


Writing this review in New York City in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic as well as the nationwide (and global) protests against the extrajudicial police killings of Black and brown individuals in the U.S. invites emotional as well as intellectual responses to these well-considered texts, particularly since both books sympathetically and astutely interrogate public engagements with music—a relationship that had been rendered distant and mute for nearly three months but has exploded back open in loud declamatory ways. The early singing from Italian balconies and the celebratory clapping, shouting, and pot banging in honor of those serving in hospitals and clinics in U.S. cities—though pointedly, not expressly for other essential workers, such as mass transit employees, food industry laborers, or those who warehouse, fulfill and deliver goods to our doorsteps—were heard in contrast to the silenced streets and quieted neighborhoods that marked the period of shelter-in-place.

When read together, these two books provide readers with a thought-provoking overview of the public soundscape in urban Japan today with analyses of specific relationships among sound, space, and social interactions. (I was asked to review both books in a single review and so, rather than simply go through each book separately, I will attempt to bring these two texts into dialog. I want to note that this is not the intent of either scholar nor should any reader assume that there is an inherent relationship between the two texts simply because both studies are located in contemporary urban Japan. My apologies to the authors if my strategy seems to shortchange their work; that is not my intent.)

Due to space limitations, I will focus on a primary overlapping concern both scholars share (regrettably, the rich analyses offered in each book will be represented here by a delimited discussion). The dominant discussion in both books centers on the relationship between the public and the private contexts as articulated and partially constituted by musical sound bolstered by perceptive explorations of a number of related issues, including the economic and political valences of that relationship. Lorraine Plourde and
Marie Abe provide, for those unfamiliar with Japan, the historical and cultural contexts for their thoughtful considerations of the specific musical activities and situations they discuss. Their books are fully resonant, however, in other, i.e., non-Japanese, contexts, particularly in terms of dissecting the relationships between music and urban spatialization and the complicated and contradictory nature of music that cultivates public sociability in order to enhance commercial interests.

Plourde focuses on public spaces through hearing bodies, both as active and passive listeners, as well as through the self-conscious efforts of BGM (background music) producers in managing the sonic ambience of interior public spaces, such as depâto (department stores) and offices. Abe focuses largely on the musicians and the streets in which a majority of chindon-ya performances take place. But they share an interest in music’s usefulness in enhancing sociability and how music helps constitute social relations in various ways. Both authors discuss the social intimacies generated by hearing music in public spaces in which music is not a primary (or, often, even a secondary) priority. Further complicating matters is the fact that BGM and chindon-ya are not necessarily thought of as “music.” A musical ensemble hired to promote businesses that rely on a hodgepodge of songs of various vintage and genre (i.e., not a conventional vernacular music ensemble but a commercial entity), Abe notes that chindon-ya is conceptualized as “neither music nor noise, and never having been canonized, documented, or commodified, chindon-ya was a sound that was hardly listened to. It does not necessarily depend on having a conventional audience—it is overheard amid other urban sounds” (23). BGM has little chance of being canonized, either, and for similar reasons. As Abe’s interlocutors assert, “Chindon-ya is first and foremost considered a business, rather than a musical genre” (24), a sentiment that would likely resonate with Plourde’s interlocutors from BGM companies. In effect, it would be as if ad jingles and muzak were studied, canonized, and otherwise taken seriously (Joseph Lanza’s Elevator Music is a welcome exception, and I was pleasantly surprised to see Plourde cite his work).

Using Anahid Kassabian’s richly textured theorization of the “ubiquitous music” of contemporary life, Plourde contrasts, on one hand, the intense listening practices of onkyô (from Plourde, “a minimal, improvised genre of electronic music that emphasizes sound texture, gaps, and silences rather than melody or rhythm” [15], notably performed at low volume and with as little physical movement by the musicians as possible) audiences and classical music café patrons with the targeted connoisseurship of BGM producers and their idealized projections of their “audience,” or more precisely, “non-listening listeners,” on the other. In fact, while Plourde opens with a chapter apiece on onkyô and classical music cafés, the heart of the book is in the second half, devoted to digging deeply into Kassabian’s notion of ubiquitous listening through a study of BGM. Plourde’s discussion of music that is not meant to be actively engaged in but, rather, to serve as an ambient background for other, primarily commercial, activities central to a given space, such as shopping in a depâto or working in a corporate office is an illuminating analysis of the ways in which music’s affective power has been harnessed as a tool of corporate control. Plourde’s discussion of the ways in which “BGM in Japan is emerging as a form of ambient labor control that exploits a particular mode of sonic
engagement” (82) that manages, for example, to inculcate an affective reflex in listeners for whom “spaces without sound” become “discomforting” (78) indicates the far-reaching consequences corporate control of the sonic environment entails.

One space in which issues of comfort/discomfort and background ambient sound come together in illustrative ways is the public restroom, a space that is conceived of as simultaneously public and private. While Plourde focuses on upscale department store women’s restrooms, it would have been interesting to contrast it with other similarly conceived spaces, such as the sento or public baths found in many residential neighborhoods. In any case, Plourde notes the mercantile rationale behind providing a pleasant sonic ambiance in a room dedicated to a mundane human activity: “As the TML [Tōyō Media Links, a sound design company] employees pointed out to me, public restrooms are incredibly important spaces in Japan, and their cleanliness is often reviewed in online sites, such as Tabelog. This applies especially to restrooms located within department stores, which are typically connected to railway stations and thus used frequently by commuters who do not actually shop in them. As the employees explained during our interview, the more positive experience someone has in a public restroom increases the likelihood that they will associate that positive atmosphere with the department store itself. Ideally, satisfied washroom goers will become devoted customers” (122–23). Part of the “positive experience” is the “relaxing sounds” chosen to “perfectly match” the aesthetically appointed restroom, filled with lush greenery and “stylish hand soaps” (123), that is, on one hand, meant to enhance the otherwise quotidian act of elimination but, on the other hand, is clearly mandated by the profit motive. Here, Plourde’s insights into the role of BGM and ambient sound design reveal the ways in which C-suite concerns with productivity enhancement and profits extend their reach into the private material lives of customers and workers beyond store shelves and cubicles.

By contrast, Abe notes how chindon-ya performers must use the open streets to induce a sense of social empathy in their listeners, who may be completely uninterested in their musical or promotional offerings, hurriedly walking past them in their daily errand runs through a shōtengai (shopping street). Like Plourde, who notes how much of the BGM she studies is meant to be heard as “sourceless,” as a pervasive sonic envelope listeners are aware of but not actively listening to, Abe describes chindon-ya performers as similarly “sourceless” despite their conspicuous clothing and an aesthetic of nigiyakasa, which Abe defines as a “particularly dynamic and spirited sociality, as well as the raucous sounds of interactions, multiplicity, and economic prosperity that characterize festive gatherings” (4). Abe, however, also discusses how “listeners at a distance can be touched by chindon-ya sounds without seeing the chindon-ya performing. The separation of sounds and visible sound source can have a powerful affective effect on the listener” (123, original emphasis).

Chindon-ya performances enact what Abe terms embodied heterophony in which the ensemble not only performs the music heterophonically but also walks out of sync with the other ensemble members, as well as “out of tempo” with the music (chindon-ya performers move constantly throughout their street performances), a visual and physical corollary to the musical heterophony. This heterophony plays against the music’s history in which the nineteenth-century European military brass bands brought the trumpet and
saxophone (and clarinet) to Japan, largely displacing the quieter shamisen (three-stringed lute) from the chindon-ya ensemble while retaining Japanese percussion instruments. But the coordinated movements of the military band were discarded because, as Abe notes, “synchronizing one’s footsteps with others according to the regular pulse provided by music was an entirely new concept [for nineteenth-century Japanese]—giving rise to the prevalent discourse of the rhythmically deficient Japanese body, which persists in various racialized tropes to this day” (41).

Alongside this embodied performance of difference, Abe’s central argument is that chindon-ya ensembles counter the teleological claims of modernity and progress marked by the privatization, regulation, and alienation of urban space through their active continuance of an earlier sense of shared public spaces marked by heterogeneity and sociability (xxii). In tracking the effectiveness of chindon-ya street performances, Abe uses the trope of resonance in two ways. Hibiki, the Japanese term, is used to account for the ways in which chindon-ya’s “sounding... produce sociality, both acoustically and affectively” (4). She uses the English term, resonance, to structure her account of the “historical, affective, acoustic, and political” work that chindon-ya performs through the sonic and the audible (4). I do not have space here to discuss the multiple ways Abe deftly mobilizes hibiki/resonance, but I do want to consider one aspect that is a shared concern with Plourde, made even more poignant as the world’s economies have been eviscerated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Abe discusses chindon-ya’s long history of filling its ranks with those who have limited choice of employment, pulling from the indigent and the ranks of the socially marginalized, such as the burakumin or “untouchable” class. Hayashi Kōjirō, founder of leading chindon-ya troupe Chindon Tsūhinsha, is notable for being a college graduate who chose to become a chindon-ya performer. It is little wonder he has introduced chindon-ya to the concert stage and studio classroom. Moreover, Hayashi’s choice to become a chindon-ya performer meant he accepted the precarious nature of his chosen profession (though it must be said that his entrepreneurial skill and the relative dearth of established chindon-ya in Osaka when he first started helped him establish what is now a profitable business). Yet it is the ways in which chindon-ya performers sound out empathy that they cut across intra-Japanese economic and social difference by “touching listeners through sound” past physical barriers of various kinds, such as walls or around corners in the meandering neighborhood streets of Osaka or Tokyo, echoing in some ways the “sourceless” BGM Plourde discusses. In a passage that will resonate with readers who have been sheltering in place for the past couple of months (March-June 2020), Abe describes this process: “Chindon-ya practitioners’ empathetic sounds reach across physical boundaries in hopes that their resonances might invite those inside to come out of their rooms, onto the veranda or into the street, to forge new social relations with chindon-ya among themselves and with local commerce. Streets, often assumed to be an abstract space of social anonymity, become a site of social warmth when home is considered a place of isolation” (127, added emphasis)—notable at a time of shelter-in-place in which the home isolates us even as it is conceived of as a safe zone, separate from potentially “infected” public spaces. But as various cities and states relax shelter-in-place restrictions and in
In contrast to the safe but isolating space of “home,” public spaces have become refashioned as sites of “social warmth” though fraught with infectious risk (as seen in the protests against police brutality).

Relatedly, precarity is a frequent signifier of contemporary Japan, often invoked in newspaper op-ed essays, for example, and both authors make a point of drawing out the clear lines that run between economic precarity and the music they analyze. Plourde sums up the pervasive sense of the “post-bubble precarity,” writing in the wake of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s neoliberal policies, dubbed “Abenomics,” that the “economic and social insecurities of everyday life in recessionary Japan have become more pronounced... leading to the experience of social precarity—‘being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one's (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community’” (83–84). The chapter in which Plourde discusses this sense of precarity is titled “Feeling Uncomfortable Without Sound: Muzak as Affect Management for Office Workers,” explicitly spelling out the role BGM companies hope to play in this environment of alienated office workers’ sense of precariousness. Plourde acknowledges that the office workers she focuses on “are not economically precarious in the ways in which temporary or freelance workers are [40 percent of the workforce, according to Plourde]” (83), though they remain anxious about their long-term livelihoods. BGM is used in this context to promote higher worker productivity by mollifying workers’ levels of alienation and sense of precariness through innocuous instrumental BGM. Plourde’s interlocutors at BGM production companies actively engender the idea that “work or home spaces without intentional background music or sound are believed to be unnatural, unsettling (iwakan), and desolate (sabishii), and, by extension, unproductive” (100). Plourde’s corporate interlocutors acknowledge that alleviating workers’ sense of precarity, among other stresses, through the affective work that BGM performs is good for business. Keeping employees happy, in other words, is not the primary concern—maintaining highly productive employees is the real incentive for providing unobtrusive yet palliative music in the office.

Keeping this state of affairs in mind, Abe writes of the ways in which chindon-ya has induced “romanticized nostalgic longing not only for the premodern and pre-Western, but also for a precapitalist economy” (89) despite its use to promote businesses. For Plourde, her discussion of a sonic patina captures the sense of temporal sedimentation particular engagements with music initiate and promote in the classical music cafés of Tokyo, which have their roots in an earlier era of scarcity in which music fans shared their recordings because recordings were expensive and often simply unavailable for most individuals—notably, a social amiability at work here. Yet, despite the intensely “private” listening sessions encouraged, even mandated, in these spaces, “music cafés draw on the tactile nature of sound... to create sociality and intimacy among patrons” (73). Plourde describes “masters” of cafés playing particular recordings for regular patrons, for example, or the ways in which listeners accommodate each other in the tightly monitored space.

Both authors question the rhetoric of nostalgia, however, in fully explaining the affective power of the music they study by noting how both BGM and chindon-ya have become, if not exactly art music, removed from their original contexts in some cases. In
the case of BGM, musician Hosono Shinichi and visual artist and graphic designer Odajima Hitoshi collaborated on a 2007 recording, *Music for Supermarket*, which reflexively (and quite cleverly) parodied the relationship between BGM and its corporate patrons. Hayashi Kōjirō has produced Chindon Tsūshinsha stage concerts and recording sessions, both new contexts for chindon-ya that reframe the contention that chindon-ya is a business rather than a musical genre. It may be an inevitable move as both BGM and chindon-ya become increasingly anachronistic in their original contexts with workers increasingly working from home or in temporary work spaces, particularly as the pandemic has dictated new work relations and public streets remain vectors of disease. Moreover, social distancing disallows the type of personal interaction Abe celebrates as a defining feature of chindon-ya’s ability to create social spaces encouraged by (temporary) social intimacies. This also raises the question about the ways in which Chindon Tsūshinsha’s embodied heterophony might work differently onstage or how social empathy might be induced for an audience at their performances on London or New York stages where, presumably, a large portion of the audience does not understand Japanese, much less engender any feelings of nostalgia for or register any recognition of much of the repertoire.

Space limitations disallow me from tangling with, or untangling, the many more insights, histories, and ethnographic detail both scholars bring to their studies, so I invite readers interested in the connections between sound and urban spatialization, music and sociability, the sonic public and the sounding body, as well as specialists in Japan studies in addition to ethnomusicologists, sound studies scholars, and anthropologists more broadly, to read these engagingly written and deeply perceptive texts.

I’ll conclude by briefly circling back to think again on the coronavirus pandemic and its effect on public spaces. While Japan has seen less pronounced consequences to the pandemic than the U.S., the spaces and practices studied by Plourde and Abe have been momentarily paused. These two books, however, can help us hear the evidence of a large-scale intimate sociability emerging from all those clapping, pot-banging cheerers on all those urban balconies as well as in all those chants of “Black lives matter” rising from all those public streets in cities around the globe, articulating a widespread empathy to the communities and individuals caught in the links between biological and economic precarity that are currently playing out—and being sounded out—across a planet in flux.

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