The Sutra of Druma, King of the Kinnara and the Buddhist Philosophy of Music

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Abstract
This chapter discusses a little-known Buddhist scripture, the Sutra of the Questions by Druma, King of the Kinnara (Daiju kinnara-ō shomon-gyō), translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in the early fifth century. This sutra is unique in that it proposes a powerful, and sympathetic, philosophy of music rooted in the Mahayana doctrines of emptiness; it also offers a template for Buddhist rituals involving music and dance that have been performed in Japan since the eighth century as part of the Gagaku and Bugaku repertory.

Keywords
Buddhism and music. Sutra of the Questions by Druma, King of the Kinnara. Gagaku. Philosophy of music (Japan).

Summary
1 Introduction. – 2 Buddhist Attitudes Toward Music. – 3 The Sutra of Druma, King of the Kinnara. – 4 King Druma’s Philosophy of Music. – 5 King Druma, Buddhist Music, and Japanese Gagaku.

1 Introduction
Early Buddhism had a negative attitude towards music and dance; the Vinaya codes explicitly prohibit monks, nuns, and lay followers not only from performing, but also from listening or watching performances. This stance is still standard in Theravada Buddhism. The Mahayana traditions took a different position; for them, at least some types of music and dances (those who contained Buddhist elements or could be used to promote Buddhism) could be considered...
offerings to the Buddhas and were therefore allowed. Moreover, canonical descriptions of the Pure Lands are replete with references to music and melodious sounds of all kinds. However, in most Mahayana cultures monks were (and still are) only allowed to play a limited range of ceremonial instruments, and extra-liturgical music and dances are performed by lay people. Japan seems to be a notable exception, both for the richness of music and dances used at Buddhist rituals (Gagaku 雅楽 and Bugaku 舞楽) and for the fact that Buddhist priests also engaged in music and dance in religious and secular contexts.

In fact, there is a scriptural basis to this: the Sutra of the Questions by Druma, King of the Kinnara (Daiju kinnara-ō shomon-gyō 大樹緊那羅王所問経, T 625; hereafter, Sutra of King Druma), translated by Kumārajīva in the early fifth century. It is a little-known scripture today, without an extensive body of critical scholarship. This sutra is unique in that it proposes a powerful, and sympathetic, philosophy of music rooted in the main Mahayana doctrines; it also offers a template for Buddhist rituals involving music and dance that have been performed in Japan since the eighth century.

In this chapter, after an overview of standard Buddhist attitudes toward music, we present a summary of the Sutra of King Druma, followed by a discussion of the philosophy of music it proposes. We will then conclude with considerations on this sutra’s impact on Gagaku and Bugaku and their role in Japanese Buddhism.

2 Buddhist Attitudes Toward Music

It is a well-known fact that early Buddhist sources present negative views of music, to the point of prohibiting it to monks, nuns, and lay practitioners. In the Zōitsu Agonkyō 増一阿含経 (T 1, no. 2, 756c) the Buddha prohibits monks and nuns from discussing music, singing, and dance (kabu 歌舞, gigaku 伎楽), because these subjects, along with wine drinking and comedy, are not appropriate for them (T 1, no. 2, 781bc). The Vinaya codes also prohibit monks, nuns, and lay people not only to perform music and dance, but also to watch or listen to performances (Makasōgi ritsu 摩訶僧祇律 T 22, no. 1425, 540b; Jūjuristu 十誦律 T 23, no. 1435, 269bc). In these texts, music is forbidden because it is related to sensual pleasure and leads to inordinate behaviour, and is therefore a major obstacle to Buddhist practice.

This chapter is based on a paper I presented at the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies, Stanford University in May 2019. I am grateful to Paul Harrison and Irene Lin for the invitation and their comments to the paper. I also benefited from suggestions from Ōuchi Fumi, Vesna Wallace, Matt Gillan, James Robson, Carl Bielefeld, and Ellen Van Goethem.
However, sutra chanting is already attested since an early period, and early scriptures praise chanting the scriptures with a beautiful singing voice (Zōitsu Agonkyō, T 1, no. 2, 558a, 673b). The orthodox practice of sutra chanting opens up the possibility of an aesthetic experience in connection to such a devotional act.

In fact, early scriptures also show a positive attitude towards music, singing, and dancing, as long as they are performed as offerings to the Buddha. The Makasōgi ritsu allows the members of the Samgha to attend music performances (gigaku) of various kind offered by lay patrons at important ceremonies, such as those commemorating the birth of the Buddha, his enlightenment, or his first sermon (T 22, no. 1425, 494a). A more explicit praise of music offerings is present in Hōen shurin, when the Buddha attended a music performance in the city of Śravastī:

All these people played music as an offering to the Buddha and the Samgha; because of the merit of that, in the future for a hundred kalpas they will not fall into an evil destination (akudō), for a hundred kalpas they will receive the highest pleasure for gods and humans, after which they will become pratyeka buddhas. (T 53, no. 2122, 576c)

In general, Mahayana scriptures tend to show a more positive attitude towards music. The Lotus Sutra says that in a distant past, the Bodhisattva Myōon played music of all kinds (hyakusen no gigaku) for 12,000 years to the Buddha Unraion’ō, and because of that he was reborn in the Buddha-land of Jōgeshukuōchibutsu (T 9, no. 262, 56). The Konkōmyō saishōō kyō describes the virtues of Benzaiten’s voice that leads beings to salvation (T 16, no. 665, chapter “Dai-Benzaiten-nyo-bon”). Here, Benzaiten’s voice is not an offering, but a tool to induce beings to accept Buddhism.

A distinct thread in Buddhist ideas about music concerns the presence of music in the heavenly realms and the Pure Lands. The Muryōju kyō describes Amida (Skt. Amitābha)’s Pure Land, with the unsurpassable beauty of the sound produced by the trees of the seven jewels, and the myriad kinds of music (gigaku) produced spontaneously, in which each sound is the sound of Dharma (hōon); moreover, heavenly beings come to play music for the Buddha, the bodhisattvas and the śrāvaka. According to this scripture, such heavenly music is not only an adornment of the Pure Land, but a veritable manifestation of the Buddha Amida endowed with the power to lead beings to the Land of Bliss. It is worth noting that the rich

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1 Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.
array of musical instruments listed in Pure Land scriptures will later appear in visual representations of the Pure Land across East Asia.

Furthermore, several Esoteric Buddhist (mikkyō 密教) scriptures present a favourable idea of music, again as an offering to Buddha and bodhisattvas; a novelty is the fact that a musical instrument, the biwa, is described as the sanmayagyō 三昧耶形 (the symbolic, substitute body) of Benzaiten, thus opening up the possibility for a sacralisation of musical instruments as well. We should point out, however, that the scriptures make a clear distinction between human music and heavenly music, and - within the category of human music - between secular music and music as Buddhist offerings. Heavenly music is described as greatly surpassing human music in beauty, variety, and scale. In general, Buddhist scriptures discourage or even prohibit human, secular music, but encourage human sacred music and lavishly praise heavenly music.

3 The Sutra of Druma, King of the Kinnara

The Sutra of the Questions by Druma, King of the Kinnara is one of the oldest scriptures in the East Asian canon. It exists in two versions, very similar in content: the first, Bussetsu Ton shindara shomon nyorai sanmai-kyō 仏説真陀羅所問如来三昧経, is attributed to Lokakṣema, who probably translated it in 170-190 CE; the second, Daiju kinnara-ō shomon-gyō 大樹緊那羅王所問経, was translated by Kumārajīva (344-413) and dates from the early fifth century. Their content is almost the same; for this reason, in this chapter we will follow almost exclusively Kumārajīva’s version. The sutra describes an extended interaction between the Buddha Śākyamuni and the king of the Kinnaras, Druma. Druma at first visits Śākyamuni on Mount Gṛdhrakūṭa near Rājagṛhīha, then invites the Buddha and his followers to his own residence on the Himalayas, and finally accompanies the Buddha back to Rājagṛhīha. The Buddha teaches aspects of the bodhisattva practice and characteristics of prajñā-pāramitā (transcendent wisdom), but also extols the virtue of Druma and his people and the salvific power of music. Several times, Druma is invited by the Buddha to share his knowledge with his audience. Throughout the sutra, numerous performances of heavenly music and singing take place, mostly by King Druma himself and his retinue of musicians and singers, but also by other divine beings, by

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2 For a list of sources, see Kataoka 1981, 150.
3 For details, see Inose 2018.
4 For a full English translation based on the Tibetan version of this scripture (which follows closely the Chinese translations), see Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2020.
elements of the environment (trees and mountains), and even by the Buddha himself, who, towards the end, preaches through songs in a remarkable and perhaps unique performance. Buddhist musicologist Kataoka Gidō has suggested that an early sutra, included in the Jō Agonkyō, could be a precedent for the Sutra of King Druma (Kataoka 1981, 157, 122-5). It is the Sutra of the Questions by Indra (Shakudaikan’in mongyō, in T 1 no. 1, 62c-66a), in which the god Indra decides to visit the Buddha to ask him doctrinal questions; Indra brings along with him the Gandharva Pañcasikha (Japanese Hanshayoku, 般遮翼). Defined “musician god” (shūgakushin, 執楽神) in the scripture, Pañcasikha is a virtuoso musician; Indra asks him to “play his beryl koto to entertain the Buddha” as a musical offering (ko ruri-kin goraku seson, 鼓瑠璃琴娯楽世尊) (the Sanskrit text has, instead of koto, vāddūryandandaṃ viṇāṃ, a viṇā with the neck/fingerboard made of beryl; the viṇā is a lute-like musical instrument). The Buddha praises Pañcasikha because his music “has many meanings: it speaks of attachment, of Buddhist practice, of the śramanera [monks], and of nirvana” (63a). However, as it will become clear in a moment, the Sutra of King Druma offers a much deeper treatment of music and its effects from the context of Buddhist teachings and practices.

A large portion of the Sutra of King Druma presents a fairly standard doctrinal apparatus that brings together prajñā-pāramitā teachings, visualisations, and instructions on various characteristics of the bodhisattvas, their practices, and their accomplishments. However, between lists of doctrinal items, the scripture presents an original view on music, in conflict with received understanding. Overall, this is therefore a unique scripture. It conveys an unusual sense of sheer joy that is ‘secular’ in tone, as resulting from the music and dance of the Kinnara, rather than from more standard and rarefied ‘pleasure of dharma’ (hōraku, 法楽). Above all, the most durable impression of this sutra is the pervasive role that music plays in it.

Before we discuss the scripture more in depth, some background information on King Druma and his people, the Kinnara (Skt. Kiṃnara), is in order – in part because they are not popular figures in Japanese Buddhism. Druma (Daiju or Ton, meaning ‘tree’ in Sanskrit) also appears (in different transliterations) in Daichidoron (as Chunronma in pages 135c, 188b; as Dōrōma in page 135b) and in Rokudo jikkyō (六度集経, as Zuma in page 44c), among others. According to the Daichidoron, he is either the king of the Gandharva (135b) or of both the Gandharva and the Kiṃnara (135c). The Sutra of King Druma locates his kingdom in the Himalayas, specifically on Mount Kösen (香山, Skt. Gandhamādana); other sources have it on Mount Kailāsa. Druma is praised in Daichidoron and in the sutras that bear his name for his knowledge of the Dharma and his spiritual at-
tainments combined with his legendary virtuosity as a musician; his instrument is the koto or kin (in Indic sources, that was most likely a vīnā). His people, the Kiṃnara (Jp. kinnara 緊那羅), are one of the life forms of gods and semi-gods called tenryū hachibushū 天龍八部衆, categories of beings that are endowed with both superhuman powers and animal features. Daichidoron says that Kinnara are members of the retinue of the devas; their residences, their food, and their music are similar to those of the gods (135b). Buddhist texts describe the Kinnara as centaurs (human body with horse face) or as bird-humans (human body with the head of a bird or vice versa); they are thus related in the mythological imagination to fauns and mermaids/sirens, hybrid beings endowed with special musical talents and sexual appetite, themes that also appear in the Sutra of King Druma.

Let us now turn to the Sutra of King Druma. The Buddha is on Mount Gṛdhrakūṭa near Rājagṛiha together with a vast crowd of great bhikṣu and bodhisattvas, who had gathered there from all directions of the universe. All of them have perfected the paramitas, acquired the nondual wisdom, and have a perfect grasp of the emptiness of all dharmas. They understand all the languages of sentient beings, can contemplate the transcendent wisdom, are endowed with the Buddha-eye, have attained the stage of irreversibility, and master various samādhi. One of these bodhisattvas, Tengan Bosatsu 天冠菩薩 (heavenly crown), is one of the protagonists of the scripture and asks several questions of the Buddha. The first question concerns how the bodhisattvas can acquire an “eloquence with many adornments” (zasshu shōgon no ben 雑種荘厳之弁) with all its beneficial effects on the listeners (Daiju kinnara-ō shomon-gyō, 368c-369a). The Buddha replies by enumerating a long set of four-item lists (369a-370a); long lists of doctrinal points are one of the features of this text. At the end of the Buddha’s speech, the universe shakes six times, a great light pervades everything, from up in the sky divinities perform celestial music (gigaku) and songs in praise of the Buddha, and flowers rain down on the Buddha.

5 For the above information, see Jenner 1979.
6 These include: Indian gods (Skt. deva or devatā; Jp. ten 天, serpents/dragons (Skt. nāga; Jp. ryū 龍), demonic beings (Skt. yoksa; Jp. yasha 夜叉), heavenly musicians (Skt. gandharva; Jp. kendatsuba 間達婆), anti-gods (Skt. asura; Jp. ashura 阿修羅), supernatural birds (Skt. garuda; Jp. karura 加樓羅), heavenly musicians and singers (Skt. kinnara; Jp. kinnara 緊那羅), and a special category of large snakes (Skt. mahoraga; Jp. magoraga 摩睺羅伽).
7 See Mochizuki 1954-71.
8 I am grateful to Vesna Wallace and Paul Harrison for pointing this out to me.
9 On this sutra, see Kataoka 1981, 125-33, 154-67; Kō 1973; Miyazaki 2007; Ono 2007.
10 According to Harrison (1992, xv), the Sanskrit original could have been Divyamauli or Devamauli.
Next, Tengan Bosatsu asks the Buddha how the bodhisattvas can hear, uphold, chant, or copy this speech after the Buddha’s nirvana (370b). The Buddha replies with a set of eight items (related to determination to practice and save sentient beings, compassion, protecting the true Dharma, defeating demons, etc.). At that moment, the universe again shook six times, all the mountains collapsed into rivers, lakes, and the ocean, but without affecting the water beings living there; the universe was now flat like the palm of a hand and beautifully decorated; all plants and trees in the universe bent towards the Buddha and produced flowers and fruits, with beautiful perfumes and light. And then, all celestial beings, without showing themselves, began to play all kinds of music (gigaku); from the Himalayas, a beautiful perfume came to permeate the universe, and all kinds of marvellous flowers went towards the Buddha and filled the entire space. All plants rained their petals on the Buddha, creating an enormous roof adorned with bells made with pearls which produced a soft and pleasant sound pervading the entire universe. The Elder Śāriputra asked the Buddha what was happening, and the Buddha replied that it was a sign that Druma, king of the Kinnara, was on his way from his residence on the Himalayas to see the Buddha and pay his respects, accompanied by multitudes of Kinnara, Gandharvas, gods, and Mahoragas. King Druma and his vast retinue indeed show up, announced by 84,000 types of music with pure songs (jōmyōka) and harmonious melodies (zenwa shugaku) (370c). The Kinnara, endowed with the great supernatural powers (jinzūriki) of the bodhisattvas, made petals rain from the sky, approached the Buddha, bowed to his feet, and circulated seven times around him.

Then, King Druma began to play his precious koto beautifully decorated, made by the divine maker Viśvakarman. When Druma started playing his koto, accompanied by his retinue, the sound could be heard all over the universe, and overpowered the celestial music played by the gods in the Realm of Desire, who then stopped playing and went to see the Buddha. At the sound of Druma’s music, everything in the surrounding environment, from the cosmic mountain Mount Sumeru down to all plants and trees, began to sway like someone who is extremely inebriated. All the members of Buddha’s retinue, with the sole exception of the bodhisattvas at the stage of non-return, at the sound of the koto, the songs, and the music, rose from their seats and, unable to control themselves, began to dance. Following this lascivious music, they abandoned their dignified deportment; they were like children dancing and playing and could not hold themselves. Utterly surprised, Tengan asked Mahākāśyapa and the other śrāvakas: “Venerables, you are detached from the afflictions (kleśas), have attained the eight liberations, and have understood the four noble truths. Why are you abandoning your dignified deportment and dance shaking your body like children?” To which
they replied: “We can’t control ourselves; because of the music of this koto, we cannot sit quietly, and we can’t keep our bodies from dancing, and our minds can’t focus”. Tengan then said to Mahākāśyapa: because of your practices and achievements “you are venerated by men and asuras like a stupa. Why can’t you hold yourself together and dance like a child?”. And Mahākāśyapa replied:

It’s like trees in a forest shaken by a powerful storm, they just can’t stand still. It’s something independent of our mind’s desire, I just can’t resist this rhythm. The music of the king of the Kinnara, with his koto, the songs, and the sounds of wind instruments [shōteki 蕉笛, lit. ‘Pan’s flute’] shake my mind like trees in a storm and it can’t stand still. (370c-371a)

Then, King Druma and his retinue of musicians, thanks to the supernatural power of the Buddha and the power of their own past merits, began to play music accompanying a song about emptiness (371bc), at which 8,000 bodhisattvas attained the capacity to endure the non-origination of dharmas (mushōnin 無生忍). Tengan asked the Buddha: “Where does this beautiful song come from?”. The Buddha replied: “Ask King Druma directly, he will answer you”. Here, the Buddha considers Druma perfectly qualified in terms of his spiritual accomplishments and explicitly authorises him to interact with the bodhisattvas and his other followers and teach them the Dharma. At this point, the sutra stages a discussion between Tengan and Druma, in which the latter expounds his profound philosophy of music and how it relates to Buddhism, which we will discuss in some detail below.

Tengan is astonished and asks the Buddha how it is possible that Druma knows such a wondrous doctrine and is capable to express such a profound teaching so eloquently. The Buddha replies that Druma planted the seeds of good deeds with innumerable buddhas in the past. Tengan asks Druma why then he has not yet attained the supreme enlightenment; Druma explains to him that there are twelve different types of incompleteness in the bodhisattvas (372ab). Then, the Buddha teaches Druma a samādhi called “abiding in the jewel” (hōjū 宝住), which is the direct experience of emptiness (372c-373c). Tengan is incredulous about Druma’s ability to attain this advanced samādhi and abide in it. Druma explains: one cannot attain or abide in this samādhi because it transcends the five aggregates (skandhas), the senses, and cognition (374a). The Buddha confirms Druma’s abil-

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11 According to standard Buddhist doctrines, the realisation of the various aspects of emptiness (in this case, the fact that things have no origin and no substance) causes discomfort, even fear; the capacity to endure such fear and to embrace the new awareness that has been attained is the next step after such realisation.
ity in using skilful means (upāya) (374b). Because of that, with the sound of his music, he can subdue and make abide in enlightenment millions of Kinnaras and Gandharvas, and among them, lead 84,000 members of his retinue to omniscience (issaichi 一切智) (374a). In other words, because of his deep knowledge of the techniques of upāya King Druma can use the intrinsic power of music for purposes related to Buddhist salvation. The Buddha further explains to Tengan: the Kinnara, like the Gardharvas and Mahoragas, love music; with their music, they arouse great love, belief, and respect for the Dharma, which in turns generates the sounds of the three jewels (busshō hōshō sōshō 仏声法声僧声), the sounds of the six pāramitā, and the sounds of many doctrinal points (dharmas) (374bc). However, we should note that what this intrinsic power of music is and where it comes from is never made explicit in the text. Indeed, metaphysics of music in India, in China, and later in Japan, proposed theories to explain the power of music in conjunction with the various forces operating in the cosmos. Most likely, it was a widespread understanding, and the author did not think it necessary to spell it out.

Next, the sutra presents a grand cosmic vision, in which petals fall from the sky on King Druma. Druma collects them all and takes them to the Buddha to make a precious canopy that envelops the entire universe, all adorned with countless pearls; each pearl puts forth innumerable rays of light; each ray of light produces a lotus flower, all in many colours and with beautiful scents; each lotus becomes a pedestal for a coloured image of a seated Śākyamuni, and all these Buddhas praise King Druma, saying: “Very well, King of the Kinnara! You can teach innumerable sentient beings, and the bodhisattvas should make offerings to you” (374c). At that moment, Druma entered a samādhi in which he invited the Buddha and his retinue to his palace in the Himalayas, so that innumerable gods, nagas, yakshas, gandharvas, asura, garuda, kinnara and mahoragas can listen to the Buddha preaching the Dharma (374c). The Buddha accepts, and the joy of the Kinnara explodes in yet another performance of songs, music, and dances (375a). Druma begins to play music singing a song in praise of the Buddha, which says in part: “the songs of gods, nāgas, and kinnara increase attachments and do not extinguish desire; the voice of the Buddha is soft, the sound of his teachings extinguish all attachments and brings peace” (375b). Then, Tengan makes his own magic: he enters a samādhi and creates a cosmic-size jewelled platform and invites the Buddha to sit on it, surrounded by his vast retinue; holding this platform in his right hand, Tengan flies to the Himalayas. When the lofty beings of the Realm of Desire and the Realm of Pure Forms see this, they rejoice greatly and make offerings to the Buddha and his retinue: flowers, incense, scents for the body, and music. King Druma sees them coming from afar and alerts the Kinnara to prepare gifts and begin to sing and play music to welcome the Buddha (375c).
King Druma and his retinue welcome the guests to the palace and offer them a sumptuous banquet. The Buddha then begins to preach the Dharma, with a long list of thirty-two aspects for each of the six paramitas (generosity, morality, patience, effort, meditation, and skilful means) (376a-378a). Then, the Buddha manifests in the sky seven giant tāla trees that emit light encompassing the entire universe; beautiful heavenly music is produced spontaneously; all trees in the Himalayas also begin to play beautiful music; the Buddha issues forth light from all his pores, each ray of light with a lotus flower, a bodhisattva sitting on each flower perfectly adorned with the thirty-two signs. Then, and this is a crucial scene, the Buddha uses his supernatural powers to create a song accompanied by music in which he clarifies all the doubts of the bodhisattvas (378b-379c).

Having heard this, the sons of King Druma pay obeisance and make offerings to the Buddha, followed by King Druma’s wives and ladies in attendance. As a result, all of Druma’s women arouse the bodhicitta (the desire to attain enlightenment) and reach the stage of no return; they ask the Buddha how they can get rid of their female body and turn into men (ten sha nyoshin toku nanshi-shin 転捨女身得男子身) (380c). The Buddha teaches them ten principles to attain that goal, generally related to the precepts and the behaviour of lay Buddhists (380c-381b), combined with the realisation of emptiness. If they are able to see the female body as empty, then there are no distinctions between a male and a female body: this is the meaning of attaining a male body (381b). All the women rejoice and as the Buddha smiles, light of all colours springs forth from his face, illuminating the entire universe.12

The Buddha assures the audience that because of their good seeds, all of Druma’s wives, after they die, will all attain a male body and be reborn in Tusita Heaven together with Miroku 弥勒, the future Buddha; when Miroku becomes Buddha they will keep making offerings to him and learn countless teachings. When King Druma himself becomes a Buddha they will be reborn in his Buddha-land where they will also receive the prediction of their future becoming buddhas (381c). At this moment, to Druma’s great joy, the Buddha issues the prophecy that one day, 680,000 billion kalpas in future, Druma will become a Buddha called Kudoku ō kōmyō nyorai 功徳王光明如来 and rule over a Buddha-realm named Mukugetsu 無垢月 (Immaculate

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12 It is interesting to note that the issue of women turning into men is already discussed in the early translation of this sutra attributed to Lokakṣema in the late second century CE (T 624, 361b-362a), thus making it one of the first scriptures to ever discuss this transformation in some detail. The relative simplicity of women’s salvation reminds one of the apocryphal Sutra on Transforming the Female Body (Ten nyoshin-gyō 転女身経), popular among court ladies in the Heian and Kamakura periods. See Meeks 2010, 302-7 (especially 303-4).
Moon); the Buddha also produced an image of that Buddha and his realm (382b). He also told the audience about Druma’s past lives and ascetic accomplishments. In short, innumerable kalpas ago, Druma used to be a cakravartin (Buddhist ideal king) called Nimindara 尼泯陀羅 at the time of a Buddha called Hōshu Nyorai 宝衆如来 in a realm called Jōketsu 浄潔; Nimindara made countless generous offerings to that Buddha (383bc).

Next, one of the sons of King Druma asks the Buddha how to abandon their musical art and enter the right path to salvation. The Buddha replies that the music of the Kinnara produces sixty-four sounds that protect the wondrous dharma of enlightenment; there is therefore no need for them to abandon music-making (384a).

At this point, King Druma realised that the Buddha and his retinue wished to go back, and with his supernatural powers he created a jewelled flying chariot to carry them; holding it in his hand, he took it back to Rājagṛiha (384bc). The Kinnara again played music and sang in praise of the Buddha (384c-385a). A famous figure in Buddhist scriptures now entered the picture. King Ajataśatru (Ajaseī 阿闍世王) saw the Kinnara accompanying the flying chariot with the Buddha and his retinue and went to meet them. In this final part of the sutra, the Buddha praises Druma. He says that because of his devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, Druma has acquired excellent eloquence and the capacity to play beautiful music (385b). King Ajataśatru asks Druma to share some of his merits with him and Druma replies that all of his merits are for him and all sentient beings, as is appropriate for a bodhisattva to do (385b).

Then, Tengan asks the Buddha how many dharmas a bodhisattva has to achieve in order to become a Dharma vessel (hōki 法器); the Buddha answers with a list of thirty-two items (385bc). Druma asks how to get rid of anxiety, and the Buddha offers another list (385b-386a). Ajataśatru asks the Buddha how a bodhisattva is to practice the pursuit of enlightenment; the Buddha replies with a poem (386b-387a). King Ajataśatru goes back to his palace; the Kinnara prepare to return to their realm and thank the Buddha with one more set of music and a rain of petals (387a). Indra appears and asks the Buddha about Druma, and Buddha praises him above everyone else. After a final conversation, the Buddha teaches a mantra to subjugate all superhuman beings with evil intentions (including Kinnara) (388b). The sutra ends with a proclamation of its merits and a final celebration (388c-389a).

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13 This is one of the earliest mantras ever included in a Chinese translation of a Buddhist text: see Harrison, South Coblin 2002.


4 King Druma’s Philosophy of Music

As we can see from this summary, this is a medley of two very different scriptures, each different in language, style, imagery, content, and audience. For convenience, let us call the first ‘Tengan’s sutra’ and the second ‘Druma’s sutra’. Tengan’s sutra is for advanced bodhisattvas. It deals with profound and abstruse aspects of scholastic teachings and is written in an abstract and detached tone. Indeed, it consists of several lists of doctrinal items, all expressed in a very technical language, about characteristics of bodhisattvas, their practices, and their achievements. Detachment is especially obvious in Tengan’s reaction to the śrāvakas dancing to the music of the Kinnara; it appears as if Tengan is so remote from the realm of the senses that he cannot even understand the śrāvakas’ state of mind, let alone their emotions in that situation. He even needs to ask the Buddha about the nature of music and why it compels such intense sensory and emotional reactions – something that is seemingly beyond his experience and comprehension.

The second scripture in the medley, Druma’s sutra, is very different. It presents central Buddhist teachings, but in ways that can be not only beneficial but also attractive to many beings at different spiritual stages: the interlocutors of the Buddha in this section are King Druma, his consorts, and his children – all lay people with different spiritual capacities and soteriological concerns: Druma is on his way to becoming a Buddha, his consorts ask how to “get rid of the female body and become men”, and his male children inquire on how to seriously engage in Buddhist practice. The content of Druma’s sutra addresses broader philosophical and cultural matters: a philosophy of music (music as a salvific practice and its limits, especially its relations to the concept of emptiness, where Druma presents the idea that music is simply a transient signifier with no stable and immutable signification), the modalities of women’s salvation, the powers of samādhi, and so forth. Its structure is not a linear sequence of lists, but rather something akin to a musical composition with different themes (the various subjects addressed by the Buddha and King Druma himself) ending in a sort of crescendo, corresponding to the Buddha’s prophecy that Druma will become a Buddha in future and rule over his own Buddha-land; the very final section, after the Buddha and his retinue have returned to Rājagṛiha, is a like a fade-out coda. In fact, this resembles very closely the structure of Gagaku and Bugaku pieces, with multiples themes, repetitions, an accelerando rhythm, and a quiet coda at the end. Above all, what stands out in Druma’s sutra is the sheer joy and sensory bliss of the Kinnara as expressed by their music and dance, something that we rarely encounter in a Buddhist scripture; even in the Pure Land sutras, for example, music is essentially an alternative form of sutra chanting, which
thus lacks the powerful sensuality of the Kinnara’s music. Finally, something that is especially relevant in the context of this chapter, is that fact that each retelling of this scripture (as discussed above) also involves another musical performance, which then becomes co-substantial with the spoken, doctrinal content of the sutra. This aspect may very well be unique among Buddhist scriptures, and might have had very practical consequences – namely, as a template for Buddhist rituals involving music as they have been performed in Japan since at least the eighth century, as we shall see below.

Three elements in the scripture are particularly relevant: (i) Buddha’s acceptance of King Druma’s invitation to visit his realm and be entertained by the Kinnara, in clear contrast with the dry and tone-deaf setting of Tengan’s portion; (ii) the fact that the Buddha explicitly authorises King Druma to speak on his behalf on matters of doctrine in two crucial moments, when Śāriputra asks the Buddha about the nature of Druma’s music first and Druma’s spiritual accomplishments later; in other words, Druma, a Kinnara and a secular musician, is veritably teaching the Dharma to śrāvaka and advanced bodhisattvas; and (iii) crucially, the Buddha himself in the latter part of the scripture, makes music (sings!) that speaks the Dharma, very much like Druma does.

However, it would be wrong to interpret this entire scripture as simply a random medley of two very different songs, as it were. Rather, this is a well-crafted attempt to present a complex set of teachings to a wide and diverse audience – something that would be interesting to both scholastic exegetes and a wider, secular audience. Tengan’s portion, despite its scholastic specialisation, already contains hints of what is about to come: the audience of which he is a member includes music-related bodhisattvas, such as bodhisattva Myōon, an important figure in the Lotus Sutra, who was later identified with Myōonten/Benzaiten (Skt. Sarasvatī), the goddess of music and musicians; and the miraculous signs following Buddha’s sermons, as we have seen, prominently include heavenly music.

One could say that this scripture is an effective attempt to represent nonduality (silent asceticism versus music performance, ascetic rigor versus sensorial experiences, scholasticism versus art). It is also a powerful endorsement of music as a proper Buddhist activity. The sutra, however, leaves matters largely unsettled. It only speaks about the celestial music of the Kinnara, not about human music. Medieval exegesis in Japan would bridge this gap and give an important role to a certain type of human music, the court and ceremonial music and dances of Gagaku and Bugaku.14 This sutra also shows a remarkable, and little noticed, transition away from a traditional

14 On this subject, see Rambelli 2021.
focus on eloquence toward an enhanced interest in the performing arts. The initial question posed by Tengan to the Buddha is a standard and innocuous one on the art of eloquence, in which a beautiful voice is placed at the service of signification and its performative effects on the audience (acceptance of Buddhism). Druma’s sudden arrival hijacks this line of argument: for him, sound is not just a tool to a distinct and separate end, but a powerful dharma in itself as a direct manifestation of emptiness. This transition from speech to voice to sound – and thus from preaching to musical performance – also seems to be at the basis of the shift in the imagery of Benzaiten, from a goddess of eloquence to Myōonten, goddess of music.

Let us now look more in depth at Druma’s understanding of music as a legitimate Buddhist practice. After what is perhaps the sutra’s most memorable episode, in which Druma’s performance on the koto has all beings, sentient and non-sentient alike, dancing uncontrollably, Tengan asks Druma where this music comes from. What follows is a summary of their dialogue.

King Druma: “This song comes from the musical voice (onjō 音声) of sentient beings”, which in turn “originates from empty space [kyokū 虚空]”. Tengan shows a very superficial understanding of music when he asks: “Doesn’t musical voice originate in the mouth?” And Druma: “The musical voice of sentient beings originates from the body and from the mind”. Tengan: “No, because the body, like plants and stones, is not intelligent [gumuchi 痴無知], and the mind, being formless, has no vision or touch and does not make speeches; it’s like an apparition [genke 幻化].” Druma: “If it is distinct from body and mind, where does it come from?” (371c). Tengan: “Ideation [shiyui 思惟] creates music and sound. If there is no voice in empty space, then sound does not emerge”. Druma has a more profound understanding:

All sounds (onjō) emerge from empty space (kyokū). Sound has the nature of emptiness (kyokūshō 虚空性): when you finish hearing it, it disappears; after it disappears, it abides in emptiness. Therefore, all dharmanas, whether they are taught or not, are emptiness. All dharmanas are like sound. If one teaches the dharmanas through sound, the dharmanas cannot be attained in sound itself. Dharmanas themselves cannot be said; what is called speech is only sound. Therefore, sound is originally non-abiding anywhere [i.e., is non-substantial], thus it is not real and solid (mukenjitsu 無堅実), and its reality only lies in its name (myō i jitsu 名為実). If so, and paradoxically, its reality is indestructible (fukakai 不可壊), has no origin (muuki 無有起) and thus is not subject to extinction, therefore it is pure (shōjō 清浄), immaculate (byakujō 白浄), and incorruptible (muku 無垢), like light (kōmyō 光明) and the mind (shinjō 心性); it is all-surpassing (shukka 出過) and beyond signs (shukka shosō 出過諸相) – that is, sound is the condition of enlightenment (shōi 正位);
when a bodhisattva is in that condition, he has attained the endurance of the non-origination of dharmas (mushōhōnin 無生法忍) [...] All discourses are only sound/voice; one produces these sounds simply because one wants to talk about something else than voice. This endurance of the non-origination of dharmas cannot be explained nor heard. Why? Because its meaning is unattainable (fukatoku 不可得), that is, absent. (372ab)

In this dense argument, we can see an attempt to outline a semiotics of speech, which also applies to music. In short, King Druma seems to be saying that discourses are simply voiced sounds or signifiers; their signifieds are not inherent in those sounds and are nowhere to be found (they are unattainable). Music is exactly the same. One seems to hear here a distant echo of Roland Barthes’ Empire of Signs, where he described a realm of pure signifiers without meanings, or, in Buddhist terms, the condition of realised emptiness. In more technical terms, music, like language, is not a symbol of anything (meaning is ontologically distinct and separate from sound); rather, music is both an index and an icon (a faithful reproduction) of emptiness – in other words, music is a concrete example, in our experiential field, of emptiness.

In this context, the materiality of King Druma’s instrument, the koto/kin, is also relevant. Aside from the fact, also significant, that it was made by the divine craftsman Viśvakarman, the sutra described it as having been made of a precious stone called ruri. Often, ruri refers in the Buddhist scriptures to lapis lazuli, a blue stone. However, the etymology of the term, from the medieval Chinese 吠瑠璃 (modern Ch. feiliuli; Jp. beiruri), points to the Sanskrit vaiḍūrya, ‘beryl’. This light green stone is in fact transparent – an effective metaphor for emptiness. In other words, King Druma plays music exemplifying emptiness on a transparent musical instrument, in an interesting example of semiotic collapse, in which the instrument, its sound, its signification, and its referent are all the same – transparent, evanescent, impermanent, ultimately empty.

5 King Druma, Buddhist Music, and Japanese Gagaku

At a time in which most Buddhist scriptures saw music just as entertainment – either a way to deal with possible patrons or as an offering to the buddhas – or as a sort of ambient music creating the soundscape of the Pure Land, the Sutra of King Druma provided the first cogent and systematic Buddhist philosophy of music as closely related to the

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15 I owe this suggestion to Paul Harrison.
concept of emptiness, its practices (*samādhi*) and its effects (*prajñā-pāramitā*). However, the importance of this sutra goes well beyond its intellectual content, as it was central for a number of developments that affected Japanese Buddhism and its attitudes towards the performing arts, especially Gagaku and Bugaku. In particular, the sutra offers a justification for the activities of musicians and performing artists, by presenting their art as both a joyful offering to the Buddhas and a form of self-cultivation. The sutra also provides the first known model for Buddhist ceremonies involving instrumental music and dance. As Buddhist musicologist Kataoka Gidō noted, the musical accompaniment to the dialogues between Druma, the Buddha, and others, can be seen as a precedent to Tendai *rongi* 論議 (doctrinal debates) ceremonies as they are still performed today (Kataoka 1981, 131-3). We can expand this insight further and see in the *Sutra of King Druma* a model for large Buddhist ceremonies involving Bugaku dance (*bugaku hōyō* 舞楽法要) and chanted lectures accompanied by Gagaku instrumental music (*kangen kōshiki* 管弦講式), which both developed in the late Heian period (see Ono 2013; Rambelli 2020; 2021).

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