

# The Calming Effect of Imee Ooi's Buddhist Music: from Mantra to Music and Meditation

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## ABSTRACT

Past researchers explain how Buddhist music has gone through three stages developing from chant, to devotional song, to commercial music. Among the many composers of Buddhist music, Imee Ooi is a well-known Malaysian composer who has composed and produced thirty albums to date, highlights being: *Siddhartha*, *Above Full Moon*, *The Chant of Metta*, *Heart Sutra* and *Jewel of Tibet*. The composer has a reputation for producing her own Buddhist mantra music that is believed to have a calming effect on listeners. This study looks into the context of Buddhist music and examines its effect on listeners. Methods that are both qualitative and quantitative in nature include analysis, interview and virtual ethnography. The song composed on the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* was selected for musical analysis to shed light on how Ooi ingeniously combines text into a musical structure that contributes to a calming and meditative effect.

**KEY WORDS:** Buddhism, Mantra, Meditation, Music, Effect, Imee Ooi.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism originated from the belief and teaching of enlightened Siddhartha Gautama – Buddha from India has a history that dated back to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE [1]. The teaching of Buddha is that there is no escape from suffering in all human life. Therefore, the main goal of meditation is to become free from suffering such as greed, hatred and delusion [2].

In Buddhism, meditation is termed Satipatthāna or Way of Mindfulness [2]. The Western term ‘meditation’ was not originally used in this religion but is now commonly accepted in contemporary practice. Meditation forms a common practice in many Eastern religions. In Buddhism, practitioners meditate to attain skills and physical stamina where accomplishment comes from constant practice [3]. Moreover, Shaw [4] explains that meditation helps to attain the eightfold path of Buddhism: right view, right speech, right action, right resolve, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness. Following the ten precepts, the teaching of Buddha prohibits one from: killing; stealing; having sexual contact; lying; consuming alcohol and other intoxicants; eating at the wrong time; entertainment such as dancing, singing, instrumental music and unsuitable performance; wearing garlands, scents and beautifying the body with cosmetic products; indulging in luxurious beds and seats and collecting gold and silver [5]. However, in contemporary Buddhism, certain practices have changed. As Cook [6] observes, meditation in contemporary Thai Buddhism is very much syncretized and secularized. The use of music in meditation also signifies a form of cultural change in Buddhism practice.

Among the various changes in contemporary practice of Buddhism, music forms the focus of this article. As Dissanayake [7] discussed, the term ‘music’ was originally Western and may not denote other cultural activity that involves organized sound. Liturgical chant or *fanbai* was strictly distinct from music in early Buddhist monastic tradition [8]. Reviewing past literature, scholars such as Tian and Tan [9], Chen [8], Chen [10] clearly delineate the development of how music once prohibited in Buddhism, continued to develop from the 1930s, surpassing the Cultural Revolution in China to the modern era of recording, commercial recording and live performances. Besides, Loo, Loo and Lee [11] also observe that Buddhist music took on a new context in competition in Malaysia which has become an annual activity held by a Buddhist association. Generally, according to Chen [10], Buddhist music is now categorized as:

- 1) Buddhist Chant (*fanbai*)
- 2) Buddhist Devotional songs (*Fojiao gequ*)
- 3) Commercial Buddhist Music (*Shangpin Fojiao Yinyue*)

In Malaysia, among the many Buddhist music composers or song writers, such as Chen Zuo Bing, Li Ying Jian, Huang Kang Qi and Zeng Jing Han, Imee Ooi has a reputation as a composer of Buddhist chant music whose music gives a calming and relaxing effect. Ooi had thirty albums produced to date and her music includes composed chant, devotional song and also musicals of which the latter may be classified as commercial Buddhist music. Her albums include *The Chant of Metta*, *Heart Sutra* and *The Great Compassionate Mantra*.

She is also the music director and composer of highly acclaimed stage musicals such as *Siddhartha*, *Above Full Moon*, *The Perfect Circle*, *Jewel of Tibet* and *Kita*.

In 1997 Ooi established her own music production company, I.M.M. Musicworks, located in the capital of Malaysia. The music production house takes on four important roles: composition, recording, editing and disseminating Buddhist music. According to Ooi (personal communication I.M.M. Musicworks, 26 October 2009), I.M.M. was her name Imm (Ooi Hooi Imm) and has the same pronunciation as *yin* which means sound or music in Chinese. Ooi explained that the way Christians incorporated music into their prayers and worship, especially the use of popular music, became a stimulus for her to compose music for Buddhists. She mentioned that during her childhood she was only able to hear Buddhist Chant at funerals. When she grew up she had thought that Buddhist music was a solemn music and was also scared of it. She had gone to church with some Christian friends and relatives and found that there was much good and sweet-sounding Christian hymn music resounding through the pleasant atmosphere of the church. Therefore, it was her goal to compose beautiful melody lines to go with the *mantra*. Among listeners who know her music in Malaysia Ooi was reputed for her calming and beautiful Buddhist music. Therefore this study examines her music and its calming effect on listeners.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed. The study was carried out in three stages: music analysis of a selected piece by Ooi, interview covering perceptions related to Ooi's music and a virtual ethnography targeted for feedback about Ooi's music from listeners.

From the many music composed by Ooi, the song with the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* was selected for analysis. Musical elements such as tempo, rhythmic pattern, melodic contour, tonality and texture will be analyzed in relation to producing a calm and meditative effect. Relation between the text and pitch will also be examined.

In the second phase, a one-to-one interview to eighty young adults from a local university Buddhist Association was carried out. This inductive approach [12] resulted in flexibility and more space for interviewees to give their perception over Ooi's music. Eighty indicated interest to participate in the interview; however, fifty were selected after confirmation of knowing Ooi's music. The interviewee's perception of Ooi's music will be reported and discussed. The following questions were asked in the short interview:

- Do you listen to Ooi's music regularly?
- Can you differentiate Ooi's music from other local Buddhist music composers?
- Do you agree that Ooi's music is able to transcend the mind?
- Do you agree that Ooi's music has a calming effect?
- Do you agree that Ooi's music is an effective way of promoting the teaching of Buddha?

Besides the interview, a new perspective in field observation virtual ethnography, as stated by Cooley, Meizel and Nasir [13] – remains an important approach in this study. This refers to a virtual tour of sites of Ooi's music on the internet where feedback from listeners all around the world will be gathered and discussed.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The meaning of *Om mani padme hom* has been discussed in the writing of many scholars such as Studholme [14], Keene [15] and Conley [16]. Conley [16, p. 246] regards *Om mani padme hom* as a 'universal compassion' mantra belonging to the Hindu and Buddhist tradition. According to Studholme [14, p.7], *mani padme* means 'jewel (*mani*) in the lotus (*padme*).' This reflects the common image of Buddha sitting on the lotus. Keene [15, p.63] explains that *Om mani padme hom* brings four meanings, where *om* means the hope of a buddhist, *mani* is to remind buddhists that everything is valuable, *padme* is the beautiful lotus and *hum* is a reminder for devotee to be kind and loving.

Studholme [14, p.110] explains that the mantra produces a 'pleasing reverberation' because the syllables *om* and *hum* sound similar, giving a continuous effect where both syllables merge together. On the other hand, the middle four syllables are rhythmic and lively when recited. Ladner [17, p.74] describes that reciting the mantra is like "bees' nest being destroyed, making the sound 'dirdirrrr.'" Therefore, the phrase *Om mani padme hom* gives a smooth flow of sound when recited.

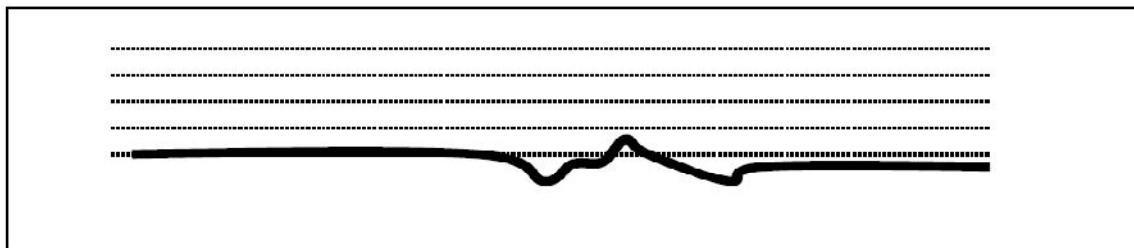
Relating the text of *Om mani padme hom* in musical analysis, for the main theme of the song Ooi placed nine beats to the text *om* which sustains and falls on the same pitch as *hom*. *Om* is followed with a shorter rhythmic pattern in the count of two beats for *mani padme*, and a final sustaining four beats to *hom* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 First subject in Om Mani Padme Hom

<b>Key</b>	: A Flat Major
<b>Tempo</b>	: Moderate pace (76 crotchet beats per minute)
<b>Chord</b>	: I - - - I - - - I - - - I - - -
<b>Back-up vocals:</b>	2 - - -   - - -   7 - - -   - - -
<b>Theme</b>	:   5 - - -   - - - <u>4 2</u>   3 <u>3 6 4.</u> <u>2</u>   3 - - -
<b>Text</b>	: Om Mani Pad me Hom

As observed in the melodic contour of the main theme, the contour reflects a melodic idea that is stable and calm in character and stays within a close frame of the alto register. Figure 2 illustrates the melodic contour by tracing the pitch on the Western five-stave notation system.

Figure 2 Melodic contour of Om mani padme hom



Ooi employs simple instrumentation, with just a smooth flowing piano arpeggio in a stately eight-beat and a sustaining string section for the underlying harmony. The character of the music is monotonous, maintaining a slow tempo and moderately soft dynamic level; and there is no contrast in these throughout the whole song.

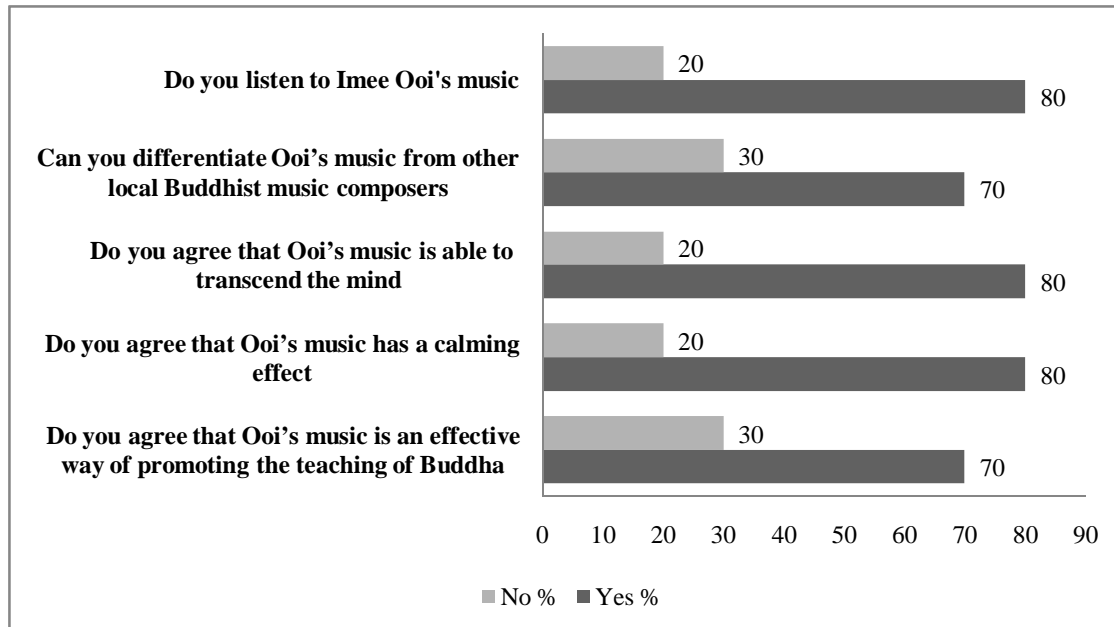
The music is repetitive and the duration of the whole song is 10 minutes and 53 seconds, which is twice as long as any regular popular song. The character of the song is solemn and slow in tempo, with the first syllable *om* in melismatic style (several pitches to a syllable). She used Western instruments such as the piano and strings that are adaptable to suit reception of modern listeners. Therefore, these traits adhere to Chen's categorization of commercial Chinese Buddhist music that reflects a 'transnational flow of styles, ideas, capital, and technologies' where she pointed to Taiwanese Buddhist record companies [18, p.17]. However, Ooi's *Om mani padme hum* is an ingenious combination of traditional text and style of chanting embedded in a modern and innovative sonic musical frame.

Ooi's musical style also reflects the results of some psychological studies in music. The effect of music on psychology has been proven in past studies. In a study by Schoen [19], he states that music brings about mood change. Another study by Hevner [20] revealed that the tonality of music gave an effect of a certain mood, in that a major mode denotes happiness and the reverse is true for music in a minor mode. Other researchers such as Riber [21], Weidenfeller and Zinny [22] and Zinny and Weidenfeller [23] observe the tempo in music and its effect, and found that slow music gave a relaxing effect. On the other hand, researches done by Giles [24], Bernardi, Porta and Sleight [25] and Teng, Wong and Zhang [26] prove that a person's heart rate and blood pressure slow down to match the tempo of the music. In addition, Giles [24] termed the phenomenon as 'entrainment.' As Donesky [27] stated, musical elements such as pitch, tempo, personal preference, type of music must be carefully selected in achieving therapeutic goals; the researcher found that slow music gave a positive short-term effect in reducing dyspnea.

Therefore, Ooi's compositional style, comprising slow tempo, soft dynamics, simple rhythmic pattern, and a steady melodic contour in a major mode, conforms to the above theories, and these may be factors contributing to altering the state of mind of listeners to a meditative or calm experience

As for the second findings of our research, the five questions elicited the following answers:

Figure 3 Results from interview conducted over Ooi's music



In our interview, 80% of our interviewees listened to Ooi's music and most of them listened to her music via YouTube, Buddhist events, musicals at local theatres and so forth. 70% are able to differentiate Ooi's music from other Buddhist composers in Malaysia. Some of them explained that most of the other composers' music is in rock and pop styles; however, Ooi's music is soothing and in a New Age style. Though, some responded that although her music is unique, they do not like it.

The results also show 80% of interviewees agree that Ooi's music is able to transcend the mind and has a calming effect. During the interview, some of the interviewees said that her music is spiritual and can make people calm down. One interviewee said that her music is like magic and is able to inspire people and purify their heart. Moreover, 70% of them agree that Ooi's music is an effective way of transmitting the teaching of Buddha. Some of them also mentioned that her music is an attractive way of promoting Buddhism. They also appreciate her passion in transmitting the Dharma via her music.

In terms of virtual observation carried out on Ooi's music on YouTube, we found the following responses [28]:

- I was coughing so bad just now but till I hear this beautiful chant, not only I stop coughing, but breathe smoothly too. By SeannyWonny
- Very calming. By Ahq1996
- Makes me want to just breath. By MonkDudeQu
- It really clear my mind. By Isbandrew
- Relaxing, melodious, calming. By Freespirit2136
- This is really calming and really helped me get some form of peace when I was going through a rough period. By Instarstwined
- I feel like time stopped its all so loooooong and powerfull I love this! By xRH84x
- Incredibly peaceful, calming, joyous version of this song. By Uteratterinchen

Feedback by listeners to Ooi's *Om mani padme hum* shows that her music produces a calming effect. It is also clear that the music is able to alter the state of mind of the listeners. The positive results from listening to the song, where a calm and peaceful sensation was felt, may contribute as a form of meditation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ooi's music reveals a hybrid of a traditional text from Buddhist mantra, New Age and commercial Buddhist music. The results from musical analysis, discussion of theories from scholars and feedback from interviewees and listeners show that her music is able to induce calmness, at least, to a majority of listeners. However, whether her music is able to transcend the mind into a real meditation state may need further research, as the methodology engaged in this study may not fully fulfil the answers to this query. Besides, the term 'meditation' may differ in Buddhism from that of a Western point of view. Therefore, description from the above interviewees might denote a form of early meditation, or just an altered state of mind to a condition of tranquillity and calmness.

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