



# Does a Sound have Buddha-Nature? Kegon Thought and the Aesthetics of Sound

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Received: 5 January 2024 / Revised: 13 June 2024 / Accepted: 8 July 2024  
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## Abstract

In his 2013 book *Kiku hito* (English translation *Homo audiens*, 2022), composer and musicologist Jo Kondo (近藤譲) outlines his interpretation of music as the interrelationship between notes, each of which ‘has its own entity and life’ and yet is only meaningful in relationship with other notes, an assertion which echoes 15th-century *nō* (能) composers Zeami’s (世阿弥) and Zenchiku’s (禅竹) writings on the life and death of each note in a *nō* performance. Though in his own writing Kondo restricts himself to the tradition of western aesthetics, in a 2023 interview he acknowledges that his system of musical interpretation is rooted in the Kegon (華嚴) Buddhist concept of Indra’s Net (which illustrates the idea of ultimate reality as the ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’ *jiji muge hokkai* 事事無礙法界). In this experimental paper, I will explore the aesthetic implications of this idea: is a listener’s interpretation of the relationships between sounds in a musical work (‘work’ defined as broadly as possible, inclusive of all forms of deep, active listening, from contemporary sound art to *nō* to Dōgen (道元) hearing a *sūtra* in the voices of monkeys) merely a metaphor for the ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’, or is it an example of it? What are the implications for the interpretation of all types of music and sound art if sounds – like other nonsentient (*hijō* 非情) phenomena such as water and mountains – have Buddha-nature (*bushō* 仏性)? And does this interpretative frame have ethical implications for interpreters – listeners, composers, and performers – of music and sound-art in this age of imminent environmental collapse?.

**Keywords** Kegon Buddhism · Aesthetics of music · Japanese aesthetics · Aesthetics of non-human sound · Aesthetics of *nō*

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## 1 Introduction

For the past several years as a practicing composer, sound artist, and scholar of Japanese aesthetics, as well as a human alive during what can seem like the death throes of Capitalist Modernity (see, for example, Machado de Oliveira, 2021), I have been actively exploring the aesthetics of non-human sounds, asking how do we interpret and how have we interpreted these sounds, both within a daily life context and in an artistic context.<sup>1</sup> Through this exploration of non-human sound, I have been necessarily deemphasising the sounds that humans make with forethought and training in concert halls and recording studios in favour of more contingent sounds, sounds made without intention, where the pleasure of finding meaning in sound is the listener's – not the composer's.

This paper is an exploration of the life of sounds which begins with Jo Kondo's (近藤譲; b. 1947) aesthetics and artistic practice. Kondo – a self-identified 'listening composer' (聴く作曲家)<sup>2</sup> – works almost exclusively in the art-music, concert hall milieu, yet is very much an 'experimental' composer in the tradition of John Cage. Kondo himself is one of most well-known composers from Japan alive today, with a catalogue of 178 musical works at the time of writing (in spring 2024), 38 recordings, and nine original musicological books (as well as multiple translations of English works into Japanese). His music has been performed and lauded around the world: He has been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters as an honorary foreign member, been a featured composer at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (the largest such festival in Europe), and has received the Suntory Music Award, one of the most prestigious awards for composers of western-style art music in Japan, among many other honours in Japan and abroad.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point for this paper was an interview Kondo gave in the Swedish contemporary music journal *Nutida Musik* (En: New Music; Jamieson, 2023) in which Kondo (who in general assertively eschews 'Japanese' or orientalisng interpretations of his work) acknowledges that he has inevitably been influenced by Japanese thought merely by having lived his life in Japan and having read Japanese philosophy (though he assiduously avoids quoting it in his own writing). Of particular relevance to the argument of this paper is the following exchange:

Jo Kondo (JK): The one obvious influence on my music is, as I said, I regard each sound in music as having an independent life, and that's a kind of a Buddhist idea. The *Kegon Sūtra* [Sk: Buddhāvataṃsaka-nāma-mahāvaiṣṭya-sūtra, commonly abbreviated as Avataṃsaka Sūtra; Jp: 華嚴經; En: Flower Orna-

<sup>1</sup> If, after John Cage (1912–1992), that can be said to be a meaningful distinction: in 'Composition as Process' Cage claims that one of the objectives of the American avant-garde artist is the recognition a continuum which 'dissolves the difference between "art" and "life"' (2010 [1961], 53).

<sup>2</sup> Kondo defines 'listener' as inclusive of composers and performers, all of whom have equal rights to make interpretations. This is opposed to the traditional view of musical interpretation which views composition as a method of communication, where the meaning of the 'text' (score/music/sound) is communicated to a passive audience via the medium of performance (or loudspeakers). See Kondo, 2022, 67ff.

<sup>3</sup> Further information about Kondo is available in Japanese and English on his website, <https://jokondo.b-sheet.jp> and in the 'Translator's Preface' to the English translation of *homo audiens* (Jamieson, 2022, 7–13).

ment Scripture (Cleary, 1993)] says that; it is how they perceive the world. The world consists of an almost infinite grouping of tiny worlds, each of which has its own independent identity. So that's a very Buddhist idea.

Daryl Jamieson: And different thinkers throughout Japanese intellectual history have taken that idea in different directions. For example, Zeami ([世阿弥] 1363–1443; one of the founders of *nō* theatre [能楽]) found a *jo-ha-kyū* ([序破急;] arising-breaking down-collapsing) form in every single note and gesture. Zenchiku ([禅竹] 1405–1468, Zeami's son-in-law) makes this even more explicitly mystical. And jumping way ahead to someone like Watsuji Teturō ([和辻哲郎] 1889–1960; Kyoto School philosopher) and his idea that humanity (*ningen* [人間]) is defined by interrelationships between individuals rather than the individuals themselves seems to resonate quite a lot with what you've been saying about your music.

JK: That's right, my emphasis on the relationship between sounds is very much Buddhist – even going back to Nāgārjuna ([Jp: 龍樹] c.150 – c.250; influential Indian philosopher of nothingness/emptiness and dependent origination) and that kind of thought. On that level, I think that my music is very Japanese. (2023, 24–25; square brackets added)

It is from the seed of this short passage that I want to begin to explore in this paper whether sounds do indeed have 'an independent life' as Kondo asserts. If so, could that 'independent life' be equivalent to the buddha-nature (仏性 *bussō*) that the most inclusive interpretations of the doctrine of *sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu* (草木国土悉皆成仏; En: the buddha-hood of non-sentient beings) would ascribe buddha-nature and a modicum of consciousness to plants, water, and rocks?<sup>4</sup> Finally, if sounds do indeed have 'an independent life' or buddha-nature, does this have ethical implications for how we interpret (*ie*, compose, perform, and listen) to sounds, including those made intentionally as music and those that exist contingently?

## 2 Jo Kondo's Aesthetics and Ethics

Early in Kondo's career he developed his own theory of 'Linear Music' (Jp: 線の音楽 *Sen no ongaku*).<sup>5</sup> This theory remains key to understanding Kondo's aesthetics, and the importance he places on the ambiguity of each note's relationship to all the

<sup>4</sup> See Rambelli (2001) for a comprehensive history of the origins and historical development of *sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu* in Buddhist thought.

<sup>5</sup> This theory forms the basis of Kondo's first book, also called *Sen no ongaku* (1979). This book has not been translated, but is summarised in English in Kondo (1988), which is reprinted as the appendix to Kondo (2022, 111–138). In essence, his concept and practice of 'Linear Music' is that while each sound has, as stated above, 'an independent life', musical meaning can only come from the linear relationship between sounds. Linear simply means a relationship in time – sounds arising at different times – which, in classical and popular music would be called 'melody', but in contemporary and experimental music is understood to encompass any temporal sequence of sound events. This linear sequence of sounds may or may not be perceived as 'melodic' in a classical sense, but is, like melody, 'linear' in the sense of occurring over time, rather than simultaneously (*ie*, 'vertically', or 'harmonically').

other notes in a piece. For Kondo, each note has its ‘own entity and life’ (2022, 139), but the way we listen to and interpret each note depends on the other sounds which surround it (musical and non-musical, in the present, but also in the past – which means our entire lifetime[s] of listening – and what we anticipate might come in the future). In his own words: ‘physically identical sounds in different combinations are never heard the same. One of the stimuli that drives me on to compose is the fascination of this multifaceted aural quality possessed by each sound in a piece of music. In the process of composing, I am most concerned with the way each sound is being heard by the listener (including the composer), and with the quality that can be perceived in each sound when related to other sounds’ (2022, 140).

As a concrete example of the ambiguity – in particular the ambiguity between each sound’s ‘independent life’ and their interdependence on all surrounding sounds<sup>6</sup> – which is cultivated by Kondo in his own work, let us look at the opening measures of one of Kondo’s most well-known early pieces, *Sight Rhythmics* (「視覚リズム法 (5つの楽器のための)」; 1975), scored for an unusual quintet of violin, steel drums, banjo, electric piano, and tuba (see Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> In this piece, Kondo uses linear pitch relationships to create an ambiguous harmonic world with multiple tonal centres or possibly none: The first note – a middle C on a banjo – means nothing by itself, but with the addition on beat 2 of the violin’s G, Kondo has formed a perfect 5th (the simplest interval in the harmonic series, which gives the music a suggestion of C being the tonic or central note of the piece but not yet unambiguously defining a tonality). The third note, an E<sup>b</sup> on the steel drums followed by another perfect 5th (an electric piano B<sup>b</sup>) first suggests C minor as the tonality (C-E<sup>b</sup>-G), but then complicates this by adding the B<sup>b</sup> and then an A, ending the bar with the chord E<sup>b</sup>-A-B<sup>b</sup>, which does not exist in tonal music but is a common chord used in early 20th-century free atonal music and early serial music. At the start of bar two, the violin restates the same G harmonic (the same pitch, rhythm, and timbre acquiring a new context by being surrounded by different sounds than that sound in the first bar), and then the tuba adds the first bass note (an E<sup>b</sup>), which, with the B<sup>b</sup> lingering in our ears, might suggest E<sup>b</sup> major, a suggestion which is immediately disrupted by the electric piano’s F<sup>#</sup>, creating a dissonance with the violin’s G which is not found in tonal music. The piece continues in the way, presenting musical material which

<sup>6</sup> ‘A combination of tones affects our perceiving of each individual tone in that combination: physically identical sounds in different combinations are never heard the same.... In music, therefore, we never experience an absolute ‘piano middle C’ which always sounds the same, independent of its relationship to the sounds surrounding it.’ (Kondo, 2022, 139–140) The ambiguity cultivated by Kondo in his music is this difference between how the same note is heard and interpreted differently when it is heard in different musical situations. ‘Ambiguity’ (*aimai* 曖昧) for Kondo is distinct from arbitrariness in that it is an inherent quality of sounds listened to musically as sonic (musical) artworks, in other words, sonic structures which are made (constructed) in the minds of the listeners (including the minds of their composers): ‘Pieces, not only chance (indeterminate) ones, are ‘made’ by *homo faber* as musical existents and are to a certain extent opaque as media of communication, so that a certain plurality of interpretation of this expressivity (emotionality) is accepted’ (Kondo 2022, 79).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to or instead of the first line of the score presented as Fig. 1, readers may refer to the recording of this work by Ensemble Nomad conducted by Inoue Satoko (井上郷子) which is available on CD (Ensemble NOMAD, 2023) and most major digital music subscription services. The brief musicological discussion in this paragraph covers the first 15 s in the recording.

(♩ = ca. 60)

vln

sd

bj

ep

tba

(♩ =  $\frac{2}{3} \times \text{♩}$ ,  $\text{♩} = \frac{2}{3} \times \text{♩}$ )

Fig. 1 Sight rhythmic. Beginning of first movement. © C. F. Peters, New York, 1980

is constantly on the edge of suggesting a concrete tonal centre – a resolution to the dissonances, in tonal music theory terms – while never resolving into a firm sense of either tonality or atonality.<sup>8</sup>

The unusual instrumentation, which brings together five instruments which are rarely heard together in chamber music – and in the case of steel drums and banjo are rarely heard in art music at all – adds to the ambiguity Kondo is attempting to create in this piece. By using instruments which have completely different timbres and which, in this combination, have little to no musico-historical baggage associated with them, each note in the piece can be heard as independent, having its own life. This sense is instantly undercut by the very fact of the notes existing together in an artificial rhythmic space which is the musical structure Kondo has written and which the interpreter is listening to in time. Some of the sounds are also held over one another, or else they fall silent yet linger in the ear, suggesting relationships despite the extreme difference in their timbre. Instrumental timbre, too, thus plays an important role in creating ambiguity in this piece, in allowing for a multiplicity of potential interpretations. Kondo's efforts to create harmonic and timbral ambiguity is mirrored by similar ambiguities in the piece's form, repetition, and rhythm, though I will for reasons of space – and the fact that the focus of this paper is the aesthetics of music rather than an analysis of the music per se – avoid further musico-logical explications.

<sup>8</sup> Most modern and experimental music since around 1913 (the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*) has been atonal (music which avoids the tonal music concepts of 'home' or 'tonic' keys [eg, C major] in order to introduce a sense of unresolved tension and/or free-floating unboundedness). Kondo's 'Linear Music', as exemplified in this brief example, deliberately implies tonal keys through the use of melodic or harmonic patterns associated with tonal music, only to undercut this with melodic or harmonic patterns associated with atonal music. The ambiguity of his 'Linear Music' comes from this mixture of references to tonal and atonal traditions; the implications of tonality, in the 1970s and 1980s, were in fact more unexpected and created a greater sense of tension and ambiguity than purely atonal music, which had by that time become well-established for more than half a century.

In *Homo audiens*, Kondo explains that, for him, composing music – by which he means any music which is not specifically commercial intent – is a purposeless activity: Music cannot convey any message or meaning, it is merely a thing which is made by a composer which leaves a trace of that composer’s existence, their freedom of mind. ‘It is a form of communication relieved of the burden of purposefulness which is possessed by language’ (2022, 80). Additionally, in the case of non-commercial musics or artworks, it represents freedom from the capitalist pressure to be productive. The activity which gives meaning to music is neither composition nor performance, it is rather interpretation. The necessarily subjective act of interpreting the musical-sonic-artistic data which comprises a work opens a person up to other subjectivities: composers’, performers’, and any other listeners with whom they discuss the work. When interpreters with radically different backgrounds encounter the same artwork (or any intriguing stimulus), they will likely have radically different interpretations of that same artwork – open communication about these differences is Kondo’s ethical–political defence of experimental music.

Kondo thus deliberately cultivates ambiguity on all levels of his work, with the intent of fostering a multiplicity of interpretations. He is interested in how listeners (including the performers and himself) will interpret the sounds he has written, how they will assemble them – compose them, listen to them, interpret them – in their own subjective mental place.

### 3 Huayan/Kegon Buddhism

Kegon (華嚴; Ch. *Huayan*) was one of the six Nara Schools of Buddhism (Jp: 南都六宗 *Nanto risshū*), headquartered at Tōdaiji (東大寺), and was of great influence in early Japanese Buddhism. Compared to its early influence in the Nara Period and its revival under Myōe (1173–1232) in the Kamakura Period, Kegon as a school of Buddhism has had relatively less direct political or intellectual influence in Japan through most of the past millennium (Kasulis, 2017, 95). However, despite some clear doctrinal differences, Zen (禪; Ch. *Chan*) Buddhism both in China and Japan was strongly influenced by Kegon teachings and in certain ways – notably in the doctrine of ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’ (*jiji muge hokkai*; 事事無礙法界) – Japanese philosophers from Zen, Shingon (真言), and other intellectual traditions have taken up aspects of the *Kegon Sūtra* and have continued to develop them.

Unlike interpretations of buddha-nature by previous Mahāyāna Schools (Jp: 大乘仏教 *daijō bukkyō*), which restricted buddha-nature to sentient (有情 *ujō*) beings, the third Huayan patriarch Fazang (643–712; 法藏 Jp: Hōzō) in his commentary on the Buddha-Nature Treatise in his *Huayan jing tanxuan ji* (華嚴經探玄記; Jp: *Kegon kyō tangen ki*; En: Record of Investigating the Mystery of the Avatamsaka Sūtra) writes that ‘According to the perfect [*Huayan*] teaching Buddha-nature and nature origination pervade animate and inanimate beings’ (Hamar, 2007, 242).

According to Bowring’s summary, in Kegon philosophy there are four progressive interpretations of how phenomena (Jp: 事 *ji*; roughly equivalent to form [Jp:

色 *shiki*] of other Buddhist schools) and principles (Jp: 理 *ri*, roughly equivalent to emptiness or nothingness [Sk: *sūnyatā*; Jp: 空 *kū*]) interpretate in the phenomenal world (the entirety of which arises from the One Mind (Jp: 一心 *isshin*) of the Buddha Mahāvairocana (Jp: 大日如来 Dainichi Nyorai). These were first explained using the metaphor of waves and the ocean:

1. The universe as phenomena (Jp: 事法界 *jihokkai*): waves on the ocean appear to exist in and of themselves.
2. The universe as principle (Jp: 理法界 *rihokkai*): the ocean appears as water and one does not see the waves.
3. The universe as the unimpeded interpenetration of principle and phenomena (Jp: 理事無礙法界 *riji muge hokkai*): one sees the waves and the water as at once distinct from each other and as one, dependent on each other.
4. The universe as the unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena (Jp: 事事無礙法界 *jiji muge hokkai*): this is Indra's net, covered in jewels at each knot, each jewel reflecting all the others. All things that exist are interdependent, all in one and one in all, the part dependent on the whole as the whole is dependent on the part. Everything has in common the fact that everything is emptiness, and it is this emptiness that links everything in a mutual relationship: the Dharma Realm can be therefore defined as pure relationship. The distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* collapses (adapted from Bowring, 2005, 105).<sup>9</sup>

This, the most developed articulation of Huayan/Kegon doctrine, was the work of the Huayan's fourth patriarch, Chengguan (澄觀, 738–839; Jp: *Chōgan*), as a result of his subsuming Chan/Zen teachings into Kegon while rejecting Confucian and Daoist ones (Van Norden & Jones, 2019).<sup>10</sup> The fractal-like way in which every grain of dust contains the universe just as the universe contains every grain of dust, and that all are manifestations of the One Mind of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana leads to the obvious conclusion that every grain of dust is also the One Mind; *i.e.*, has buddha-nature, or *tathāgatagarbha* (the womb of the Buddha, Jp: 如来藏 *nyoraijō*), or Nature Origination (Jp: 性起 *shōki*), or suchness (Sk: *tathātā*; Jp: 真如 *shinnyō*).

<sup>9</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper to investigate deeply the way these four concepts which Lepekhova calls Kegon's 'four shapes of the Dharma world' (2012, 49–50) have been interpreted over time and in different contexts. Recent scholarship – *ie* Lepekhova, Chang (2012), Toru (2024) – among others, all offer slightly different translations of the Chinese names of these four 'shapes' which are nonetheless largely congruent in their interpretations. I have chosen to use Bowring's translations here because his book is a general and accessible overview of Japanese religious thought (rather than Chinese) – and this paper is principally concerned with how these ideas have been received through Kegon philosophy in Japan, rather than their historical origin in China – and because Bowring's summary of the four Dharma worlds in terms of Chengguan's image of waves and ocean is both particularly evocative as well as sympathetically resonating with Konparu Zenchiku's concept of ocean as Primal Water (Thornhill 1993, 157ff).

<sup>10</sup> Note that in this period, Zen had yet to be introduced into Japan, so the mutual influence of Daoism, Huayan, and Chan doctrines preceded Zen's establishment in Japan, though it postdated the introduction of both the Kegon School and *sūtra* in Japan.

The *Kegon Sūtra* itself – especially in the chapter called the ‘Manifestation of the Buddha’ (chapter 37 in Cleary’s, 1993 translation) – describes at length how the one cosmic buddha manifests in all things; this does not exclude sound and music. This sūtra is famously long, ornate, and complex, but here are a few passages which back up Kondo’s claim that the sūtra does indeed ascribe ‘life’ to ‘individual sounds’:

How should great enlightening beings know the voice of Buddha? They should know Buddha’s voice is omnipresent, because it pervades all sounds. They should know Buddha’s voice pleases all according to their mentalities, because its explanation of truth is clear and comprehensive. (Cleary, 1993, 989).

The celestial concubine of the great lord god, named Beautiful Mouth, whose voice corresponds to a hundred thousand kinds of music, within each of which are also a hundred thousand different tones. Just as that goddess Beautiful Mouth produces countless sounds in one utterance, in the same way Buddha produces innumerable voices in one utterance, according to the differences in mentalities of sentient beings, reaching them all and enabling them to gain understanding. (Cleary, 1993, 992)

Ten-Powered Buddha .../ Produces a sublime voice pervading the cosmos (Cleary, 1993, 996)

The lord god has a precious concubine / Who voices all kinds of music / Producing a hundred thousand sounds in one voice / With a hundred thousand tones in each sound. / The voice of Buddha is also like this, / Producing all tones in one voice, / Different according to beings’ characters and inclinations, / Causing each to end afflictions when they hear. (Cleary, 1993, 997)

In a later chapter, the sūtra references the names of ‘sixty decillion buddhas’, among the first of which is ‘Ubiquitous Sound of Silence’ (Cleary, 1993, 1423).

It is clear that, for the *Kegon Sūtra*’s compilers-cum-editors, sounds, including musical ones, were both part of their vision of the universality of Mahāvairocana’s One Mind, but that different individuals perceive these sounds in different ways, according to the subjective experiences, education, training, and practice of the hearer.<sup>11</sup>

It is a small step from here to the Japanese Zen philosopher Dōgen’s (道元; 1200–1253) understanding of Buddha Nature in the *Busshō* (‘Buddha Nature’) fascicle of his *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏; En: ‘The True Dharma-Eye Treasury’). There, Dōgen interprets the Buddha Śākyamuni’s statement in chapter 27 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Jp: 大般涅槃經 *daihatsu nehan gyō*; En: Nirvāṇa Sūtra) ‘All living beings totally have the buddha-nature: The Tathāgata abides constantly’, saying that ‘[t]hose called “living beings,” or called “the sentient,” or called “all forms of life,” or called “all creatures,” are living beings and are all forms of existence. In short, “total existence” is “the buddha-nature” (91c7; 2008, 3,4).

<sup>11</sup> This conception of perception is not a world away from Gibsonian ecological theories of perception (Gibson 2014 [1979]), the implications for musical interpretation of Gibsonian ecological perception have been explored by Clarke (2005) and Jamieson (2018).



Concluding the same sūtra, Dōgen says that buddha-nature ‘is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles’ (101a; 2008, 30). It is, indeed, just everything.

Dōgen was also a skilful poet, and poetic expression of the buddha-nature of sounds is of course relevant here. For example (in Miranda Shaw’s translations):

峰の色谷の響きも皆ながら音が釈迦牟尼の声と姿と

*Mine no iro tani no hibiki mo mina nagara ne ga Shakamuni no koe to sugata to*

Mountain colours, valley echoes, everything as it is – Śākyamuni’s voice and body (Shaw, 1985, 121)

谷に響き峰に鳴く猿たえだえにただこの経を説くところ聞け

*Tani ni hibiki mine ni naku saru taedae ni tada kono kyō o toku tokoso kike*

Monkey cries from the mountain echo in the valley: I listen only to the preaching of this sūtra. (Shaw, 1985, 123)

聞くままにまた心なき身にしあらば己なりけり軒の玉水

*Kiku mama ni mata kokoro naki mi ni shi araba onore narikeri noki no tamamizu*

As I listened, I became the sound of rain on the eaves (Shaw, 1985, 124)

These *waka* (和歌) succinctly illustrate the main point of the Kegon Sūtra’s conception of buddha-nature and how it filtered into Japanese Zen: Reality is an ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’ which nevertheless retain their phenomenal (wholly contingent and ever-changing, impermanent) identities whilst reflecting the entirety of the universe as mirror (Dōgen *is* the sound of the rain whilst remaining phenomenologically a human being). This applies not only to humans, not only to so-called sentient animals (monkeys), but to colours, rain, and even secondary acoustic phenomena such as echoes.

#### 4 Konparu Zenchiku’s ‘Theatre of Revelation’

Even among the generally slow-moving world of *nō* dramaturgy, Konparu Zenchiku’s (1405-c.1468) works stand out for their understatedness, cultivated ambiguity, and lack of dramatic and musical development. Zenchiku’s plays and treatises are dense with allusion and allegoresis.<sup>12</sup> His most influential intellectual contribution is arguably the series of commentaries and complex intertextual elaborations on his revelatory vision *Rokurin Ichiro* (六輪一露; En: Six Circles, One Dewdrop).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the *nō* plays he composed demonstrate his strong knowledge of and belief in the contemporary Original Enlightenment (Jp: 本覚思想 *hongaku shisō*) discourses, the central tenet of which is the non-duality of

<sup>12</sup> Allegoresis is an interpretive method of understanding the non-dual nature of reality via ‘associational identification derive[d] from the rule of correspondence: that when two people, places, or things share a name, they must ultimately be the same (nondual)’ (Klein, 2021, 91).

<sup>13</sup> Ten of these increasingly complex, esoteric, and fascinating texts survive; the first two were translated in full and later ones in part by Thornhill (1993) and all extant versions were translated in full by Mark Nearman (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996).

conventional and absolute reality, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (Jp: 生死即涅槃 *shōji-soku-nehān*), sin and salvation (Jp: 煩惱即解脱 *bonnō-soku-gedatsu*), buddhas and non-buddhas. One way in which this is evidenced in both Zenchiku's theoretical works and theatrical practice is by the frequent use of circularity, a returning at the end of a work to the state which existed at the beginning (eg, the first and last of the Six Circles of his *Rokurin Ichiro* are both empty circles; the beginnings and endings of his plays often use the same slow *ōnori* (大ノリ) rhythmic pattern, which rarely happens in *nō* by other composers). Additionally, the stories dramatized in Zenchiku's *nō* illustrate central tenets of Original Enlightenment thought such as the buddha-hood of non-sentient [Jp: 非情 *hijō*] beings (many of his plays feature plants as characters – such as *Bashō* [芭蕉; a plantain tree] and *Kakitsubata* [杜若; an iris flower]) and the spiritual equality of women and men. Zenchiku's plots show little to no character development from start to finish, for how can you become Enlightened and ascend to *nirvāṇa* when everyone is already always Enlightened and *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are non-dual? As Paul Atkins notes in his 2006 study of Zenchiku's works *Revealed Identity*, Zenchiku portrays 'the enlightenment experience as revelational rather than transformational' (24).<sup>14</sup> Atkins cites Zenchiku's play *Bashō* (芭蕉; En: Plantain Tree) as exemplifying this. *Bashō* is strongly influenced by Original Enlightenment thought and the related concept of *shohō jissō* (諸法実相, meaning 'all phenomena are Truth, just as they are' [Atkins, 2006, 24]). As such the *shite* (シテ; En: main actor), who is the titular plantain tree, is already enlightened from the very start of the play. As Atkins points out, '[i]f anyone is transformed it is the *waki* [ワキ; En: supporting character; in *Bashō*, a Buddhist priest], and the audience on whose behalf he sometimes acts, by a new awareness' (2006, 64).

The previous tangent section was intended to show that Zenchiku's knowledge and use of contemporary Buddhist thought (though his use is entirely syncretic with proto-Shintō [神道] *kami*[神]-worship), including Kegon thought. Though, as mentioned above, in his time the Kegon school itself had long been superseded in terms of political power and influence by newer Buddhist sects, Zenchiku sent his *Rokurin Ichiro* treatises to various scholars and incorporated their comments and insights into his rewritings and expansions of the text, among which was the prominent Kegon priest Nittō Shamon Shigyoku (入唐沙門志玉; 1383–1463).<sup>15</sup> The final One Dewdrop of the *Rokurin Ichiro* vision, which represents non-duality, incorporating and reflecting the other six circles/stages (and all other things, since one of the six circles is the circle of forms [*ie*, all phenomena]) in a single drop, is a standard Kegon metaphor. Even at this stage, Kegon's intellectual influence remained strong and its influence – via his incorporation of multiple aspects of Shigyoku's

<sup>14</sup> Atkins coined the phrase 'Theatre of Revelation' which I used as this section's title. Atkins uses this phrase to distinguish Zenchiku's approach to *nō* from Zeami's 'Theatre of Transformation' (2006,10).

<sup>15</sup> The other two known scholars whose commentaries influenced the *Rokurin Ichiro* treatises were the Confucian scholar Ichijō Kaneyoshi (一条兼良; 1402–1481) and Zen monk Nankō Sōgen (南江宗沅; 1387–1463). See Thornhill (1993, 11), and Nearman (1995a, 236–237) for differing interpretations of the relationship between these commentaries and Zenchiku's original texts.

interpretations into his development of the *Rokurin Ichiro* paradigm<sup>16</sup> – is clear in Zenchiku's aesthetic outlook and in his works.

But to return to the question of individual sounds, where the practically-minded Zeami Motokiyo (c.1363–c.1443)<sup>17</sup> followed Chinese music theory and posited a 3-step process – first pitch, second breath, third voice: in other words, the *jo-ha-kyū* fractal structure of Zeami's entire rhythmic conception of *nō* expressed in a single note – Zenchiku's six-part *Rokurin Ichiro* system interprets the life of each single note in explicitly Kegan terms adapted from Shigyoku's commentary: Circle 1: Longevity (Jp: 寿 *ju*), Circle 2: Arising (Jp: 生 *shō*), Circle 3: Abiding (Jp: 住 *jū*), Circle 4: Change (Jp: 異 *i*), Circle 5: extinction (Jp: 滅 *metsu*), and finally returning to Circle 6: Emptiness (Jp: 空 *kū*). The first Circle of Longevity (like the sixth Circle of Emptiness, this is visually represented in Zenchiku's manuscript by a completely empty circle) is related by Shigyoku and Zenchiku to an important nondual Kegan doctrine: 'one source of motion and stillness' (Jp: 動靜一元 *dōsei ichigen*) 'dō [motion] and sei [stillness] represent the arising and subsequent subsiding of delusion, on the ground of truth (*ichigen*)' (Thornhill, 1993, 102).<sup>18</sup>

## 5 Do Sounds have Buddha-Nature?

So what does this mean for the titular question of this paper? In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, sounds and music are clearly understood as manifestations of the cosmic One Mind of Mahāvairocana, manifesting in myriad ways depending on the interpreter. In Shigyoku's Kegan thought, and in Zenchiku's theory and praxis, a sound arises, abides, changes, and then is extinguished, returning to the limitless emptiness (Jp: 虚空 *kokū*; or – as the concept has developed in the 20th- and 21st-century Kyoto School – Nishida Kitarō's [西田幾多郎] 'place of absolute nothingness' [Jp: 絶対無の場所], or Ueda Shizuteru's [上田閑照] 'hollow

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Shigyoku's Kegan commentary on *Rokurin Ichiro*, see chapter 4 of Thornhill (1993, 88–121).

<sup>17</sup> Zeami is generally regarded as the founder of *nō* and its first theorist; he was also Zenchiku's father-in-law and mentor.

<sup>18</sup> It is also notable that Zenchiku's understanding of the lifecycle of a single sound as exemplified by the second to fifth circles mirror one of the most common ways that the programmers of electronic synthesizers analyse and construe the development of a single note over time. This method is generally known by its abbreviation AHDSR, which stands for Attack (akin to Zenchiku's Birth); Hold (Abiding); Decay (Change); Sustain; Release (Extinction). The Sustain section of AHDSR does not have a correlative in Zenchiku's theory. That is because the sustaining (without changing) of a single sound is theoretically possible with electronics, but is not realisable by actual human musicians; in addition, sustain is fundamentally about the volume level rather than the development of the sound in time (the other four elements of the AHDSR model refer to time alone, but Sustain refers to both time and volume), so its lack of a corollary with Zenchiku's model of the life of sounds sung by humans is understandable. This correlation between how artificial musical tones are synthesised and Zenchiku's 15th-century understanding of how sounds are produced is further evidence that Zenchiku's writings might be mystical in inspiration and esoteric in writing, but show Zenchiku's deep, practical understanding of sound and thus the *Rokurin Ichiro* system is also a practical guide for practicing musician/actors.

expanse' [Jp: 「虚」の世界 *kyo no sekai*]). For Dōgen, humans can non-dually identify with sounds and for both Dōgen and Zenchiku, non-human sounds (even sounds arising from non-sentient beings) could be interpreted as preaching the dharma. For Jo Kondo, each sound has its own life, but meaning (in other words, musical meaning) can only come from the relationship between sounds,<sup>19</sup> and will be interpreted differently by different interpreters. Likewise, as it says in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* itself, 'Buddha produces innumerable voices in one utterance, according to the differences in mentalities of sentient beings, reaching them all and enabling them to gain understanding' (Cleary, 1993, 992).

Does any of this mean that sounds themselves – as opposed to physical beings like waterfalls, falling rocks, rustling leaves, or monkeys which make sounds – have buddha-nature? If we take buddha-nature to be, as Kegon scholars would have it, Suchness – in essence basically 'nature' itself – then it would seem that sounds would have to possess buddha-nature if they possess any quality at all.

As we saw above, Chengguan, when explaining the counterintuitive idea of the 'unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena', tended to use the metaphor of an ocean and waves. Conventionally speaking – in other words, to our human manner of looking at things – both oceans and waves exist as discrete things, but how can we determine where the border between one and the other is? We cannot – because there is complete, yet unimpeded, interpenetration of one into the other. In his commentary on Zenchiku's *Rokurin Ichiro*, Shigyoku repurposes this metaphor to describe the arising of things, but specifically sound in the context of nō singing. And, as we who both suffer and benefit from the advances of Modernity all know, sound is merely a vibration that propagates as a wave through a medium – and, if all phenomenal matter is, in Shigyoku's formulation, a single golden wave of transitory existence arising on the formless, tranquil sea of Nature Origination (Thornhill, 1993, 105), should a sound wave not be considered as that as well?

## 6 The Ethics of Listening

If all things are Buddha-nature just as they are, what does that imply for the way we interpret – listen to, ascribe meaning to, perform, and compose using – sounds which are in some sense living things with Buddha-natures as much as we are?

Kondo himself articulates a kind of ethics of experimental listening in *homo audiens*, positing that the inherent openness of music (*ie*, music without, or music considered apart from, lyrics) to a wide variety of interpretations can act as a catalyst to the understanding of different cultures and subcultures in our 'polystylistic culture' (Jp: 多様式文化 *tayōshiki bunka*). However, this mutual understanding of the other can occur only on the condition that appeals to critical authority and one's own tradition

<sup>19</sup> As briefly referenced previously in the *Nutida Musik* interview which provided the starting point for this paper, note again the similarity with Watsuji Tetsurō's idea that humanity (Jp: 人間 *ningen*) is the relationship between (Jp: 間 *gen* [or *aida*, when read as a single character]) people (Jp: 人 *nin* [or *hito*]), and is not something that can exist in a single individual human.

are abandoned and interpreters open their ears and be willing to encounter sounds with the respect that should be accorded them as living beings, beings with Buddha-natures (Kondo, 2022, 97–99).<sup>20</sup> I would argue that we also extend that same respect to all other cultures, humans and non-human, whose sounds we are interpreting.

Composers in the American Experimental School (sometimes called the New York School) of composition centred around John Cage and those who have and are developing his legacy (such as Kondo) have often articulated, in their several ways, a kind of respect towards sounds which resonates with Kondo's approach. Cage himself would often speak of letting sounds be themselves. His famous so-called 'silent' piece *4'33"* (1952) is the most ultimate example of non-interference in the sonic content of a piece of music.<sup>21</sup> Cage's friend Morton Feldman (1926–1987) wrote about his own approach to composition via concentrated listening as opposed to the structuralist or formalist approaches then common among the European avant-garde (such as electronic music pioneer Karlheinz Stockhausen):

My past experience was not to 'meddle' with the material, but use my concentration as a guide to what might transpire. I mentioned this to Stockhausen once when he had asked me what my secret was. 'I don't push the sounds around.' Stockhausen mulled this over and asked: 'Not even a little bit?' (Feldman, 2000, 143).

Kondo himself composes in this way, painstakingly listening to each combination of notes, playing them again and again, until the notes themselves reveal to him what notes should come next. Linda Catlin Smith – a one-time student of Kondo, and, like Kondo, a friend and kind of protégé, though not a student, of Feldman's – says this about her method:

[My method of composition] is primarily a method of listening. I spend time finding or creating a fragment of music – a beginning maybe? – that interests me.... I listen to it, and wait to hear what it seems to require. This is difficult to describe because it seems so simple. But it is a complex activity.... This compositional approach is a kind of extreme awareness,... requir[ing] a kind of active reflection.... It is similar to how I imagine *ikebana* [生け花].... A sense of balance or rightness; an attention to the detail of these flowers or musical fragments; a sense of space, or phrasing – this is what I bring to the process. I compose this way because I want to stay aware of the experience of listening to the piece, because the experience of listening to it is the piece. (Smith, 1992).

Michael Pisaro-Liu, an eminent practitioner and theorist of field recording (the recording of contingent environmental sounds) has referred to field recordings, no matter how active and loud they might be, as 'recordings of silence' (Pisaro, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> To reiterate, Kondo doesn't reference any non-Western sources in the text of *Homo audiens* – the equation of Kondo's claim that sounds have an 'independent life' with their having Buddha-natures is my own interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> There is a small mountain of books and articles on this most famous of experimental pieces; one particularly useful introduction to the history and conceptual framework of the piece is Kyle Gann's *No Such Thing as Silence* (2011).

Thus silence, as in Cage's *4'33"*, is sound not made with the intention of being heard as music, sound which occurs without purpose, without the maker of the sound intending that it be listened to. Is the apocalypse (revelation) of the impossibility of a living human experiencing true silence (*ie*, a complete absence of sound) not a manifestation of the Buddha named 'Ubiquitous Sound of Silence'?

These are all somewhat different ways of articulating the same point – composing (which, per Kondo, is just a kind of listening, and every listener is composing a piece out of the presented sonic materials every time they listen to – interpret – any sound as 'music') can be a shared process of deep reflection and interaction with other living beings (be they other human beings, sound-making non-humans, or purely sounds themselves) on terms which are respectful of the types of being they are and the cultures, histories, physical presences they bring with them.

## 7 Conclusion

What is the point of all this speculation, of this unearthing of thought that was coming to the end of its relevance even in Zenchiku's era in Japan, that remained a footnote to Buddhism in China, and barely made a ripple in India?

Paul Atkin's calls Zenchiku's theatre a 'Theatre of Revelation'. As Dougald Hine, a writer on culture in the era of climate catastrophe, frequently points out, 'apocalypse' is simply the Greek word for 'revelation'. In his recent book *At Work in the Ruins*, he details how European Enlightenment and scientific ways of thinking have blinkered us as subjects of Modernity into not realising that there are other ways of knowing, other ways of listening, other ways of interpreting. He identifies four useful things that can be done in a time of apocalypse – a time which reveals the hidden fractures in our conception of conventional reality, the Lacanian Real of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Those four things are:

1. Salvaging the good from Modernity (see also Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's *Hospicing Modernity*, 2021);
2. Mourn the good which cannot be salvaged;
3. Notice that things in Modernity were never quite as good as we were promised, that the cracks were always there;
4. Realise that, as Modernity was beginning, other ways of life, other ways of understanding the world, were being destroyed, and that picking up those threads – praxis and knowledge which Modernity found obsolete and worthless – which might be useful after Modernity has come to its end. (Hine, 2023, 198ff)

This fourth project is principally what this present research project is engaged in, trying to recover pre-Modern ways of experiencing the world which are less anthropocentric, ways of knowing the world and interacting with other, non-human beings – those other waves on the ocean of the Real – which are less destructive.

Philosopher Takemura Makio (竹村牧男; b. 1948) writes that 'environmental problems are directly related to the issue of one's relationship to others' (2019

[2009], 78), and that a true universal awareness of the Kegon axiom ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’ would necessarily lead to the end of competition with our fellow beings and bring about universal compassion (and implicitly an end to the destruction of non-human beings and environments). He notes that the Sanskrit word which is usually translated as ‘compassion’ – *karuṇā* – actually literally means ‘sympathetic oscillation’. The term ‘sympathetic oscillation’ is also used in music, meaning two sounds whose waves are congruent in particular ways.<sup>22</sup>

So, whether this question about Buddha-nature is ultimately real or just a metaphor, whether they are meaningful or not – and even for Dōgen, “‘wanting to know the meaning of buddha-nature” does not only mean knowing. It means wanting to practice it, wanting to experience it, wanting to preach it, and wanting to forget it’ (92c; 2008, 6) – going forward in my own practice as a listening-composer, as a result of researching this paper I will be more attuned to the ‘unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena’ and especially the ‘sympathetic oscillations’ that exist all around us. We, as beings capable of conscious action in the world, can choose to be more or less sympathetic in our ‘oscillations’ with other beings, other things, other buddhas.

**Funding** This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 23K00215. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the author’s organization, JSPS nor MEXT.

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<sup>22</sup> This refers to sound waves whose speed of oscillation (measured in Hertz) are related in simple whole-number ratios. There is an entire genre of experimental music based on explorations of these ‘just intonation’ intervals which is tangentially related to the New York School of Cage and his companions and disciples, especially James Tenney. See Sabat (n.d.) for further information.

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