the Shingon priest SemimaruP’s cover of “Heart Sutra Pop” at his Buddhist altar (*but sudan*), the abstract cartoon representations of Hatsune Miku and her disembodied voice are visually emplaced in a real-life scene that is visually coded as a site of Buddhist rituals for Japanese audiences. SemimaruP’s cover and his participation in the “Wagaku” version of the sutra ground this religiously ambiguous media object within the physical space of ecclesiastic authority and traditional ritual. Another recent, relevant example of priests authenticating themselves using visual signs occurred in 2019 in response to a police officer ticketing a monk for driving in his religious garments, claiming that they were too restrictive to safely drive. The hashtag #僧衣でできるもん (*#sōidedekirumon*), or “#ICanDoItInMyRobes” went viral on Twitter.⁶ Priests posted videos of them wearing their vestments and performing backflips, wielding lightsabers, and playing drums, among other nimble activities.

The sonorous vocalization of sutras has an especially substantial capacity to affect the feeling of a Buddhist aura through technological media. While visual iconography emplaces performances within the representations of spaces of sacred tradition, sonorous experience and the voice has the capacity to transport listeners into intimate, sensuous contact with Buddhist tradition. It circulates the sounds of the temple and of religious rites through the ears of the listener. Scholars have observed the capacity of sonic experience and technological media to “reconfigure space” (Born 2013). As musicologist Georgina Born notes,

“music and sound have long been employed to cultivate realms of both public and private experience, these capacities accelerated with the burgeoning of sound media from the late nineteenth century . . . [T]he gramophone and its precursors made it possible in the first decades of the twentieth century for music-listening to be relocated from the music hall, jazz club or concert hall to the home or brothel, while radio broadcast enabled music to accompany not only domestic life but factory labour and political meetings”.

(Born 2013, p. 3)

Contemporary computer and internet technologies and handheld media players can re-configure even the most mundane and secular space into one with a Buddhist aura by relocating sacred sounds and signs from the temple to the home, train, automobile, etc.—wherever a device can be brought in-hand. The sound of the iconic ‘grain of the voice’ priests reciting scripture—what Roland Barthes described as “the body in the voice as it sings” or vocalizes (Barthes and Heath 1978, p. 188)—serves an authenticating function for priests by bringing listeners into sensuous contact with their monastically-refined corporeal habitus. The cloistered spaces of recitation become accessible in reproduction through mass media networks. As mentioned previously, chant is traditionally used in Buddhist ceremonies in order to guide souls into their next incarnation and ensure a prosperous rebirth in the Pure Land, for generating merit, for affecting listeners’ salvation, for attaining enlightenment, and for securing different types of this-worldly benefits (Ōuchi 2021, p. 210). The ‘grain of the voice’ of priests reciting scripture, in this sense, may be felt to mediate relations between the living and the dead, to assuage suffering, and to generate merit as well as this-worldly benefits. Even without an explicit awareness of the ontological function of the voice by listeners, its distinctive grain embeds the material corporeality of these traditional religious practices. The sound of the stream of words chanted seamlessly in time may generate a sacred atmosphere through circulating indexical signifiers of Buddhism. Thus, for example, Zennen and the VOWZ Band are able to present a sonorously ‘authentic’ interpretation of the Heart Sutra, even as they embellish its conventional recitation with electric guitars and rock-and-roll drums. The grain of the priests’ voices reciting the sutra in their interpretation emplaces them sonorously within the soundscape of Buddhism, and may evoke memories of perhaps gloomy-seeming rites

and ceremonies; however, the playful usage of rock-music instrumentation may disrupt negative affective associations with this Buddhist-signifying vocal quality, and represent priests in a more positive, relatable light. In summary, I suggest that mediated vocalizations have the potential to generate a sacred Buddhistic aura in moments of audition, albeit one that is spatially, temporally, musically, and ideologically separated from a specific ritual occasion through media technologies.

Music-making priests' statements regarding their work demonstrate that the technological mediatization of sound, as well as its musical arrangement, does not dissolve its capacity to spiritually affect listeners and produce an aura of enchantment. Zennen and Kossan have both communicated to me that simply hearing the words of the sutra without understanding them can have "magical" effects (p.c., 24 and 25 June 2021). From their point of view, technological mediation does not negate the capacity of audition to realize these effects. However, it does seem that technological mediation and global trends in musical sensibilities—especially those broadly linked with the 'spirituality' movement and the ambient aesthetics of 'New Age' music, which have been trending in various forms in Japan since the late 20th century (Shimazono 2007; Gaitanidis 2010; Roquet 2016; Horie 2021)—do engender different affective modes than traditional rites. An 'aura' of sorts may also be generated, it seems, through the non-specifically-religious capacities of audible media to create ambient and atmospheric environments as "technologies of the self" that regulate affect (Roquet 2016, pp. 1–21). For example, it is more common for some (but not all) music-making priests to represent the affects of their musical arrangements in terms of "calm," "relaxation," "sleep," and "peace" rather than in terms of mediating relations between the living and the dead, or the idea of realizing Buddhahood in one's own body through sonic practice. Kanho Yakushiji explained his feelings about his 'telework' video of priests reciting his chorus arrangement of the Heart Sutra to Koshin Paley Ellison, an interviewer for Tricycle Magazine, in terms of its power to affect calm and create connections: "I hope that this video will be sent to the whole world as one of the messages from the monks, and that those who see it will feel calm and feel that they are alive now. I wanted to share the power of the voice of people and the power of connection with many people" (Ellison 2021). Akasaka Yōgetsu remarks in an interview with Miran Miyano of VICE media that sutra chant can "help heal people's hearts." He states that "I have had fans tell me that they were able to sleep well and relax due to my beatboxing videos, which is absolutely amazing" (Miyano 2020). These and similar musical arrangements articulate traditional Buddhist sonic practices with global trends in 'New Age' and 'spiritual' ideology. Through inducing a relaxing atmosphere of calmness that is infused with messages from Buddhist texts, these vocalizations may be interpreted as materializing Buddhist ethical commitments to reduce suffering and increase joy. At the same time, their form is indelibly linked to the neoliberal emphasis on the individual, atmospheric self-regulation, and autonomous self-care that has affected the social body in Japan and other postindustrial nations (Roquet 2016, pp. 9–18). Their reproduction and resounding serve an ethical religious function, but one that is practically and aesthetically distinct from the usage of chant in ceremonies and rites such as funerals. I suggest that we can imagine this technologically mediated ethical religious function as aiming to assuage effects of the "malaise of modernity," which philosopher Charles Taylor has identified as the sense of loss of meaning within the disenchanting secularism of the modern world (Taylor 2007, pp. 299–321), through specifically Buddhist techniques. Through mass media, these musical arrangements may enchant listeners with electronically transduced and musically articulated sounds of traditional chant, generating Buddhist auras in the conventionally secular circuits of trans-national technological modernity.

Interestingly, the audible signifiers of Buddhist texts—the words themselves—may be thought to have enchanting effects that draw listeners into the space of Buddhist teachings, even if they are not recorded from a human corporeal body. We see this in the case of Hatsune Miku's performances of Heart Sutra Pop, as well as Mindar, a robot priest at Kodai Temple in Kyoto. Tatsumi Akinobu, who is a Jōdō-shin priest that makes electronic and hip-hop music, told me that he felt that the vocalization of sutras—even if they are

enunciated by the synthesized voice of Hatsune Miku—had an important religious function by drawing people into the fold of Dharma teachings:

“If there’s an opportunity for a sutra to reach the general population—even just one person—and therefore propagate it, so that more people are able to hear it . . . Like, that Hatsune Miku [version] might spread [the sutra] to even more people. The people listening [to the teachings] will increase. If a [musical composition] happens to do that, isn’t that a good thing?”

(Tatsumi 2021, p.c., 24 March)

While ‘Heart Sutra Pop’ circulates through the conventionally secular media of the internet, synthesized, robotic voices have also been deployed within the sacred spaces of temples, as in the case of Mindar. Mindar is cast in the image of Kannon, and performs sermons on the Heart Sutra.⁷ Tensho Goto, the chief priest of the temple, explained a key idea about the robot in a news conference. “If an image of Buddha speaks, teachings of Buddhism will probably be easier to understand. [. . .] We want people to see the robot and think about the essence of Buddhism” (Holley 2019). He elaborates that while a robot does not have a soul in the Christian sense of the word, “Buddhism isn’t a belief in God; it’s pursuing Buddha’s path. It doesn’t matter whether it is represented by a machine, a piece of scrap metal, or a tree” (Samuel 2019). Even though these two synthetic modes of vocalization do not involve the bodily grain of the voice of chanting ecclesiastics, their novelty does have the expedient effect of stoking interest in Buddhism, and their mode of proliferating Buddhist Dharma messages is understood by many to not be out-of-place within Mahayana ontological frameworks.

Based on these comments about the religious efficacy of the voice and the audition of sutras, as well as current trends in media circulation, I suggest that musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra may produce a Buddhist aura by circulating sonorous Buddhist tokens. Drawing on the scholar of Buddhist material culture Fabio Rambelli (2016), I propose that we can imagine these media objects as “prayer machines”, having conceptual and practical continuities with premodern Buddhist material culture. According to Rambelli, early examples include prayer wheels—which are supposed to have the same magical effects as chanting mantras when spun—as well as musical instruments (*shakuhachi*, gongs, and drums) and ritual implements. He defines ‘prayer machines’ as:

“conceptually situated at the intersection of tools and semiotic devices: they are used to modify reality by enhancing human capacity to pray, but they also produce sense effects in a broad sense (spreading the Dharma, creating different ways to experience, if not understand, the teachings and to attain salvation). Importantly, in terms of their semiotic status, these prayer machines can be considered as special devices aimed at proliferating signifiers associated with Buddhism (ritual forms, sensorial elements, physical experiences)—and not its signifieds (more precisely the system of meaning associated with Buddhist teachings)”.

(Rambelli 2016, p. 104)

Imagining musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra as modern ‘prayer machines’ allows us to imagine how these media objects can work as ‘expedient’ or ‘skillful means’ (*jp. hōben*) within the context of other Buddhist objects, ritual implements, and teachings. They promote “novel and specific ways to ‘pray’ and spread Buddhism” through musical practice. They do not replace the traditional functions of ecclesiastic authorities, but draw on the affordances of contemporary mass media in order to provide a supplemental way of spreading the Dharma that is attuned to worldly sensibilities and the vicissitudes of technological transformation. By tracing different ways, these prayer machines function when they are thrown into circulation—when the prayer wheels are touched and set spinning—we can learn about the complex ways that the formations and sensibilities of the Buddhist religiosity in Japan overlap and generate friction with the behaviors, understandings, and sensibilities of secularism.

3. Musical Sound, Sutra Recitation, and Religious Efficacy

A major component of ‘Buddhist musical mediation’ as a structure of feeling is the recognition of sonic correspondences between the traditional sonic practices, and contemporary, global styles of popular music. Despite the distinctions that are often drawn between traditional Japanese forms of humanly organized sound and modern popular and art music, the theoretical affordances of the concept of ‘music’ *qua* ‘*ongaku*’ to translate different practices into a mutually intelligible register of sonic experience is a crucial element of musicalizing the Heart Sutra, and other Buddhist texts.

The Heart Sutra, as it is traditionally recited, has several sonic characteristics that are well suited to the process of musicalization: its rhythmic aspect, its mellifluousness, and its short length. Zennen, the leader of the VOWZ Band, told me that he didn’t feel there to be any significant difference in the spiritual value between traditional sutra chanting and performing the Heart Sutra as music. They are simply different styles of expression (*hyōgen*) with a different outward appearance (*mitame*) which take place in different social contexts, such as the live house instead of a temple (Zennen 2021, p.c.). He explained to me his motivations to for making a musical arrangement of the Heart Sutra, observing that “sutras are full of musical aspects. If I took those aspects and arranged them into more modern (*gendaiteki*) music, I could spread [the sutra and Dharma] to more people. So, I combined the two” (ibid). The Heart Sutra, in particular, lends itself to music because of its short length. Zennen remarked that “[i]t’s different from other sutras because it’s the shortest. So, to put it in a song is a perfect fit” (ibid). Tatsumi told me something similar, observing that “[if I] place a hip-hop beat along with a sutra, young people might become interested (Tatsumi 2021, p.c.). Asakura Gyosen—a Jōdō-shin priest who started holding “techno memorial services” in 2016 on the occasion Hōonkō, a rite that observes the memorial of Shinran Shonin, the founder of Jōdō-shin Buddhism—remarked in an interview that “I have long thought the rhythm of reading the sutras can be matched with techno music” (Hamahata 2017).

It is interesting to note the resonance between the historical importance of aesthetics to ritual efficacy in Japanese Buddhist sonic performances, and ecclesiastics’ attempts to modernize the sound of Buddhism through music making. As ethnomusicologist Ōuchi Fumi emphasizes, traditional Buddhist vocal practices “had to meet certain aesthetic norms in order to attract audiences and involve them in the enactment of performance in order to accomplish its ritual purpose” (Ōuchi 2021, p. 210). Through the development of *shōmyō* performance, ideas about religious efficacy and the aesthetics of performance became deeply intertwined (ibid.). She emphasizes that “[t]raditionally, there is no clear division between religious rituals and performing arts enacted for aesthetic or sensory pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is, in fact, indispensable in many cases for activating ritual efficacy” (ibid., p. 209). Throughout the history of Buddhism in Japan, popular songs were incorporated into proselytizing. Asakura Gyosen notes that in his musical setting of the Jōdō-shin text ‘Shōshinge’ for his annual techno memorial service, he is very careful that his electronically-modulated vocalizations correspond to its traditional melody. He remarks that this melody “was made about 540 years ago by appropriating the melodies of the popular songs (*poppu no songu*) of the day. So, depending on your way of thinking, sutra chant has been incorporating pop elements since that time” (Gyō 2019).

In part because of the strong institutional tendency to keep Temple Buddhism and modern music making cloistered apart, the aesthetic norms of sutra chant have been largely unaffected by Western-derived musical sensibilities throughout Japanese modernity. One consequence of this, however, has been that Buddhist practices may seem ossified and anachronistic. Meanwhile, the tastes of the public have drifted with changing local and global trends in popular music. While musical settings of sutras involve sonic transformations articulated by the concept of secularism, the practice of ‘modernizing’ styles of sutra chant through composing musical fusions in order to appeal to audience tastes may also be understood as resonating with long-standing traditions of proselytizing through aurally appealing sonic performances within Japanese Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhist ontology emphasizes impermanence and change, not a timeless imaginary of pure tradition. As the Heart Sutra itself teaches, all forms of sense perception and discernment are devoid of essential self-existence. In this sense, it is somewhat ironic that the sonic practices of Buddhist institutions in modern Japan have been resistant to transformation. Asakura remarks that “[t]he main teaching of Buddhism is nothing will remain. Everything will change.” (Swan 2021). He observes that within the history of Buddhism, it took approximately 500 years for the practice of creating statues of Buddhist cosmological figures to become widely accepted, and that, according to one theory—which nods to the Buddhism’s history as a cosmopolitan and transnational system of teachings and practices, rather than as a form of distinctive national culture—this development may have been influenced through cultural exchange with European Hellenistic cultures (Gyō 2019). He also observes that Buddhism has tended to incorporate the sensibilities of different times and places in order to transmit its teachings to the present. Buddhist modes of performance and artistic representation have gone through multiple iterations throughout Japanese history itself, after all. Therefore, he suggests that incorporating current technologies into Buddhist practice is an important stepping stone to ensure its robust, future development (ibid.).

Kanho Yakushiji similarly remarks that “I believe [that both] keeping the tradition and change are necessary. Arranging the sutra as music means ‘change.’ Not everyone approves, but I believe change is necessary to remain with the times and give a new generation a chance to learn about Buddhism” (Ellison 2021). Along these lines, the commenter C.Blackhole on Akasaka’s “Heart Sutra Beatbox” video writes that “tradition is important; however, just keeping tradition as-is will certainly become obsolete. Tradition is preserved because it can continue to incorporate new currents” (Akasaka 2020a). Importantly, these transformations are not *merely* aesthetic—at least in a secular epistemology of musical aesthetics that separates musical characteristics from its ethical and ritual functions. The articulation of sutra chant in the contemporary media milieu involves transformations in the sensibility of vocalization’s supramundane potentials, and may involve, as we have seen, a greater emphasis on the affects of ‘healing’ and ‘relaxation’ or humor or aesthetic relatability rather than on traditional ontological functions; nevertheless, the key point here is that the sound of the sutra chant itself has an ethical function that attunes hearers to *some* feeling and understanding of a transcendent Buddhist moral universe, even if these feelings and understandings involve different forms of comportment than traditional modes of attunement.

There is an important functional difference between the usage of musical prayer machines for public outreach, and the traditional usage of sutra chant for religious efficacy. ‘Buddhist musical mediation,’ as these examples suggest, involves the adaptation and mobilization of ideas about the enchanting and magical potentials of sonic experience through circulating musical prayer machines. However, it articulates these convictions of enchantment with respect to the urgencies of contemporary secular life in technologized, postindustrial society. These priests meanwhile continue to perform sutra according to ritual, reproducing traditional concepts and practices of ritual efficacy. Kossan, Rinzai priest who performs popular rock and metal songs by bands such as The Beatles, AC/DC, and Judas Priest in the style of sutra chant, told me that he often gets comments on his videos requesting that he perform these songs, rather than traditional sutras, at the commenter’s eventual funeral. He told me, “Playing AC/DC with Buddhist instrument is . . . I don’t think it can be the substitute of chanting sutras. [. . .] In the comments, many people give me a comment: please come to my own funeral and chant this song instead of sutra! [. . .] I’m happy they can leave that comment, but it’s still not sutra” (Kossan 2021, p.c.). According to Kossan, the traditional way of using sacred Buddhist texts for the purpose of guiding ancestral spirits to the next realm is fundamental to religious practice. In this way, the enchanting function of musical public outreach should be distinguished from other forms of religious efficacy.

Traditional forms of sutra chant and their concomitant ontologies of ritual efficacy may, indeed, become relics of the past, unless local public interest in Buddhism is revitalized. Musicalizing a sutra for public outreach will not cause these practices and ontologies of sonic efficacy to decay, as long as Temple Buddhist institutions continue to be able to produce practices, behaviors, and sensibilities of the voice's efficacy among new generations of ecclesiastics and religious communities. In summary, these musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra represent and perform a technologically mediated sonorous sensibility of Buddhist that is not imagined to be timelessly 'traditional,' but rather is in sync with the preponderant rhythms of the cultural, technological, and musical milieu of contemporary Japan. The relatable aura that these and forms of comportment that these musical prayer machines produce may draw new listeners into contact and sympathy with Buddhist teachings, but they are not meant to replace the traditional roles of important rites. Rather, they are expedient means that help ensure tradition's dynamic future development.

4. Intervening in Disaffection with Buddhism in Japan with Religious Play

Disaffection with religious institutions, uncertainty about religious identity, and the declining numbers of young parishioners in Buddhist temples have contributed to a burgeoning institutional crisis (Reader 2012; Nelson 2013). This is cited by various music-making ecclesiastics including Tatsumi Akinobu (Tatsumi 2019, p.c.), Asakura Gyosen (Gyō 2019), Akasaka Yōgetsu (Miyano 2020), and Zennen (2021, p.c.). Anthropologist Jonathan Nelson observes that "[a] gradual loss of popular support means that many of Japanese Buddhism's important sites will increasingly accommodate casual tourism and an emphasis on cultural heritage. But the small neighborhood or village temples may very well become a relic of another era unless they can rethink their purpose and find new resources" (Nelson 2013, pp. 19–20). While Vocaloid 'prosumers' may enjoy play with Buddhist content while positioning themselves apart from religious institutions, younger generations of Buddhist priests are faced with the challenge of stoking interest in Buddhism, lest their temples be forced to close due to waning religious interest and lack of financial support. For priests such as Zennen, members of the VOWZ Band, Kanho Yakushiji, Akasaka Yōgetsu, Tatsumi Akinobu, Kossan, Asakura Gyosen, and Tomomitsu Gashin, musical sound is a well-suited resource for revitalizing interest in their temples, both locally as well as through global media. Intervention in local Japanese disaffection with Buddhism by mobilizing ecclesiastic authority via engaging with media circulation is another important element of 'Buddhist musical mediation'.

It is commonly observed by these priests that Buddhism has a negative public image in Japan due to its frequent association with funerals. Many individuals will mostly come into contact with Buddhism and sutra recitation through its ritual role in memorial services and solemn-seeming ceremonies. A 2007 survey by the Japan Consumers' Association reports that in 2007, 89.5% of funerals were Buddhist (Yu 2010, p. 122). Akasaka remarks that "I think in Japan, people often associate Buddhism with funerals, and the sutra has a little bit of a negative and sad image" (Miyano 2020). These associations are not surprising, given the important, long-standing role of the voice and other sounds in Japanese Buddhism to mediate relationships between the living and the dead. However, much of Buddhism's negative public image is due to the relationship between Buddhist funerals, money, and the lavish "funeral industry" that emerged in the 1970s (Nelson 2013, pp. 43–44). Nelson writes that "the priesthood struggles with an image problem caused in part by how they stage and conduct funerals and memorial services" (2013, p. 47).⁸ He quotes a thirty-year-old male critic whose sentiments give a sense of the 'funeral problem' (*sōsai mondai*):

"Buddhist priests are totally caught up in tradition. They think it's enough to perform funeral services, and you don't see any initiative at all to reform the system. Lately they've been talking about things like the 'spiritual darkness in our hearts,' but each person is supposed to deal with it himself, and there's no collective effort, no place where everyone can vent their feelings. I think a temple

should really be a nucleus for that kind of activity, but they don't seem to play that role at all".

(*ibid.*, pp. 47–48)

Musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra show that music is well suited to transmuting negative affective associations with Buddhist sonic rites—and by extension, Buddhism as a religion—into positive ones. One common trope in comments on videos such as 'Heart Sutra Pop' riffs on the negative associations with funerals. Like commenters on Kossan's videos of rock songs performed with sutra-style vocals and Buddhist ritual implements, listeners of 'Heart Sutra Pop' and its iterations request musical arrangements be played or performed at their funeral. For example, one user writes: "Play this at my funeral" (Onyū, 1:04, #67473).⁹ Another commenter writes, "I'd also like to request this at my funeral" (Onyū, 1:05, #67766). More seriously, another comment reads, "My father loved Vocaloid, so at his funeral, when no one was around, I decided to play this." (Onyū, 1:36, #67596). A commenter on SemimaruP's videos requests that he officiate their funeral: "I request this priest at my funeral" (SemimaruP, 2:24, #10390). A comment on Akasaka's musical arrangement reads that, "When I die, I want this person to come to my funeral, for everyone to have a party together, and to be sent off with a smile" (Akasaka 2020a). Another commenter on this version reads that, "Hearing this at a funeral, [one could] ascend to heaven in high spirits. This is great" (Akasaka 2020a). These comments show pleasantly surprised affective responses to the circulation of musical prayer machines.

Re-arrangements and covers of "Heart Sutra Pop" on Niko Niko Dōga provide additional examples of how musicalizations of the Heart Sutra function like prayer machines that create novel ways to pray through practices of "religious play" (Thomas 2012, p. 11). One common trope for social engagement on this website is to post karaoke-style "*utattemiru*" videos, which loosely translates to "give singing a try." Other users may engage by performing musical instruments. The aforementioned video by SemimaruP plays with this trope by using the ritual implements of the *rin*, *mokugyo*, and *taiko* at his temple's Buddhist altar. To name just a few more of these sorts of videos, we may note a hardcore version (Tarachio 2012), an R&B version by the famous Vocaloid producer *halyosy* (2010), a pop version by a female singer (Tōkahako 2010), a *karaoke* and dance version by a young child (diveman 2010), a version by a 17-person choir with piano, *mokugyo* and *rin* accompaniment (Gianni 2016), and—bringing it full-circle—a version chanted by a Buddhist priest (Mirai-ji fukyō-bu 2017).¹⁰ Some user comments attest to "Heart Sutra Pop" as inspiring interest in, and appreciation for, the sutra itself. For example, one user writes "I got into the Heart Sutra thanks to this song" (Onyū, 0:35, comment #67716). There are numerous additional examples in this vein. These live performance videos show novel ways that people learn to recite the sutra in tune with Miku's melody, using the body in novel ways to articulate and internalize Buddhist scripture.

The reception of "Heart Sutra Pop" and its iterations are religiously ambiguous. On the one hand, as forms of prayer machines, they are created from and circulate Buddhist religious content to a globally networked audience. The participation of ecclesiastic authorities including SemimaruP and the pseudonymous representative of the 'Future Temple Proselytization Division' (*Mirai-ji fukyō-bu*) in this phenomenon authenticates the notion that even the synthesized voice of Hatsune Miku can be used to spread Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, user interpretations are multifarious, and do not necessarily involve feelings of religiosity in the sense of a professed faith. Many comments are 'tongue-in-cheek' (Thomas 2015). In fact, a large number of comments simply express laughter in some variations of the form of "*www*" (a Japanese equivalent to 'lol'). For example, one user quips in a comment on SemimaruP's cover: "Kūkai: 'How did it come to this?'" (SemimaruP, 1:42, #1742). Another user quips in a comment on the "Wagaku" version, "Why is this choice accepted as OK? LOL" (0:46, #573). Other users make jokes about the idea that one can "become a Buddha" (*jōbutsu suru*) through sonic performance.¹¹ Ironic comments read, for example, "If you listen to this song, you can become enlightened, lol" (Onyū, 1:30, #67606); "I get the feeling that I can become a Buddha, lol" (SemimaruP, 1:46,

#1702). While these laughter-tinged comments on “Heart Sutra Pop” might be interpreted as ironic, a comment on Akasaka’s musical arrangement describes an affect that takes these ideas about transcendent sonic efficacy more seriously. The user Ginko no Poo-san comments, “When I listened to this, tears started to flow and I felt the sensation that my body was floating in the air. Am I dead? Am I about to become a Buddha?” (Akasaka 2020a). The range of affective responses to musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra in general is wide, but one common pattern throughout is the simple feeling of surprise at experiencing such unexpected combinations of traditional religious content with various popular music styles.

The range of ambiguous affective responses to musical settings of the Heart Sutra can be interpreted by mobilizing Japanese religious studies scholar Jolyon Thomas’s analytics of ‘tongue-in-cheek religion’ and ‘religious play’ (*shūkyō asobi*). Idiosyncratic music-making can be readily interpreted as play, and musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra play with tradition. Thomas argues that religious content does not only become sensible through “fidelity to tradition, sedulity in ritual practice, and formal allegiance to a specific doctrinal lineage” (Thomas 2012, p. 11). Many people in contemporary Japan choose to engage with religious content through irreverent, tongue-in-cheek humor, which “gives [people] a chance to play at religion without formally adopting a religious identity” (Thomas 2015). Through his studies of religious content in the visual media of anime and manga, he argues that

“[a]udiences need not recognize a narrative as formally religious for it to serve an inspirational or instructive function akin to that found in conventional religious hagiographies and myths, and narratives need not be characterized as doctrine to have a hortatory or edifying effect akin to that of orthodox religious homilies and parables. Moreover, ritual activity and textual exegesis are not necessarily conducted under the auspices of formal religious institutions or through the mediation of clergies”.

(Thomas 2012, p. 11)

Thomas’s analytics and argument help us to understand the ambivalent reception of “Heart Sutra Pop” and other musical prayer machines. Buddhist signifiers and rituals are part of the fabric of Japanese society and cultural history, even if trends towards secularization have contributed to significant transformations in the general public’s relationships with these signifiers and rites. Practices of religious play, however tongue-in-cheek and unserious they may be, allow audiences to creatively engage with religious content as part of a common cultural inheritance. At the same time, playfulness is a strategy for ecclesiastics to work against the austere and gloomy image that is commonly associated with Buddhism.

5. “Two Worlds Becoming One”: Articulating Tradition and Modernity

In an interview conducted by Koshin Paley Ellison and published in Tricycle Magazine, Kanho Yakushiji, who is the 16th successive head priest of Kaizen Temple in Imabari, Ehime prefecture, discusses his sense of the separation between Buddhism and popular music. He explains that he became interested in music because of his father, who sung karaoke and played a bit of guitar. “I started playing his guitar when I was in junior high school,” he recounted to the interviewer, and “used to chant the *Heart Sutra* every morning before going to school.” Despite the contemporaneity of these practices, he recounts that they felt like separate worlds:

“Initially I thought about music and Buddhism separately. I started to realize the message of the songs I wrote was connected to Buddhism and the two worlds gradually became one. The major turning point was when I made the musical arrangement of the Heart Sutra in 2016. I realized I didn’t have to separate music and Buddhism anymore, and I came to the conclusion that I should simply convey my message in my own way”.

(Ellison 2021)

This idea of “two worlds becoming one” resonates with the experiences of other musicking ecclesiastics. Tatsumi Akinobu, the 16th successive head priest of the Jōdō-shin Shōsan Temple in Kagamimachi, Kumamoto prefecture, told me that, as far back as he can remember, he would visit the family’s *butsudan* and chant the *nembutsu* every morning. He would eventually learn to chant Pure Land sutras as part of his education through a Jōdō-shin school system. Meanwhile, he grew up constantly hearing piano through the paper-thin walls of the temple-home complex. His mother worked for the Yamaha corporation and taught music lessons in a room beside the main hall, and was also a big fan of popular genres such as ‘City pop.’ Therefore, while he got a sense from the older generation and institutional norms that Buddhist practices and popular music should not mix, in his own life experience, both forms of practice were “always together” (*zutto isshō*) (Tatsumi 2019, p.c.). Although he was reluctant to go public with his musical persona until approximately 2010, his family has supported his musical attempts to generate interest in Buddhism. Asakura Gyosen, the 17th successive head priest of the Jōdō-shin Shoon Temple in Fukui, explained to the reporter Hamahata Tomoyuki of the Japan News Network that his father gave him a stereo system when he was a first-year student in junior high school (Hamahata 2017). His fascination with “Rydeen” by the Japanese electronic music pioneer group Yellow Magic Orchestra led to DJ gigs on the weekends in Kyoto. One year after succeeding his father in 2015 as the head priest of the temple, he held his first “techno memorial service” event in on the occasion of Hōonkō. Kossan was born into a monastic family (Kossan 2021, p.c.). His early musical loves were rock and heavy metal music, and he played drums in several bands throughout high school and college. At first, he rebelled against the expectation that he must take over his father’s temple. After completing his monastic training, he moved to New York, joined a band, and undertook a masters’ degree studying the traditional music of Okinawa. In 2015, he moved back to Hachiōji, Tokyo to take over the Hōshō Temple, a family friend’s temple. Inspired by the viral success of a drum-set performance that he uploaded as part of the #ICanDoItInMyRobes Twitter campaign, he began to post videos of him performing his favorite popular music in traditional Buddhist chant styles (Kossan 2020). He explained to me that, because he used to play drum set in rock and heavy metal bands, he found the percussive *mokugyo* and *rin* would be perfect for fusing together the “opposite” sensibilities of sutra chanting and rock music (ibid.).

There are common tropes running through these stories, which may be interpreted as generative, frictional forces underlying the emergence of a musically-oriented structure of feeling among current generations of ecclesiastics of Temple Buddhism. Many these priests were the first sons born into family temples. They tended to feel that they had to keep their music-making private, unmixed with their public roles as ecclesiastics. They were strongly expected to take on their fathers’ role as the head priest of their family temples. While they held respect for their filial duties, music making and listening were also an important part of their early lives. They often felt a sense of conflict between their ecclesiastic roles and their musical desires. Interestingly, in the stories told by Kanho Yakushiji, Asakura, and Tatsumi, they inherited not only their ecclesiastic station from their parents, but also specific musical sensibilities. Other priests, such as Zennen and Tomomitsu Gashin (MixMag 2019), became interested in Buddhism through sudden affinities, after many years of engaging with popular music styles. Despite many individual differences, all of these priests have more or less independently concluded that combing Buddhism with music is a crucial technique for not only reconciling tension between their professional ecclesiastic and musical identities,

but also for reaching out to young people who increasingly shun organized religion. Another common element is that these priests have turned to contemporary music practices, concepts, technologies, and media in order to achieve their religious goals.

Ethnomusicologist Jennifer Milioto Matsue remarks that “the lack of ‘obvious’ intersections and absence of devotional expression [in popular music] reveals much about Japanese culture’s experience of religion in general. In the case of Japan then, asking why there is a *lack* of religious connection to contemporary popular music may be equally, if not more important than exploring where a correlation does exist” (Matsue 2018, p. 160). The stories of these priests help us to understand this lack of intersection by emphasizing the friction between conservative ideas of tradition, and the everyday reality of popular music’s ubiquitous integration into the soundscape of secular Japanese modernity. Even when priests’ tastes were inspired by their religious parents, they internalized a demarcation between Buddhist and musician identities. Since approximately 2010, this younger generation of priests has utilized and embraced global media communications technologies in order to stage effective interventions against the institutionally overdetermined opposition between Buddhist sonic practices and popular music practices. While these musical settings may have gained media traction due to the surprising novelty of seeing a priest performing popular music, these priests do not seek to be “unique” or “shocking” or “novel” forever. Kanho Yakushiji explains that, “I’m not stuck with any one identity anymore. I became a monk who happened to like music. I will just be myself and convey my message” (Ellison 2021). Akasaka Yōgetsu states that “It’s not that I wanted to gain attention for my ‘uniqueness,’ I just wanted to continue my passion for music. [. . .] In the same way someone plays the guitar or the drums, I myself am just a normal performer” (Miyano 2020). To reiterate, these priests seek to challenge the normative representations of Buddhism that make their musical performances surprising in the first place. Musicalizing the Heart Sutra is, as this essay demonstrates, a religiously significant practice that works towards this practical and worldly goal.

To be sure, these musical compositions cannot be holistically understood in terms of continuity with tradition, or as emerging solely from Buddhist ontological frameworks. While they exhibit conceptual and practical resonances with traditional Buddhist notions of materiality, musical arrangements of the Heart Sutra are articulated by practices, behaviors, and understandings of the world that derive the modern institution of secularism (Asad 2003). Most notably, these idiosyncratic interpretations of tradition shift from the institutional to the individual. They are in sync with what scholar of Japanese religions Levi McLaughlin describes as “a global secular shift, also at work in Japan, that has seen religion delegated to the interior realm” (McLaughlin 2021, p. 31). In these examples, priests’ individual and quasi-private musical affinities inform the style and content of musical arrangements. Musical sound, however, overflows the spatial boundaries of the individual and the private interior to create shared social experiences. In the first place, these priests interiorized their socially-cultivated individual musical affinities as private (inner) tastes and sensibilities, which were construed in contradistinction to their outward-facing public role as priests. These individually-guided sensibilities are now being mobilized to re-configure the public role of Buddhism. Through technological media, as Borne notes, music and sound mediation may have an exteriorizing function that engenders “collective forms of life and work” (Born 2013, p. 3). Therefore, while the individually-oriented form of these interventions should be emphasized, it is also interesting to observe how musical sound can exteriorize private sensibilities and bring about new, collectively networked—albeit spatially diffuse—ways of knowing and experiencing Buddhist teachings. The space of the sacred and the space of the secular become blurred through the circulation of musical Heart Sutra prayer machines. Ultimately, it remains to be seen and heard through further development and research how, and in what capacity, these sonic practices that appear between the margins of Buddhist institutions and secular life will affect collective sensibilities and understandings of Buddhism in Japan, as well as globally.

6. Conclusions

In this essay, I investigated how the sonic and religious practice of musicalizing the Heart Sutra in Japan propagates Buddhism locally and globally. I discussed how it transforms the sacred rite of performing the Heart Sutra by turning it into technologically mediated musical objects, which I interpreted using Rambelli's analytic of the "prayer machine." These musical prayer machines spread novel ways of engaging with Buddhist signifiers and embodying Buddhist Dharma, even if they do not necessarily affect serious religious sensibilities in listeners. I suggested that these prayer machines are affective elements of an emerging structure of feeling that utilizes mediated musical sound as an expedient means for priests to generate public interest in Buddhism at a time of relative institutional precarity, as well as for collapsing the overdetermined distinction between their personal/private/musical practices, and their professional/public/sacred sonic practices.

Through showing examples of priests' understandings of their musical arrangements with respect to Japanese Buddhist conceptions of ritual efficacy, aesthetics, and sonic performance as a material, ethical practice, this essay showed that, despite their stylistic disjunctures with normative representations of Buddhism, these idiosyncratic musical performances have resonances with long-standing traditions of using sound to spread Buddhist teachings and expediently appeal to the sensibilities of specific times and places. Rather than rejecting contemporary media technologies and the globally circulating musical trends—as seems to have been the norm among Temple Buddhist institutions until approximately 2010—priests appropriate them as expedient means for propagating the Dharma in a social milieu that is increasingly disaffected with Buddhism and religious institutions. While these idiosyncratic musical performances have substantial practical and conceptual resonances with Buddhist traditions, they are also affected by global trends of secularization. They are not universally accepted within Buddhist institutions, and the resonances with tradition that were pointed out are far from universally or univocally acknowledged. The audition of listeners, meanwhile, may be disenchanting and tongue-in-cheek, or may involve serious feelings of transcendent sonic experience, or some messy combination of the two. Whether or not a devout religious sensibility snaps into place through the audition of a Buddhist aura produced by a musical prayer machine, these media objects will continue to circulate and propagate signifiers of Buddhism.

In conclusion, the present essay suggests fruitful directions for future research into the articulation of traditional Japanese Buddhist sonic techniques with contemporary media technologies. Further ethnographic fieldwork is needed to better understand friction between these heterodox sonic practices and the institutional orthodoxies of Temple Buddhist denominations, to assess the range and scope of the impact of these practices on collective sensibilities of Buddhism, and to better understand how traditional conceptions of Buddhist sounds' ritual efficacy has been affected by the modern institution of secularism since the dawn of the Meiji period. Overall, this media-oriented study is a provisional step towards a more holistic understanding of how modern, media-induced transformations in sonic sensibility have affected ethical attunements to the Buddhist cosmos.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Appendix A. Tanahashi Kazuaki and Joan Halifax's Translation of the Heart Sutra

The Sutra on the Heart of Realizing Wisdom beyond Wisdom

Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken,
moves in the deep course of
realizing wisdom beyond wisdom,
sees that all five streams of
body, heart, and mind are without boundary,
and frees all from anguish.
O Shariputra [who listens to the teachings of the Buddha],
form is not separate from boundlessness;
boundlessness is not separate from form.
Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form.
Feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment are also like this.
neither stains nor purifies,
neither increases nor decreases.
Boundlessness is not limited by form,
nor by feelings, perceptions, inclinations, or discernment.
It is free of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind;
free of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and any object of mind;
free of sensory realms, including the realm of the mind.
It is free of ignorance and the end of ignorance.
Boundlessness is free of old age and death,
and free of the end of old age and death.
It is free of suffering, arising, cessation, and path,
and free of wisdom and attainment.
Being free of attainment, those who help all to awaken
abide in the realization of wisdom beyond wisdom
and live with an unhindered mind.
Without hindrance, the mind has no fear.
Free from confusion, those who lead all to liberation
embody profound serenity.
All those in the past, present, and future,
who realize wisdom beyond wisdom,
manifest unsurpassable and thorough awakening.
Know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom
is no other than this wondrous mantra,
luminous, unequalled, and supreme.
It relieves all suffering.
It is genuine, not illusory.
So set forth this mantra of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom.

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