

The Soundscape of Contemporary Buddhist Music in Taiwan: Tzu Chi Vesak Ceremony

Authors : Sylvia Huang

Abstract : Contemporary Buddhist music has been emerged at the new forms of large-scale public Buddhist ritual ceremonies that may involve up to 10,000 participants at a time. Since 2007, the Buddha's Birthday ceremony (Sanskrit, Vesak) by the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation has being held at major cities in Taiwan and many affiliated Tzu Chi offices around the world. Analysis of this modern and technologically-dependent ceremony sheds new light on the significance of music in contemporary Buddhist ritual, and also on recently enhanced and increasingly intimate connections between music and Buddhism. Through extensive ethnographic research of ten years (2007-2017), the research explores how the form of contemporary Buddhist music relates to the role of music in participants' experience of the ritual and the way in which they construct meaning. The theoretical approach draws on both ethnomusicology and Buddhist teachings, Dharma. As soundscape is defined as the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape, the concept of soundscape is utilised to examine the contemporary ritual music in the Tzu Chi Vesak ceremony. The analysis opens new territory in exploring how analysis of Buddhist music can benefit from incorporating Buddhist philosophy within the methodological approach. Main findings are: 1) music becomes a method for Buddhist understanding through a focus in particular on how the ceremonial program is followed by music, and 2) participants engage with each other and entrain with music in the Vesak ceremony. As Buddhist sounding, such as scripture reading, liturgical chanting, and ceremonial music singing, is a sonic epistemological knowing of the conditions in which Buddhism is practiced, experienced, and transmigrated, the research concludes by showing that studies of Buddhist music have the potential to reveal distinctively Buddhist concepts, meaning, and values. Certain principles of Buddhist philosophy are adopted within ethnomusicological analysis to further enhance understandings of the crucial function of music within such a ritual context. Finally, the contemporary Buddhist music performance in the ceremony is possessed as a means of direct access to the spiritual experience in Buddhism.

Keywords : buddhist music, Taiwan, soundscape, Vesak ceremony

Conference Title : ICMC 2018 : International Conference on Music and Consciousness

Conference Location : Kyoto, Japan

Conference Dates : November 15-16, 2018