

Research Note

Instrumental Musicians and Music in the Lotus Sutra

Jonathan P. Cummings

Summary: Musicians were an integral part of the ceremonies and events described in the Lotus Sutra and in the multiple references to performances by these musicians, the term 'gandharva' is used to mean 'heavenly musician'. Music also helps portray a transition from 'truth' in the first half of the Lotus Sutra to 'action' in the second half. Enthusiastic instrumental musicians played rousing and inspiring music. The descriptions of some of these performances may have been meant to be interpreted. Music emphasizes the preaching of the sutra.

Scope: This article deals with references to the presence of instrumental musicians in the Lotus Sutra. The author was a professional instrumental musician, and the scope of this article is bounded to that expertise. A professional instrumental musician has also served as editor for the article. Although there are many references to performances by singers and dancers [including 'kimnaras'] as well in the Lotus Sutra, they haven't been dealt with here as experts in these fields would bring better insight to them.

About the Lotus Sutra: The Lotus Sutra uses a necessarily cosmic scale to explain the incredibly vast potential of a human heart filled with compassion. The Lotus Sutra uses many similes and parables; and "teaches of the great hidden treasure of the heart, as vast as the universe itself, which dispels any feelings of powerlessness. It teaches a dynamic way of living in which we breathe the immense life of the universe itself. It teaches the true great adventure of self-reformation."¹ The cosmic scale and vast timelines of the Lotus Sutra are actually well suited to describing the immeasurable potential of a human heart.

The Presence of Musicians throughout the Lotus Sutra

MUSICIANS in the Lotus Sutra include humans, nonhumans, Mgandharvas, heavenly beings, dragons and more. However,

gandharvas are prominent.

Musicians were present at the start of the Lotus Sutra on Mount Gridhrakuta (Eagle Peak) near Rajagriha in India.² The Sutra states that four gandharva kings³ were present at the beginning⁴ — the gandharva king Pleasant, the gandharva king Pleasant Sound, the gandharva king Beautiful, and the gandharva king Beautiful Sound — each with several hundreds of thousands of followers. A gandharva is defined as “a heavenly musician, one of the eight kinds of non-human beings who protect Buddhism”.⁵ In the context of the Lotus Sutra, which repeatedly emphasizes “good men and good women”, and also outlines Buddhahood for both men and women, the gender of a gandharva is irrelevant.

Gandharva musicians also accompanied other buddhas, each paying reverence to their own respective buddhas and making offerings (of music, presumably) to their respective buddhas.⁶

The gandharvas and other musicians react spontaneously with joy, dance (“their hearts were filled with great joy and danced without end”), and a vast variety of music to the prediction of supreme perfect enlightenment for Shariputra — apparently because this opened a path (i.e., a path through faith) to Buddhahood for “voice-hearers”.⁷

Attending the Lotus Sutra ceremony themselves, gandharvas who sought the Buddha way or listened to the Lotus Sutra (even one verse) and thought of it with joy for even one moment received the prophecy of their own supreme perfect enlightenment in the Lotus Sutra.⁸

As ‘Teachers of the Law’ themselves, pitying living beings who suffer in this saha world,⁹ gandharva musicians who revere and expound the Lotus Sutra apparently also vowed to be reborn in this saha world, among living beings mired in suffering, and to voluntarily relinquish the reward due them for their pure deeds in past lifetimes.¹⁰ Ambiguity seems to be prevented by the wording of ‘The Teacher of the Law’ chapter; the initial paragraph includes gandharvas, the second paragraph says “someone”, the third paragraph says “people” and mentions music, the fourth paragraph (which also mentions the offering of music) asks “what living beings will be able to attain Buddhahood”, and the fifth paragraph says “these people voluntarily relinquish”.¹¹

Gandharva musicians were part of all three assemblies in both locations — the first assembly on Mount Gridhrakuta [Eagle Peak], the second assembly in the middle of the air over Eagle Peak [Ceremony in the Air], and the concluding assembly back on Mount Gridhrakuta [Eagle Peak].¹²

Gandharvas and even ‘daughters of gandharvas’ will also gather

around a bodhisattva who preaches the Law, in order to listen to the Law.¹³

Gandharvas were present when the Bodhisattvas of the Earth vowed to uphold and preach the Law,¹⁴ reacted with joy when these Bodhisattvas made this vow,¹⁵ and did so again when Shakyamuni Buddha entrusted the Bodhisattvas of the Earth with the mission to propagate the Law¹⁶ (in the Latter Day of the Law¹⁷).

Gandharvas may also preach the Lotus Sutra or the [Mystic] Law. Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound can manifest himself or herself as a gandharva and preach the Lotus Sutra, for the sake of living beings in difficult circumstances, if a gandharva's presence is appropriate.¹⁸ They may also preach the Law, if living beings need a gandharva preaching the Law to be saved. For example, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds can manifest himself or herself as a gandharva and preach the Law in the form of a gandharva.¹⁹

Interpretation:²⁰ This seems to suggest that musicians can adopt, embrace, and embody the spirit and determination of Bodhisattvas of the Earth [because this is the Latter Day of the Law]. It also seems to suggest that I and others can adopt, embrace, and embody the spirit and determination of Bodhisattvas of the Earth and preach the Mystic Law. In other words, a musician can be a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

The presence of gandharvas seems to grow as the Lotus Sutra progresses (see Chart 1 later in this article).

The heavenly king Upholder of the Nation, at the concluding assembly on Mount Gridhrakuta, is inspired to promise to shield and guard those who uphold the Lotus Sutra. He advanced from within the vast assembly to where the Buddha was and pledged to do so. The heavenly king Upholder of the Nation was in the vast assembly "along with a host of thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas²¹ of gandharvas who surrounded him and paid him reverence".²² (Analysis note: "millions of nayutas of gandharvas" means the gandharvas can theoretically be numbered or counted. A number facilitates analysis and modeling.)

Then, toward the end of the Lotus Sutra, "numberless" gandharvas accompanied Bodhisattva Universal Worthy when Bodhisattva Universal Worthy came to listen to and accept the Lotus Sutra. He (or she) and the numberless gandharvas thereby attended the concluding assembly on Mount Gridhrakuta.²³ (Analysis note: "Numberless" seems to indicate, theoretically, that there are too many gandharvas to be

numbered or counted. Lack of a number thwarts numerical analysis, but modeling is possible. See Chart 1.)

Contributions of Music by Musicians in the Lotus Sutra

While the assembly on Mount Gridhrakuta in India in the saha world was the first gathering, in other lands and in other worlds, heavenly beings made offerings of music to the memorial towers (funerary towers) of other deceased buddhas.²⁴

Interpretation: This seems to suggest that music can be suitable as an offering as part of a memorial service for a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra.

Those who sincerely made offerings of music to the memorial towers of deceased buddhas were said to “have attained the buddha way”.²⁵ These offerings included the playing of flutes and pipes.

Interpretation: This suggests that music as an offering as part of a memorial service for a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra expresses the attainment of the buddha way by the musicians or those offering the music. It also implies that offering music to the deceased and family of the deceased is an acceptable way to honor the deceased and the faith-related efforts of a deceased practitioner of the Lotus Sutra, as part of a memorial service.

When Shakyamuni predicted enlightenment for Shariputra (a “voice-hearer”), “heavenly beings made music, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand varieties, all at the same time in the midst of the air”.²⁶ This was apparently an expression of joy, with the realization that a path of faith²⁷ to bodhisattva practices and supreme perfect enlightenment existed for voice-hearers; the voice-hearers and others realized suddenly that Shariputra and others in the assembly could enter that path through faith alone.²⁸ This vast variety of musical expression was probably spontaneous and exuberant.

Interpretations: Efforts in a path of faith in the Lotus Sutra were (and should be) honored, respected, and applauded. Another interpretation is that one should improve one’s own efforts in faith, so as to better embrace, uphold, and preach the Lotus Sutra. (This is the Latter Day of the Law, however, so embracing and upholding the Lotus Sutra

now means embracing the Law or *Gohonzon*.²⁹⁾

Four heavenly kings as their offering to the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence beat on heavenly drums and other heavenly beings played heavenly musical instruments, all for ten small kalpas, while the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence was meditating, until he attained supreme perfect enlightenment.³⁰

The number of musical offerings and performances seems to increase from Chapter 10 through Chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra.

In Chapter 10, Shakyamuni Buddha says to Bodhisattva Medicine King that those who read and recite the Lotus Sutra should be 'greeted' with offerings and reverence, including the offering of making music.³¹ (A musical greeting here should imply a brief 'fanfare' or 'salute'.)

Interpretations: The efforts of teachers of the sutra [i.e., Bodhisattvas of the Earth] should be recognized, applauded, and respected. One should try to improve one's own efforts as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

Shakyamuni Buddha also says to Bodhisattva Medicine King that towers (made of the seven kinds of gems) should be erected in any place whatsoever where the Lotus Sutra is preached, read, recited, copied, or where a roll of it exists, and that music should be offered to these towers.³² Shakyamuni Buddha tells Bodhisattva Medicine King that relics of the Buddha's body would not need to be enshrined in such towers, because the entire body of the thus come one would already be present.

In Chapter 11, when the Treasure Tower³³ emerges from the earth, gandharvas offer music as alms to the Treasure Tower, paying it reverence, honor, and praise.³⁴ The context seems to suggest many musical fanfares.

Interpretations: This seems to suggest that music can be suitable as a means to revere, honor, and praise the efforts in real Buddhist practice by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. This also suggests that one should revere, honor, and praise the efforts by Bodhisattvas of the Earth. And it suggests that one should exert oneself in one's own practice as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

Shakyamuni predicts that music will be offered to the memorial tower containing relics of the body of the Buddha 'Heavenly King Thus Come One'.³⁵ Heavenly King Thus Come One is the evil Devadatta, eventually

reborn as a buddha, after “immeasurable kalpas have passed” in a far distant future.³⁶

In ‘The Life Span of the Thus Come One’ chapter (Chapter 16) of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha explains that the land of the buddha, where living beings enjoy themselves at ease, is always safe and tranquil, with gods beating heavenly drums constantly making many kinds of music.³⁷

After Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound finished making offerings to Shakyamuni Buddha and to the Treasure Tower of Many Treasures Buddha, he returned to his original land, while “hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of different kinds of music played”³⁸ in the lands he passed through en route back to his original land.

In Chapter 26, Shakyamuni Buddha praises the demon daughters who pledged to shield and guard those Teachers of the Law who accept and uphold the mere name of the Lotus Sutra, who accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra in its entirety, and who offer music to the Lotus Sutra.³⁹

Interpretations: This suggests that one should have the spirit to shield and guard Bodhisattvas of the Earth. And it suggests that music can be a wonderful offering to the Lotus Sutra.

In Chapter 28, Bodhisattva Universal Worthy arrives from the east near the conclusion of the Lotus Sutra, he and his gathering of bodhisattvas having passed through multiple lands, while “immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of different kinds of music played”.⁴⁰

Interpretation: This suggests that one should have the spirit to respect and cherish fellow Bodhisattvas of the Earth who are practicing with us for our current lifetimes.

Also in Chapter 28 is the prediction that those who do no more than copy the Lotus Sutra will be greeted when they are reborn in a heaven filled with all kinds of music.⁴¹

Types of Musical Instruments Mentioned in the Lotus Sutra

“Striking drums or blowing horns or conch shells, playing pipes, flutes, zithers, harps, balloon guitars, cymbals, and gongs”⁴² are all mentioned as a means of offerings, if intended wholly as an offering.

Persons who receive, embrace, read, and recite the Lotus Sutra are said to have made offerings that are equivalent to constructing memorial

towers and other structures. The equivalent memorial towers are said to include many kinds of drums, musical instruments, pipes, and harps.⁴³ The compressed verse version of the same prose also mentions “assorted musical instruments”.⁴⁴

For those who practice the Lotus Sutra, the resulting ear benefits⁴⁵ (purification of the hearing sense) include an ability to hear “gandharva voices”⁴⁶ as well as “bell, chime, conch, drum sounds, lute and harp sounds, pipe and flute sounds”.⁴⁷

In the land of a buddha of the distant past named Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue Thus Come One, heavenly beings played on heavenly [musical] instruments.⁴⁸

In ages past, in a land called Manifesting All Worlds (the land of a buddha named Cloud Thunder Sound King), Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound ‘employed’ a hundred thousand types of musical instruments for twelve thousand years to provide an offering to the Buddha Cloud Thunder Sound King.⁴⁹ In this context, there was no mention of gandharvas or other musicians.

Types of Instrumental Music in the Lotus Sutra

This section relies on knowledge of some modern types of music performances. In brief, the process of characterizing ancient musical offerings in more modern musical terms requires some knowledge of modern music performance and some knowledge of contexts in the Lotus Sutra. The context is as follows.

The contexts for the music seem to vary from brief, boisterous, and joyful events to lengthy offerings of reverence, suggesting the types of performances. The shortest musical expressions were probably exuberant, spontaneous, unrehearsed notes or instrumental calls when responding with joy. Short, rehearsed, joyful ‘salutes’ were often used to recognize the arrival or transit of bodhisattvas. Rehearsed ‘fanfares’ (or ‘flourishes’) were apparently used to recognize the arrival of buddhas, important bodhisattvas, and the emergence of the Treasure Tower of Many Treasures Buddha. Longer musical arrangements were probably used as offerings at memorial towers. In modern musical terms [assuming modern 4/4 time], (a) the exuberant notes may have been one bar in duration, possibly two or three bars, (b) the salutes may have been four to 12 bars in duration, (c) the fanfares or flourishes may have been eight to 16 bars or more in duration, and (d) other musical arrangements could have been quite lengthy, perhaps hundreds of bars in duration. Salutes, fanfares, flourishes, and other lengthy pieces would have been

arranged, rehearsed, and memorized.

The arrangement for musical performances also seems to vary. The group of gandharvas present at the initial assembly may have presented a variety of music as offerings. This group is described as four “heavenly musicians”, each a gandharva king (although gender is not relevant in the context of the Lotus Sutra), each with hundreds of thousands of followers. These four may have been accomplished musicians, but none of their performances is described.

Making music as a form of ‘greeting’, to show respect and praise for a person who reads and recites the Lotus Sutra,⁵⁰ seems to suggest a fanfare (or flourish — longer than a salute), various fanfares, or longer instrumental performances to honor the common mortal who practices the Lotus Sutra. The context (“should greet them with”) indicates this is part of a greeting that precedes dialog, because the person encouraged to perform the musical greeting is also asked to thereafter listen to the person being greeted who delights in expounding the Law. In the sense that a fanfare is used to greet or announce the arrival of an important person, the use of a fanfare to greet the person who practices and explains the Lotus Sutra fits quite well with the intent of the Lotus Sutra, especially the context in ‘The Teacher of the Law’ chapter. In fact, the arrivals of Bodhisattvas of the Earth and the teachers of the sutra — as exceptionally important people in Buddhism — would indeed merit fanfares. The emergence of the Treasure Tower (Chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra) was also greeted by gandharvas who “offered ‘all kinds’ of ... music as alms to the treasure tower, paying it reverence, honor, and praise.”⁵¹ Others in the assembly also greeted the emergence of the treasure tower with music. This suggests that both fanfares and longer musical performances may have been performed to honor the emergence of the Treasure Tower.

The musical instruments outlined in the Lotus Sutra do not include brass instruments. Thus, the reader is asked to imagine salutes, fanfares, and flourishes performed with acoustic and unamplified flutes and other acoustic instruments, instead of modern brass-oriented fanfares.

Musical Performances Interpreted

The description of some musical performances by instrumental musicians in the Lotus Sutra may have been intended to be interpreted.

The musical performances which praise bodhisattvas seem to suggest that one should also praise those Bodhisattvas of the Earth who read, embrace, uphold, and preach the Lotus Sutra (the Law or *Gohonzon*)⁵²

in the Latter Day of the Law). In other words, these performances serve as encouragement to praise efforts in faith and especially the efforts of Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

The musical performances at locations where the Lotus Sutra has been preached — as offerings to the memorial towers that memorialize the preaching at those locations — can also be interpreted as encouragement to praise the local efforts of Bodhisattvas of the Earth who strive to propagate the Lotus Sutra (Law or *Gohonzon*⁵³) in their own locations.

Finally, the bodhisattvas honored by the offering of musical performances to their efforts also seem to be encouragement that one should adopt the intent and heart of Bodhisattvas of the Earth in one's own Buddhist practice.

Comments of Others

Offerings of music are one of the ten kinds of offerings.⁵⁴

The following seven paragraphs from *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Volume VI, explain its importance in Buddhism:

Suda: The sutra says that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound makes “musical offerings” (LS24, 294) [LSOC, 335]. This is a characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism. It seems that music and dancing were prohibited by Hinayana clerical orders as obstacles to one's practice. Practitioners were not only forbidden from engaging in such activities themselves, but they were also not supposed to enjoy them.

Endo: But when we come to Mahayana Buddhism, it's exactly the opposite.

Ikeda: The “Teacher of the Law” chapter includes a directive to make offerings of music to the Lotus Sutra (cf. LS10, 161) [see LSOC, 200]. And King Ashoka, a strong believer in Buddhism and once a king of ancient India is said to have made musical offerings.

Saito: This took the form of festivals that took place around stupas.

Ikeda: It's known that people would gather around stupas singing songs and playing various musical instruments. They acted out dramas, performed dances and read poetry. Merchants stood by, hawking their wares.

Endo: Sounds like quite a party!...

Ikeda: It was an offering of music in praise of the Dharma. It was an offering of joy. When the people expressed their pure joy to live based on the Law with their entire being, song poured forth and their bodies sprang into action. Those “waves of peace” spread out far and wide. Ashoka’s offerings of music and dance could be thought of as the precursor to our great cultural movement.⁵⁵

The following paragraph is also from *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Volume VI:

Saito: According to one source, when the Lotus Sutra was being compiled in its present form, the musical offerings of King Ashoka were common knowledge; and this is reflected in the makeup of the “Wonderful Sound” chapter and the other chapters in the transmission section. Whether this explanation is true or not, it is clear that music is inseparable from the Lotus Sutra.⁵⁶

There is a transition from ‘light’ in the first half of the Lotus Sutra to ‘music’ in the second half, as the following two paragraphs from *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Volume VI, discuss:

Ikeda: In the essential teaching (second half) of the Lotus Sutra, we find many names that relate to sounds or voices. It’s a very vocal group! Besides Wonderful Sound and Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, there is Awesome Sound King Thus Come One (“Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter), Cloud Thunder Sound King (“Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound” chapter) and Cloud Thunder Sound Constellation King Flower Wisdom (“Former Affairs of King Wonderful Adornment” chapter). Voices also figure prominently in the “Dharani” chapter. By contrast, in the theoretical teaching (first half) of the Lotus Sutra, there are many names that relate to “light.”...

Ikeda: Light represents the truth of the true entity of all phenomena. It is the eternal and unchanging truth. Sound, on the other hand, represents action as an emissary of the original Buddha of the remote past. It is inexhaustible wisdom, which functions in accord with changing circumstances.⁵⁷

Transitions in the Emphasis of the Musical Offerings

There is emphasis in the purpose and objective of musical offerings outlined in the Lotus Sutra, and that emphasis changes. For example, music is offered to the memorial towers of buddhas in early chapters of the Lotus Sutra. Then an example from the remote past of offering music to a buddha is presented. Beginning in Chapter 10, however, the emphasis of the offerings begins to change.

- Music is offered to a buddha (prior to Chapter 10, see earlier sections).
- Then music is to be offered to the Lotus Sutra (early in Chapter 10, twice).
- Then music is to be offered to a teacher of the Sutra.
- Then music is to be offered to the preaching of the Sutra.
- Then music is offered to the treasure tower (early in Chapter 11).

Table 1 is intended to help depict and double-check for transitions. It also helps to look for a pattern or patterns in the transitions in emphasis.

Table 1 is organized with chapter and page numbers in the left column, then time frames (past, present [Analysis note: ‘present’ includes the three assemblies in two locations described in the Lotus Sutra.], and future), then location in eight columns, then performers (implied performers) in nine columns, then to whom or to what the music was to be offered, and then the type of music. Overall, eight instances are or were in this saha world. Of those eight instances in the saha world, seven were in the ‘present’, and six are to include human performers. In the first half of the Lotus Sutra, one of these eight instances was an offering to a memorial tower.

In Chapter 10, ‘The Teacher of the Law’, transitions in emphasis become evident. Two of the eight saha world musical offerings are to be to the Lotus Sutra, although one of those two is in the ‘present’ and the other is in the future. Then a musical offering to those who teach the sutra is suggested, followed by a suggestion for a musical offering to the teaching of the sutra (i.e., to a seven-gem tower erected to commemorate the teaching of the sutra). There seem to be four dramatic musical suggestions [‘transitions in emphasis’] in quick succession in Chapter 10. These four initiate and introduce an emphasis on the preaching or teaching of the Lotus Sutra.⁵⁸

In Chapter 11, ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’, there is a very dramatic musical offering — dramatic because of the vast number of performers — to the Treasure Tower of Many Treasures Buddha

[referenced as page 209 in Table 1].

To whom was the music to be offered? 13 columns of Table 1 suggest additional transitions in emphasis or a focus in emphasis.

Other transitions are implied in other columns of Table 1. Music to be offered to the Lotus Sutra then appears again at the end of Chapter 26.⁵⁹

To summarize the ‘intent’ of the musical transitions, it seems that offering music to the Lotus Sutra, then to the teachers of the sutra (i.e., those who expound the sutra), and then to the teaching and propagation of the sutra is an important theme. Transitions in this emphasis seem to start happening in Chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra with four suggestions at a gradually accelerating pace compared to the pace of musical offerings in the rest of the Lotus Sutra. The musical offering to the Treasure Tower of Many Treasures Buddha (in Chapter 11), by many of the musicians (possibly all the musicians) present as part of the initial assembly, is also telling. These five instances [transitions in emphasis] come just prior to the beginning of the Ceremony in the Air⁶⁰ and the music suggestions and performance seem to foretell that something very important is about to unfold in the Lotus Sutra. Indeed, the Lotus Sutra moves from theory in the first half to the essential portions in the second half.

The emphasis of the musical offerings then further transitions to honoring the preaching of the Lotus Sutra. Four instances are noted in the footnotes at the bottom of Table 1: preaching the Law by Devadatta in a future existence, preaching the Lotus Sutra by the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue Thus Come One, preaching this sutra in this saha world by Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, and preaching and propagating the Lotus Sutra and the Law in this saha world in the evil Latter Day of the Law by Bodhisattva Universal Worthy. As the Lotus Sutra changes from the theoretical teachings of the first half to the essential teachings in the second half, the suggested musical offerings and the performances begin to emphasize the preaching and propagation of the Lotus Sutra. The focus of the emerging emphasis seems to become more and more concentrated. Then the location and time are mentioned as the focus spotlights the preaching of the Lotus Sutra in the saha world [this world] in the Latter Day of the Law [modern times].

Chart 1 is illustrative, rather than precise. It was created to display the increasing presence of musicians and gandharvas as the scenes in the Lotus Sutra begin to focus on preaching the Lotus Sutra. The chart was initially created with a logarithmic scale for the vertical axis, with a range from the possibly three million gandharvas present in Chapter 1 to “millions of nayutas of gandharvas” to the “numberless” gandharvas

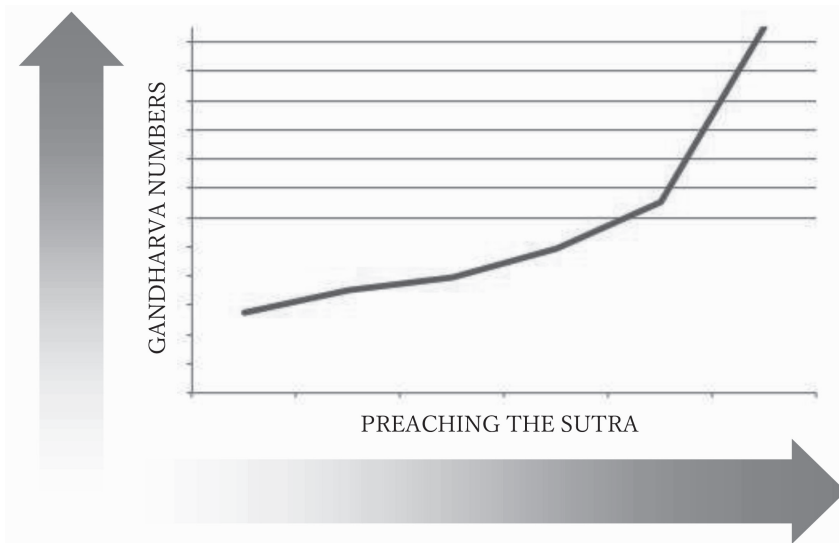


Chart 1. Gandharva presence increases as the emphasis transitions to “preaching” the Lotus Sutra. (Illustrative, with logarithmic scale, rather than precise.)

present in Chapter 28. (Analysis note: ‘Numberless’ is not meaningful on a logarithmic scale, so Chart 1 illustrates rather than measures the transitions.)

Bodhisattva Universal Worthy was accompanied by “numberless” beings in an assembly, including numberless gandharvas. He and his entire assembly (including the musicians) came to listen to and accept the Lotus Sutra, and begged that the Lotus Sutra be preached “for us”.⁶¹ Bodhisattva Universal Worthy vowed to protect those who preach the Lotus Sutra, preach the Law himself, and support the propagation of the Lotus Sutra — all in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law in Jambudvīpa (the saha world).⁶² No other assembly is accompanied by “numberless” gandharvas, only those who came to listen to, accept, and request the preaching of the Lotus Sutra.

Chart 2 is also illustrative and not precise. It shows that the number of performances increases as the context changes in the Lotus Sutra. For example, there are musical greetings for those who read and recite the Lotus Sutra. There is music offered to the Lotus Sutra, to teachers of the Sutra, and to the Treasure Tower. And then there are “millions of different kinds of music played”⁶³ as offerings to Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound who preaches the Lotus Sutra in the saha world. Then, “immeasurable” millions of different kinds of music⁶⁴ played

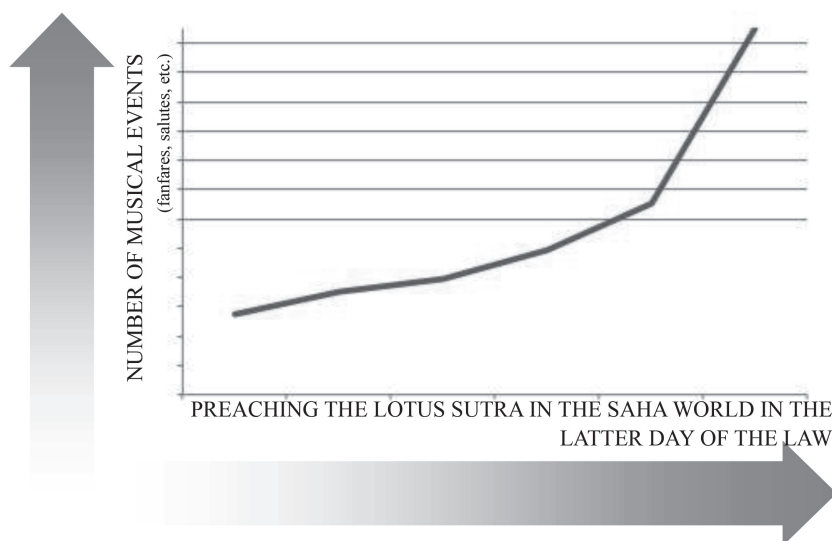


Chart 2. Musical events and performances increase as the emphasis transitions to “preaching” the Lotus Sutra in the saha world in the Latter Day of the Law. (Also illustrative, with logarithmic scale, rather than precise.)

as Bodhisattva Universal Worthy traveled to Mount Gridhrakuta to vow to protect those who uphold and practice the Lotus Sutra in the evil and corrupt age of the last 500 period. (Analysis note: The word ‘immeasurable’ is not useful on a logarithmic scale.)

Table 1 and Charts 1 and 2 suggest that the musicians and musical offerings emphasized the future, the preaching of the Lotus Sutra in the saha world in the future Latter Day of the Law.

Demeanor of the Musicians

The musicians present in the Lotus Sutra were gentle and forbearing. The simile of the ‘robe’ helps to explain their demeanor. In ‘The Teacher of the Law’ chapter (Chapter 10) of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha explains that “the ‘thus come one’s robe’ is the mind (internal attitude and latent) that is gentle and forbearing”⁶⁵ and also that “gentleness and patience (external behavior and manifest) are the robe”.⁶⁶ Shakyamuni asks that those “good men and good women [gender is not relevant] who, after the thus come one has entered extinction, wish to expound this Lotus Sutra for the four kinds of believers ... should ... put on the thus come one’s robe ... and then for the sake of the four kinds of believers broadly expound this sutra”.⁶⁷ Earlier, upon the

prediction of supreme perfect enlightenment for Shariputra [a voice-hearer], those in the great assembly, including gandharvas, were filled with great joy and danced. "Each one removed the upper robe that he or she was wearing and presented it as an offering to the Buddha.... The heavenly robes they had scattered remained suspended in the air and turned round and round of themselves."⁶⁸ This particular offering of "heavenly robes" in Chapter 3 is probably meant to be interpreted, rather than accepted literally; thinking of traditional Buddhist robes may inhibit interpretation by a modern, practicing musician here. The "heavenly robes" could symbolize gentleness and patience or symbolize joy. Heartfelt gentleness and patience would probably be very acceptable offerings to a Buddha. Joy is a wonderful offering to a Buddha. The musicians were indeed gentle and forbearing, and joy pervaded the entire assembly in this particular instance in Chapter 3.

"Filled with great joy and danced" also suggests the musicians were not jealous of this prediction of supreme perfect enlightenment for Shariputra or of Shariputra. Instead, they were "filled with great joy and danced", happy for Shariputra and happy that a path of faith had been identified.

Portions of the Lotus Sutra suggest that a bodhisattva can take the form of a gandharva. This means that a musician can host (adopt) the determination, compassion, and attitudes of a bodhisattva (or bodhisattva-buddha), and preach the Law or the Lotus Sutra as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. Thus, being a musician does not prevent one from being a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

In most cases, the instrumental music must have been rousing, inspiring, and wholehearted. Because music expresses the spirit in the musician's heart, the instrumental musicians also must have been inspired, joyful, and enthusiastic. That joy was evident in their demeanor; they "danced without end".

The musicians apparently had no expectations. They did not expect that the Lotus Sutra would be preached or that the Law would be preached. Instead, they reacted with joy to these events. The music and the performances were self-motivated and independent, as spontaneous offerings of joy. In Chapter 1 ('Introduction') of the Lotus Sutra, only Manjushri seemed to expect that the Buddha was about to preach the Lotus Sutra.⁶⁹ In Chapter 2 ('Expedient Means'), not only did the musicians not have expectations, they were, instead, filled with perplexity,⁷⁰ wondering about the meaning of the discussion between Shariputra and the Buddha. Expectations can prevent appreciation. If the person 'expects' XYZ and receives XYZ, appreciation might be limited

because it was expected. If the person ‘expects’ a large amount of ABC but receives only a small amount, then appreciation might not arise, because a larger amount was expected. Musicians in the Lotus Sutra had no expectations. Thus, there was joy in their demeanor frequently.

There is no sense of animosity or competition between musicians or bands in the Lotus Sutra amid descriptions of their musical contributions. In other words, if I look for what is ‘not’ described in the Lotus Sutra, I can also learn about the attitude (or intended attitude) of the musicians.

There is no reference to rehearsals, musical practice, stages, amphitheatres, or venue. There was no tune-up session, no metronome, no conductor, and no check-in. There were no references to an identifiable ‘band’ or orchestra. A professional performing musician might conclude that much of the description of musical offerings by musicians was therefore intended as examples in faith or was intended to be interpreted. The musicians were apparently fearless and inspired.

In terms of faith, there were no priests or intermediaries for any of the musicians. And there was no reference to any ritual or formality for them. They were probably united in faith. Generally, the musicians are excellent examples in faith, even with truncated descriptions of their performances.

The Musical Arrangements

The music performed by instrumental musicians as part of the Lotus Sutra was probably memorized and passed orally from generation to generation. Written forms of the musical arrangements may not have survived to the modern era. The following is an excerpt that outlines the rarity of such ancient sheet music and the complexity of performance:

Ikeda: Music fills the Lotus Sutra. Sheet music of Tang China, an age when the Lotus Sutra flourished in the country, has been excavated at Dunhuang. It is more than a thousand years old, and experts are still trying to determine just what kind of music it is. Not only does it indicate the pitch of each note, but it even indicates the rhythm. Some have even tried performing it.⁷¹

Recreating or finding the ancient musical arrangements used in Lotus Sutra locations and ceremonies may not be necessary. Musical instruments and musical notation have evolved greatly over the intervening centuries. If the purpose is to perform short, joyful salutes,

and fanfares, then creating modern salutes, fanfares, flourishes, and other musical arrangements more appropriate to the practice of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law — arrangements reimagined with modern musical notation — would better serve the purpose. If the purpose is to recreate ancient performances, then the older musical instruments and arrangements would also be needed. However, capturing the spirit of the musical arrangements can be accomplished with modern instruments and modern musicians.

The arrangements were probably rousing and festive, played with enthusiasm by accomplished (and probably also by successor apprentice) instrumental musicians.

Conclusions

The musical offerings and presence of musicians in the Lotus Sutra point to an emphasis on the propagation of the Lotus Sutra and Law in the Latter Day of the Law in this saha world. That emphasis appears in more than one chapter in the Lotus Sutra, especially in its latter half. Music also serves to highlight a transition from theory and truths in the first half of the Lotus Sutra to actual practice and action in the second half. The music would have been spirited, uplifting, and rousing while coming from gentle, fearless, enthusiastic, inspired musicians.

The number of musicians grows as the Lotus Sutra progresses as does the number of musical offerings.

Notes

¹ Daisaku Ikeda, Katsuji Saito, Takanori Endo, and Haruo Suda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (WLS), vol. I (Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 2000), 14.

² Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras* (LSOC) (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2009), 37. The author's use of capitalization and spelling in this paper may follow the usage in the referenced texts. As a result, capitalization may vary from section to section.

³ Note that "four kings" would imply they came from four different kingdoms.

⁴ LSOC, 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, glossary, 404.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51, 160, 162, 164, and 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 89. (See also 110 for faith as a path.)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 199. This is at the start of 'The Teacher of the Law' chapter.

⁹ Saha world is defined as "This world, which is full of suffering. Often translated as the world of endurance.... [T]he *sahā* world indicates a world in which people must endure suffering. It is also defined as an impure land, a land defiled by

- earthly desires and illusions, in contrast with a pure land.” (From *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism* [TSGDB] [Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2002], 558.)
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 200. This also seems to mean that they choose to be reborn as human beings in the saha world, rather than be reborn as ‘heavenly musicians’.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 199–200.
- ¹² Ibid., 37 (at Mt. Gridhrakuta), 215 (in the air above Mt. Gridhrakuta), and 320–21 (back to Mt. Gridhrakuta again).
- ¹³ Ibid., 301.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 314.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 315.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 320. This “entrustment” occurs on pages 319–20 of the LSOC. The wording of the vow is found in the first paragraph on page 314 of the LSOC.
- ¹⁷ The “Latter Day of the Law” is viewed in the Lotus Sutra as the time when the Lotus Sutra and the Law are to be propagated. The Latter Day of the Law begins with the start of the fifth and final five-hundred-year period following the death of Shakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha. The ‘Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King’ (23rd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, “After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off.” (From TSGDB, 358.)
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 336. This suggests that a musician practicing the Lotus Sutra [i.e., the Law] who adopts and embodies the spirit and determination of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound should be qualified to preach the Sutra.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 342–43. This suggests that a musician practicing the Lotus Sutra [i.e., the Law] who adopts and embodies the spirit and determination of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds should be qualified to preach the Law.
- ²⁰ I understand that an arbitrary interpretation must be avoided. Nichiren Daishonin states, “Faith in this sutra means that you will surely attain Buddhahood if you are true to the entirety of the Lotus Sutra, adhering exactly to its teachings without adding any of your own ideas or following the arbitrary interpretations of others.” Nichiren, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (WND), vol. I (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 1030.
- ²¹ Nayuta is a “numerical unit, defined differently in different texts but clearly indicating an extremely large number”. LSOC, glossary, 408.
- ²² Ibid., 350.
- ²³ Ibid., 360.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 44.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 73 and 74.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 89.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 110.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 110 and 118. In other words, Shariputra’s new path to supreme perfect enlightenment was faith. His decades of knowledge, learning, disciplines, and dedicated practices as a voice-hearer were suddenly overtaken by this new path of faith. Faith became his path. This was revolutionary in the Lotus Sutra; those in the assembly realized they also could use the path of faith. Shakyamuni and those in the assembly were overjoyed to learn of this new path.
- ²⁹ Because the teachings of Shakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha would be less effective in the Latter Day of the Law, the ‘Law’ of the Lotus Sutra [partly expressed in the sutra’s title ‘Myoho-Renge-Kyo’] is to be used in the Latter Day of the Law. The

‘Entrustment’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra clarifies that Shakyamuni entrusts the ‘Law’ to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth [LSOC, 319], *rather* than entrusting the sutra. The ‘Entrustment’ chapter implies that the Lotus Sutra would be preserved and already available to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the future, but it is the ‘Law’ that is entrusted to them for use in the future; there would be no need to entrust the sutra that would already be available. *Gohonzon* means object of devotion. *Go* is honorific and *honzon* means object of devotion. Very briefly, the *Gohonzon* inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin at the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law is a mandala that depicts the ‘Law’ described in the ‘Entrustment’ chapter, that represents the faith (of those Bodhisattvas) as oneness of the person and that Law, and that serves as an object of devotion. Embracing the *Gohonzon* of Nichiren Daishonin implies embracing the Law (entrusted in the Lotus Sutra’s ‘Entrustment’ chapter) and implies embracing the new path of faith used by Shariputra and others (described in the ‘Simile and Parable’ chapter). See TSGBD pages 252–56 for a detailed definition of this *Gohonzon*.

³⁰ LSOC, 156–57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

³² *Ibid.*, 204.

³³ An explanation of the Treasure Tower is beyond the scope of this paper. For readers who seek an explanation, please see WND, vol. I (299–300) and *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (WLS), vol. III (Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 2001), 3–38. An explanation of the treasures adorning the Treasure Tower is also beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁴ LSOC, 209.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 272.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 337 (near the end of Chapter 24).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73–74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 293. Described in the Lotus Sutra as “ear benefits” with which to purify ears — a prospect that will be attractive to musicians.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵² See earlier endnote explaining *Gohonzon*.

⁵³ See earlier endnote explaining *Gohonzon*.

⁵⁴ Daisaku Ikeda, Katsuji Saito, Takanori Endo, and Haruo Suda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (WLS), vol. II (Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 2000), 220.

⁵⁵ Daisaku Ikeda, Katsuji Saito, Takanori Endo, and Haruo Suda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (WLS), vol. VI (Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 2003), 54–55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 76–77.

⁵⁸ In Chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra, preaching of the Sutra and preaching of the Law are both mentioned, e.g., “expound the sutra” or “expound the Law”. Regarding preaching the Law, the ‘Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings [of Nichiren Daishonin]’ reads “Now that we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, preaching the Law means [chanting] Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.” (Burton Watson, trans., *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* [Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2004], 134.)

⁵⁹ LSOC, 352.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 215 (for contrast).

⁶¹ Ibid., 360.

⁶² Ibid., 360–62.

⁶³ Ibid., 337.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 360.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 205 (part of the prose section).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 207 (part of the verse section).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 205. The prose portion on page 205–06 might address internal (latent) attitude, the verse section on page 206–07 might address external (manifest) behavior.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁷¹ WLS, vol. VI, 57–58.

Acknowledgement

Ms Tatiana Cassetta’s gracious assistance with editing musical and other aspects of this paper is greatly appreciated.

About the Author and Editor

Jonathan P. Cummings earned a master’s degree from the Joint Military Intelligence College. He worked primarily as a systems analyst until retirement in 2014 but also as a software analyst, communications systems designer, and electrical systems designer. Mr Cummings was a part-time, professional trombonist for many years in the past. He is currently establishing a small vegetable farm in retirement. He has been a Buddhist for more than 50 years and practices Buddhism in West Virginia (USA) with the SGI-USA.

Tatiana Cassetta earned a master’s degree from West Virginia University. She edited the document as a musical aspects editor. Ms Cassetta is a talented professional flutist who performs as well as teaches. She is co-founder and principal of the *BETA Quartet*, a flute quartet that not only performs challenging arrangements but also commissions new arrangements for flute quartets. She is also the Resident Artist at a major flute company. She has been a Buddhist for many years, and practices with the SGI-USA in Pennsylvania (USA). She is also a talented writer and editor.

