

## IN QUEST OF EMPTINESS: THE STUDY OF BUDDHIST INFLUENCES ON JONATHAN HARVEY AND HIS COMPOSITIONS

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### Abstract

Jonathan Harvey, a British electroacoustic composer and one of the most important composers of the twentieth century, integrated Buddhist influences into his life and works particularly composed in the 1990s onwards. Despite his significant contributions, there remains a need for a comprehensive study that investigates what led the composer to embrace spirituality as a foundation for his creativity and categorizes the impact of Buddhism on his compositions. The novel intent of this study is to not only touch on ideas or musical materials in his works that were inspired by Buddhism but also conduct significant analyses of his compositions to show the depth of Harvey's understanding of Buddhist practice and philosophy, especially the notion of emptiness and how it became the foundation for his musical thinking. This article initially exhibits evidence of spiritually-related influences in his early life as a choirboy and during his exploration of Hinduism even before his encounter with Buddhism in the 1970s. He absorbed every culture and philosophy he had studied to broaden his artistic approaches and aesthetics. Since his first composition inspired by Buddhism in 1986, his music continued to draw upon Buddhist concepts. The religious influence appears in multiple formats for example the use of musical materials from Buddhist monastic music, the use of texts from Buddhist literature, and the depiction of Buddhist terms or stories. Meditation also played an important role in Harvey's compositions and compositional methods. Being able to contemplate a musical object enabled him to develop musical ideas further while the state of tranquility he experienced during meditation became apparent in his sound world. His study of the Buddhist notion of emptiness led him to the understanding of the nature of human perception and the essence of music as the representation of the illusive reality: the core definition of emptiness. Harvey applied ambiguity to his music through the constant stage

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of functional change of musical material, the ambiguity of musical timbres, and the play with listener's expectation. The ambiguity in musical compositions represents the philosophy of emptiness by demonstrating that everything only occurs in the mind.

**Keywords:** Jonathan Harvey / Buddhist Influence / Contemporary Composition / Electroacoustic Composition

## Introduction

Jonathan Harvey was unquestionably one of the most prominent British composers of the twentieth century. After graduating from the Universities of Cambridge and Glasgow he went on to study with Milton Babbitt at Princeton University.<sup>1</sup> He was one of the pioneers of British electroacoustic music and the first British composer invited to work at the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM) in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Harvey was drawn to exotic musical materials, cultures and philosophies. The influence of the east on Harvey is comparable to other Western composers of the twentieth century such as Olivier Messiaen who studied Indian rhythmic patterns and John Cage who was deeply affected by Zen Buddhism. Harvey became interested in Buddhism in the 1980s and it proved a lasting influence affecting his outlook on composition until the end of his life. From an early stage in his development, religious and spiritual beliefs always had a strong impact on Harvey's work. Michael Oliver, a British writer and journalist, has written that Harvey's work has "intense emotion to express ... prompted by deep religious feeling."<sup>3</sup> The amount of times Buddhism is discussed in Harvey's articles, books, and interviews is also remarkable. However, the number of substantial investigations on what led the composer to embark on this spiritual path or the quantity of thorough studies on the categories of Buddhist influence in his works are not proportionate to his contribution and significance.

This academic article aims to study how Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy, especially the notion of emptiness which later became the center of his musical language, affected

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<sup>1</sup> "Biography," Jonathan Harvey's official website, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://jonathanharveycomposer.com/biography>.

<sup>2</sup> IRCAM is an institute for research in sound, music, and electro-acoustical art music, founded in 1970s by Pierre Boulez, a French composer and conductor.

"History," IRCAM, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.ircam.fr/ircam/historique>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Oliver, "Miscellany: Justin Connolly - Jonathan Harvey - Roger Smalley - Anthony Payne - Tristan Cary - Anthony Milner - Christopher Headington - Robin Holloway - David Ellis," in *British Music Now*, ed. Lewis Foreman (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 164.

Jonathan Harvey and his music. In order to achieve this aim, I will outline his childhood background which may shed light on why he became a religiously inspired composer. I will also examine other Eastern influences before his first contact with Buddhism and the use of Buddhism-related contents in his music. Finally, I will explore the Buddhist influence on his ideas including the notions of meditation, human perception, emptiness, and ambiguity.

### The Form of Spirituality: Background

In order to understand how Jonathan Harvey became a composer driven by his religious beliefs and spirituality, one must study his background. Furthermore, to see how Buddhism influenced his music, one must examine the influence of other cultures and religions that interested him.

Most of Jonathan Harvey's compositions are concerned with religion and are intentionally composed to connect with human feelings on a deeper level. Harvey was sent to St. Michael's College Choir School in Tenbury when he was nine years old.<sup>4</sup> He states that because of his choirboy background he found music was always spiritual. This stems from his experience of singing daily Morning and Evening prayers, for no audience but only to praise God, which was always associated with ritual.<sup>5</sup> Pi-yen Chen, a Chinese music researcher, claims that in Buddhism music is also used for religious purposes:

In religious practices, ... it is more important to recognize that music possesses a function that can direct practitioners toward certain specific experiences and allow them to make sense of the coherent relationships of body and mind.<sup>6</sup>

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the first meaning of the term "spiritual" is "of or pertaining to, affecting or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially as regarded in a religious aspect."<sup>7</sup> At St. Michael's College, Harvey started composing church music

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Griffiths, *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (London: Faber, 1985), 46-49.

<sup>6</sup> Pi-yen Chen, "Sound and Emptiness: Music, Philosophy, and the Monastic Practice of Buddhist Doctrine," *History of Religions* 41, no. 1 (August 2001): 24.

<sup>7</sup> John Andrew Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner, "spiritual," in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, xvi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 257.

influenced by Renaissance music.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s he composed a large number of compositions for chorus which concern Christianity, for example, *Gaude Maria* (1965), *Ludus Amoris* (1969), *I Love the Lord* (1976), *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis* (1978), and *O Jesu Nomen Dulce* (1979).<sup>9</sup> However, the term spiritual can be associated with human spirit and feelings as well. Another definition of spiritual in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is “of or pertaining to, consisting of, spirit regarded in either a religious or intellectual aspect.”<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Arnold Whittall, a British musicologist, Harvey asserts that Rudolf Steiner had an impact on him and his music.<sup>11</sup> After reading Steiner’s writings in 1972, he gained a new perspective of the spiritual nature of everything, not only of religion.<sup>12</sup> In Harvey’s book *Music and Inspiration*, he argues as follows:

Spiritual content in music, as my own experience and that of others has shown, is certainly not restricted to works with a specific liturgical purpose or religious themes. Numerous composers, otherwise very disparate, have consistently expressed their desire to serve a spiritual purpose, and to send a message to humanity through their music.<sup>13</sup>

He also elaborates the meaning of the term spiritual by defining “unspiritual music” according to his point of view. In his book *In Quest of Spirit*, he uses his composition *The Riot*, the only piece of his which he finds unspiritual, as an example. He describes it as unspiritual because it is “witty and lightweight” and also “concerned with playfulness and humor.” He concludes that spiritual music should be “profound and touch us at some very deep, very important, level.”<sup>14</sup>

Before Buddhism became a strong influence on Harvey, Indian culture, poetry, and musical materials were his sources of inspiration especially in the early 1980s. Around 1960,

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Griffiths, *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (London: Faber, 1985), 46.

<sup>9</sup> “Discography,” Jonathan Harvey’s page on Faber Music’s official website, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.fabermusic.com/we-represent/jonathan-harvey/discography>.

<sup>10</sup> John Andrew Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner, “spiritual,” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, xvi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 258.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Joseph Lorenz Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian philosopher.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber, 1999), 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber, 1999), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 8, 15.

he began to show an interest in Indian culture.<sup>15</sup> He grew particularly interested in “Transcendental Meditation”<sup>16</sup> when he had meditation practice with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the first developer of this meditative technique.<sup>17</sup> Apart from practicing Indian meditation, Harvey was also interested in Indian literature. He uses the text from his meditation instructor, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in his choral piece *The Path of Devotion* (1983).<sup>18</sup> He also uses text from a poem *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore, translated into English by Tagore himself, in a composition for soprano and eight instrumentalists titled *Song Offerings* (1985).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he adapted rhythmic materials from Vedic chant and used them in his compositions, for instance, *Bhakti* (1982),<sup>20</sup> *Curve with Plateaux* (1982), *Nataraja* (1983), and *Flight Elegy* (1983-1989).<sup>21</sup> The rhythms of Vedic chant are uncommon among Western musicians. They have irregular time signatures created by the various lengths of words and combinations of stressed or unstressed syllables of the text.

Harvey did not completely abandon Christian concepts when he started to be interested in Indian cultures or reject Christianity and Hinduism when he became a Buddhist. Alternatively, he used every culture and philosophy he had studied to broaden his aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> According to the lists of his compositions from Faber Music’s website, in 1981 he wrote an opera concerning the Resurrection of Jesus, *Passion and Resurrection*, and released a major Hinduism-inspired composition, *Bhakti*, in the following year. Between 1984 and 1986 his compositions have various sources of spiritual inspiration. This includes his Christian influenced choral work, *Come Holy Ghost*, which he composed in 1984. One year later Harvey used text from Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry in his piece *Song Offerings*. Additionally, Harvey’s first

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew Jenkins, “A Search for Emptiness: An Interview with Jonathan Harvey,” *Perspectives of New Music* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 220.

<sup>16</sup> Transcendental Meditation is a type of meditation which meditators have to repeat either short or long Sanskrit mantras in mind. This helps the participants calm their thoughts and find a deeper level of consciousness and relaxation, which leads to enhance inner joy, vitality, and creativity.

John Gordon Melton, “Transcendental Meditation,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Transcendental-Meditation>.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Macleod, “Harvey,” July 17, 2009, in *Composer of the Week H-Q*, BBC Radio 3, podcast, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00lk7s5>.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber, 1999), 58.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber, 1999), 64.

<sup>22</sup> Barrie Gavin, “Barrie Gavin talks to Jonathan Harvey,” on *Jonathan Harvey - 70th Anniversary Box Set*, Sargasso SDVD001, 2009, DVD.

entirely Buddhist work *Forms of Emptiness* (1986) was composed in the same year as the Christian inspired orchestral piece *Madonna of Winter and Spring* and the choral work *God is Our Refuge*. Furthermore, in 1994 Harvey began practicing Buddhist meditation instead of Transcendental Meditation,<sup>23</sup> but he still composed two works concerning the Crucifixion of Jesus, *Death of Light, Light of Death*, in 1998 and *Remember, O Lord* in 2003.<sup>24</sup>

This overview of Harvey's background has demonstrated his conviction that music should concern religious beliefs or deeply relate to human feelings. I believe that all of Jonathan Harvey's own music is informed by this conviction. I have shown that there were three key periods of influence for Harvey, Christianity in his early life, Hinduism in the early 1980s, and Buddhism from the second half of the same decade. However, Harvey did not consider each religious source of influence to be unrelated to each other. Instead, he was able to incorporate all of these influences into his aesthetic.

### **Buddhism: Direct Influence**

Harvey directly used many Buddhist concepts, texts, and musical materials in his music from 1986 until the end of his life. He started reading about Buddhism at the same time that he began practicing Indian meditation in 1960.<sup>25</sup> However, after his encounter with Rudolf Steiner's writings in 1972, he incorporated Buddhism into his artistic frame of reference. In one of Steiner's books, he compares Buddhism with Christianity and demonstrates the similarities between the two religions.<sup>26</sup> He also mentions principal Buddhist philosophies such as "The Eightfold Path" and "The Four Noble Truths."<sup>27</sup> These philosophies described by Steiner formed the new foundations of Harvey's compositional aesthetic.

The first issue I will explore is Harvey's use of Buddhist terms and stories in his music. Harvey uses Buddhist terminology for the title of his cello and electronic piece *Advaya* (1994). In the program note, he explains that "Advaya" is a Buddhist term that means "not two"

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Jenkins, "A Search for Emptiness: An Interview with Jonathan Harvey," *Perspectives of New Music* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 221.

<sup>24</sup> "Discography," Jonathan Harvey's page on Faber Music's official website, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.fabermusic.com/we-represent/jonathan-harvey/discography>.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Jenkins, "A Search for Emptiness: An Interview with Jonathan Harvey," *Perspectives of New Music* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 220.

<sup>26</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "Buddhism and Pauline Christianity," in *The Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric* (Great Barrington: SteinerBooks, 2003), 47-54.

<sup>27</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "Buddhist and Christ," in *From Buddha to Christ* (New York: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1978), 33.

which is perfectly represented by the duality of cello and electronics. All the sounds produced by the electronics are either live-processed or pre-recorded. This results in several sections that sound as if there are two cellos playing simultaneously instead of just one.<sup>28</sup> One such section occurs five bars before rehearsal mark D and continues until rehearsal mark E.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for the piece *Advaya*. It features two staves: Violoncello (Cello) and CD1 (Electronics). The score is divided into two sections by rehearsal marks D and E. Section D starts with a tempo marking of 'ca. 80' and 'nat.' (natural). The Cello part is marked 'molto cantabile' and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The CD1 part is marked 'match cello in dynamic' and 'play with CD1'. Section E starts with a tempo marking of '152' and 'pizz.' (pizzicato). The Cello part is marked 'molto s.p.' (molto sostenuto) and 'f' (forte). The CD1 part is marked 'molto s.p.' and 'ff' (fortissimo). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 1 An excerpt of a duet between cello and electronics in *Advaya*

Source: by author

Another composition that clearly displays Buddhist influence is his opera *Wagner Dream* (2006). The story of the opera concerns Richard Wagner during the very last moments of his life and his final wish to complete *Die Sieger*, Wagner's last opera concerning Buddha's pupil.<sup>29</sup> In Wagner's *Die Sieger* a barmaid, Prakriti, falls in love with Buddha's pupil, Ananda. After she knows that she cannot marry the young monk, she wishes to be ordained and join the order to put an end to her despair.<sup>30</sup> In *Wagner Dream*, a depiction of Wagner's last moments and a realization of *Die Sieger* unfold simultaneously on stage. Harvey expands Wagner's initial storyline into a rich narrative that incorporates philosophical dialogues between Prakriti and Buddha. *Wagner Dream* not only contains a Buddhist story but also shows Harvey's profound understanding of Buddhist philosophy. It is clear that the use of Buddhist terms and stories has been vital to Harvey's exploration of Buddhism through his music.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Advaya* (London: Faber, 2001).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/advaya-2593/score>.

<sup>29</sup> Ornan Rotem, "Preface," in *Circles of Silence* (Lewes: Sylph Editions, 2007), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Wagner Dream* (London: Faber, 2006).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/wagner-dream-4656/score>.

Example 2 Bass parts at the beginning of *Wagner Dream* incorporating overtone-singing and Tibetan chant

Source: by author

Similar to his use of musical materials from Vedic chant, Harvey uses material from Tibetan monastic music in his compositions as well. In a choral composition *Forms of Emptiness*, in the two bass parts in the “Chant” section,<sup>31</sup> he uses the overtone-singing technique which is a characteristic of Tibetan chant.<sup>32</sup> The overtone-singing technique is used throughout the piece particularly in the bass lines. In Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies monks also sing biphonic chant in an extremely low register. Ricardo Canzio, an Argentinian ethnomusicologist, describes Tibetan chant in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* as follows:

Texts are chanted around a fundamental sound with its timbre modified or ornamented. ... Each singer emits a deep fundamental tone, simultaneously producing a distinct harmonic or partial of that fundamental.<sup>33</sup>

In *Body Mandala*, a composition for orchestra composed in 2006, Harvey uses orchestral instruments to imitate textures and timbres of Tibetan instrumental monastic music. One of the Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies called “Bon” contains instrumental music and dance

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Forms of Emptiness* (London: Faber, 1986).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/forms-of-emptiness-866/score>.

<sup>32</sup> A vocal style in which a single performer produces more than one clearly audible note simultaneously.

Carole Pegg, “overtone-singing,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xviii, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 822.

<sup>33</sup> Ricardo Canzio, “Tibetan music, II, 1(ii): Monastic music: Buddhist school,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xxv, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 443.

as well as chant and recitation.<sup>34</sup> Traditional instruments featured in Bon include *gshang*, *mga*, *dung-chen*, and *rgya-gling* which Harvey evokes using crotales, drums, trumpets, and oboes respectively.<sup>35</sup> He also includes Tibetan cymbals, “rol-mo,” in the orchestra. Moreover, the structure of Bon consists of chants or recitations and instrumental interludes performed alternately.<sup>36</sup> These interludes contain sustained or repeated notes by multiple instruments.<sup>37</sup> This could be argued to be analogous to the first section of Harvey’s *Body Mandala*. The dramatic structure of this piece also consists of alternations between short solo instrumental sections and sustained interludes. Harvey’s use of musical materials from Tibetan monastic music demonstrates a direct Buddhist influence on his compositions.

Harvey also uses text concerning Buddhist philosophy in his compositions. One such example is *One Evening*, a composition for soprano, mezzo-soprano, ensemble, and electronics completed in 1994. The lyrics used in all four movements concern the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness from different perspectives. In the first movement, Harvey uses an English translation of the poetry of Han Shan, a Chinese writer from the fifth century. The poem describes one evening during meditation.<sup>38</sup> The following are excerpts from the first movement:

I saw distinctly the Great All-Illuminating: pure, transparent, empty and open like a clear sea – nothing at all existed! ... Clear and empty shines the ocean like moonlight on snow, no trace of man nor gods.

...

You will see that your body and mind, like the mountains, rivers, spaces and territories of the outer world, are all contained inside the true mind, wonderful and illuminated.

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<sup>34</sup> Ricardo Canzio, “Tibetan music, II, 1(i): Monastic music: Liturgical chant and music of Bon,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xxv, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 441.

<sup>35</sup> Ricardo Canzio, “Tibetan music, II, 1(ii): Monastic music: Buddhist school,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xxv, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 443.

<sup>36</sup> Listen to Nyen-Seng, Tibet Drepung Loseling Monastery Monks, *Tibet Drepung Loseling Monastery Monks: Sacred Music, Sacred Dance for Planetary Healing and World Purification*, recorded 2011, Music and Arts Programs of America B005BXX11E, CD.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Body Mandala* (London: Faber, 2006).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/body-mandala-4868/score>.

<sup>38</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber, 1999), 31.

In the fourth movement, Harvey uses a Buddhist scripture in Sanskrit from Heart Sutra that praises Buddha's teaching of emptiness. Harvey selected the passage "*Om namo bhagavatyai arya-prajnaparamitaya*" which translates as "homage to the perfection of wisdom, the lovely, the holy."<sup>39</sup> The other compositions that use translated Buddhist texts are *Buddhist Songs No. 1* (2003) and *Buddhist Songs No. 2* (2004). He took these texts from a sixth-century poem, "*Bodhisattvacharyavatara*", or "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life."<sup>40</sup>

To summarize, I have shown that after Harvey was first artistically inspired by Buddhism in 1986 his music continued to draw upon Buddhist concepts. I have demonstrated how this influence has been displayed in a multitude of ways such as adopting musical materials from Buddhist monastic music, using texts from Buddhist literature or scripture and the depiction of Buddhist terms or stories. However, Harvey's embrace of Buddhism did not merely end here with the adopted material; he continued to immerse himself in Buddhist practice and philosophy such as meditation and the notion of emptiness which later affected his compositional approach.

### Meditation and Music

Meditation was an important part of Jonathan Harvey's life. It was not only a religious practice but also a source of musical inspiration. He found compositional materials from meditation and meditation itself became part of his compositional method. The two types of meditation that Harvey practiced, Vedic meditation and Buddhist meditation, are similar. The Vedic or Indian Transcendental Meditation helps the meditators relax their thoughts and obtain a mode of heightened perception. On the other hand, Buddhist meditation aims to help the meditators observe their states of mind in order to truly understand Buddhist philosophy. Instead of repeating mantras, Buddhist meditators have to concentrate on an object in their minds, which can be their breaths, body parts, or feelings. Buddhadasa, a Thai venerable monk, explains Buddhist meditation, known as "*anapanasati*" in Pali, as follows:

The term "Anapanasati" does not mean, as is generally interpreted, *mindfulness established on in and out breathing*. Actually, it means *mindfulness established on an object all the time with each in and*

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Harvey, "Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer's Perspective," in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 294.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Buddhist Songs No. 2* (London: Faber, 2012).

*out breath*: Initially one establishes mindfulness on the breathing itself, then on different kinds of feeling, different states of mind, then the characteristic of impermanence ... and finally on relinquishment, which is the ultimate objective of the practice.<sup>41</sup>

Harvey describes meditation as “looking at the object with a microscope.”<sup>42</sup> Concentrating on an object became his compositional method. When he composed, he concentrated on a musical idea and expanded the idea into a piece of music. Barrie Gavin, a British film director, explains that Harvey used meditative technique to create *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco*, a well-known electronic composition from 1980:

In the film, which I made with Jonathan two to three years ago, which is called “Towards and Beyond,” he talked about the concentration on an object or a phenomenon, and concentrating on it until it began to change its shape, its meaning, and its resonance. I think that it is a part of a Zen Buddhist tradition. He used, I think very wisely, very simple elements for the making of *Mortuos Plango*. ... If you take the bell and closely examine all the resonances, the overtones, the mysterious other sounds which are circling around it, you begin to get a different kind of universe. And I probably think that one of Jonathan’s greatest gifts is this ability to take something really very small and out of it to develop something very enormous.<sup>43</sup>

Harvey himself also states that meditation is vital to his work as a composer. Harvey describes the benefits of meditation as follows:

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<sup>41</sup> Buddhadasa, “Anapanasati,” trans. Bhikkhu Nagasena, Buddha Dharma Education Association’s website, accessed August 8, 2023, <http://www.buddhanet.net>.

<sup>42</sup> Barrie Gavin, “Barrie Gavin talks to Jonathan Harvey,” on *Jonathan Harvey - 70th Anniversary Box Set*, Sargasso SDVD001, 2009, DVD.

<sup>43</sup> Barrie Gavin, “Jonathan Harvey’s *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco*,” January 22, 2012, in *Radio 3’s Fifty Modern Classics*, BBC Radio 3, podcast, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02r9r21>.

In a typical meditation, thoughts become more and more refined, subtle, delicate - until they disappear into silence. Seen as the vanishing point of refinement, silence can be pregnant with meaning, carrying the process of refinement into the unknown, beyond thought.<sup>44</sup>

One of the musical materials that Harvey obtained from meditation can be found in his exploration of inhalation and exhalation which strongly features in his orchestral work *Tranquil Abiding* (1998). Repeated rhythms, played by string instruments at the very beginning, represent slow and mindful breathing in meditation. This concept is repeated throughout the piece and represents the definition of the title which is a Buddhist term meaning “a state of single-pointed concentration.”<sup>45</sup> Another musical idea influenced by meditative practice found in some of Harvey’s compositions, such as *Bhakti*,<sup>46</sup> *Advaya*,<sup>47</sup> and *Wagner Dream*,<sup>48</sup> is the use of a very soft opening with sustained notes. He named this type of soft, sustained sound as “zero-sound” which means “a long, almost featureless note.” He also asserts that he intentionally began the piece with a sense of tranquility “to invite the listener to a quieter level, there to attend with a subtler, more refined, more delicate perception.”<sup>49</sup>

Harvey, along with other composers influenced by Buddhism, widely employed the compositional technique of gradually transforming a musical idea from one state to another. This technique is directly influenced by what composers claim to have experienced during meditation. Robert Haskins, an American musicologist, explains that the Buddhist influenced music of American composer Robert Morris “encourages listeners to cultivate undivided attention as music unfolds from moment to moment.”<sup>50</sup> In Harvey’s *...towards a pure land* (2005) the musical ideas gradually unfold from a static beginning towards a more chaotic and intense state and transform into a moment of silence in the middle of the piece. The other

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Tranquil Abiding* (London: Faber, 2004).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/tranquil-abiding-3250/score>.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Bhakti* (London: Faber, 1989).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/bhakti-810/score>.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Bhakti* (London: Faber, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Wagner Dream* (London: Faber, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Haskins, “Differing Evocations of Buddhism in Two Works by Robert Morris and John Cage,” *Perspectives of New Music* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 345.

half of the composition begins with a development of the previous intense section until the music gradually resolves towards the end of the piece.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Harvey's *Tranquil Abiding* also explores this concept of gradual transformation. The piece starts with a zero-sound incorporating repeated breathing rhythms, then, above the repeated rhythms, various musical ideas gradually transform and reach the first climax at rehearsal mark K. The musical ideas then transform via a series of compressions and expansions towards a second climax at rehearsal mark Z, finally resolving to a tranquil ending.<sup>52</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of 'Tranquil Abiding'. It features three staves: a grand staff (Vlc. div. and DB div.) and a single staff (Vla. div.). The grand staff is in 4/4 time and contains two parts: Vlc. div. (Violin) and DB div. (Double Bass). The Vlc. div. part starts with a *ppp* dynamic and features a series of notes with a crescendo and decrescendo. The DB div. part starts with a *ppp* dynamic and features a series of notes with a crescendo and decrescendo. The Vla. div. part starts with a *pp* dynamic and features a series of notes with a crescendo and decrescendo. The score includes dynamic markings (*ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, *p*) and a fermata over the final note of the Vlc. div. part. The Vla. 1 part has a triplet of notes marked with a '3' and a '7' above it. The Vla. 2-3 part has a triplet of notes marked with a '7' and a '7' above it.

Example 3 The beginning of *Tranquil Abiding* with the musical material imitating inhalation and exhalation

Source: by author

Meditation was clearly an integral part of Harvey's compositions and compositional method. He used the skills he learnt from meditation in order to concentrate on an object enabling him to develop musical ideas. Additionally, he created musical materials from breathing rhythms and the state of tranquility he experienced during meditation.

### In Quest of Emptiness

This paper has already discussed Buddhist influence on Jonathan Harvey and his music by examining the musical materials used in his compositions. This final section aims to explore how Buddhist philosophy affected his thinking. The Buddhist notion of "emptiness" was significant for Harvey. It appears in most of his articles, books, and interviews. I wish to examine how the concept of emptiness influenced his musical thinking. I wish to demonstrate that the idea of emptiness was central to his philosophy as a composer.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *...towards a pure land* (London: Faber, 2005).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/towards-a-pure-land-4593/score>.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Tranquil Abiding* (London: Faber, 2004).

In order to understand the notion of emptiness the Buddhist view of human perception has to be examined. Buddhism teaches that everything a human perceives is not real and occurs only in one's mind. In Buddhism, every life on earth consists of five aggregates.<sup>53</sup> The aggregates that are chiefly concerned with human perception are the aggregate of form and the aggregate of consciousness. The aggregate of consciousness includes six senses perceived by five physical sense organs and the mind. The aggregate of form is every physical object that humans can sense. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, describes the aggregate of form as follows:

The aggregate of form includes all the objects of the five sense consciousnesses: everything that our eyes can see, our ears can hear, our nose can smell, our tongue can taste, and our body can sense or touch.<sup>54</sup>

When a human senses an object, every detail of the object such as its color, shape, sound, smell, or taste, will appear in their mind. It is not certain that the "object in one's mind" is identical to the "real object." Arthur Schopenhauer, a German philosopher, argues about human perception as follows:

The world can only be represented as phenomena by functions of the mind, whereas the world in itself is not observable directly.<sup>55</sup>

However, perhaps it is too extreme to say that everything that occurs in the mind is not real. The object produced by the mind may have some basis in reality but it can only be a superficial level of reality or "conventional reality." Harvey describes two types of reality as follows:

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<sup>53</sup> Five aggregates are the aggregate of form, the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of discrimination, the aggregate of compositional factors, and the aggregate of consciousness.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart of Wisdom* (London: Tharpa, 1986), 26.

<sup>54</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart of Wisdom* (London: Tharpa, 1986), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Morris, "Toward a 'Buddhist Music': Precursors East and West," a talk delivered in 2005 Sibley Lecture, Alfred University, April 26, 2005, <http://ecmc.rochester.edu/rdm/downloads.html>.

The conventional reality is the reality we work with, do our daily business with, and get around with. We impute reality to entities both incorrectly (thinking a bit of rope is a live snake) and, through the power of reason, correctly (calling our bodies “bodies”). Ultimate reality is a way of understanding the world truly, seeing things-as-they-really-are.<sup>56</sup>

If everything only occurs in one’s mind, it must be true that everything exists because of mind’s assistance; this is the core concept of emptiness. Harvey describes the idea of emptiness as follows:

Emptiness means the lack of inherent existence of objects and concepts from their own side. It doesn’t mean that they don’t exist, but it means that they don’t exist solidly in the conventional way; they don’t exist inherently without our aid.<sup>57</sup>

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso further explains existence:

If something were inherently existent, it would have an existence within itself, independent of other phenomena. ... If an object were inherently existent it would also be “truly existent” and “existent from its own side.” An object is truly existent if its existence is established from the side of the object itself without depending upon an apprehending consciousness.<sup>58</sup>

The Buddhist notion of emptiness dictates that everything a person experiences is in fact only within their mind and not a true representation of reality. Furthermore, in order to experience the truth or the ultimate reality one must understand that everything only occurs in one’s mind.

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Buddhism and the Undecidability of Music,” in *Circles of Silence* (Lewes: Sylph Editions, 2007), 31.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 279.

<sup>58</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart of Wisdom* (London: Tharpa, 1986), 29.

For Harvey, music helps people understand the ultimate reality as it demonstrates the concept of emptiness. He states that “music shows us how mind works.” When we listen to a piece of music, we will experience various feelings and themes or musical objects will be retained by our minds. When the music ends, those feelings and memories still exist within the minds of listeners. Harvey claims, therefore, that music “presents us with a *representation* of illusions.”<sup>59</sup> Harvey believes that the notion of emptiness is strongly related to ambiguity in music. He describes that the finale of Jean Sibelius’ Symphony No.5 contains ambiguous content. At rehearsal mark D, horns play a majestic melodic line in the foreground, after a few seconds that melodic line becomes an accompaniment to another melody.<sup>60</sup> The ambiguity in this case is the changing roles of musical ideas. Harvey states that “ambiguity is a threat to the solidity of existence.”<sup>61</sup>



Example 4 From the 14th measure after rehearsal mark D of the last movement of Sibelius’ Symphony No. 5, the majestic melodic line played by horns transforms its role into an accompaniment when another melody played by flutes, clarinets, and oboes begins

Source: by author

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 281.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 284.

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 282.

Ambiguity is created when the function of a musical idea changes. Furthermore, the function of the musical idea is dependent on its context. Harvey gives the example that an A major chord does not have a function in itself but when placed in a piece in the key of C# minor it will acquire a function because of its context. Moreover, if the A major chord is placed in a piece in the key of C major, its function will be completely different.<sup>62</sup> Ambiguity, created by the changing functions of musical ideas, represents the philosophy of emptiness by demonstrating that everything is not what it appears to be and all things are in a constant state of change.

Harvey also creates timbral ambiguity in his compositions. He states that he can create a state of ambiguity through the use of electronics as follows:

With electronics it is common to make sounds that have no, or only vestigial, traces of human instrumental performance. No person can be envisaged blowing, hitting or scraping anything. They are often sounds of mysterious provenance. With live electronics, when electronics are performed in real time like instruments and combined with instruments (or, of course voices), two worlds are brought together in a theatre of transformations. No-one listening knows exactly what is instrumental and what is electronic anymore.<sup>63</sup>

In Harvey's *Advaya* there is a long duet section between cello and electronics from rehearsal marks D to H. During this duet the illusion of a second cello, created by the electronics, establishes a period of ambiguity during which listeners cannot distinguish the electronic sounds from the acoustic sounds.

In his composition for fifteen players and electronics *Wheel of Emptiness* (1997), he also uses electronics to create ambiguity in several sections of the piece. Harvey achieves this by using inharmonic spectra to conceal any fundamental pitch. He describes the initial inspiration of the composition as follows:

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<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Harvey, "Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer's Perspective," in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 282-283.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Harvey, "The Metaphysics of Live Electronics," *Contemporary Music Review* 18, no. 3 (1999): 80.

The idea of Wheel of Emptiness is a Buddhist one, where identity and separateness are seen as an illusion rather clearly and everything is dissolved into the flow of change which actually is the nature of the world. Everything changes.<sup>64</sup>

He states that in some sections of the piece he uses a sampler keyboard to play spectra created by “equal-addition spectral compression” which is a computer synthesis technique that manipulates the spectrum by adding sounds twenty hertz higher than each partial of the fundamental.<sup>65</sup> This distorts the spectrum and weakens the fundamental pitch creating a state of ambiguity.

Harvey also plays with the listeners’ expectations in order to create ambiguity. He does this by establishing a function of a musical idea but then undermines it by surprising the listener in a similar way to a deceptive cadence in tonal harmony.<sup>66</sup> *Wheel of Emptiness* features fifteen small musical objects that have no relation to each other. After the exposition of the small musical ideas, each idea transforms and merges with others. For example, one of the small musical objects is a short melodic line played by oboe, trumpet and horn. The melody is heard in its entirety in the exposition but when the idea returns only the beginning of the melody is the same; the rest of the melodic line is transformed or merged with other ideas.<sup>67</sup> Another small idea is a pair of musical cells: a short motif played in a low register and high long notes. According to the excerpt shown in example 5, the high notes always follow the first motif immediately except after the third instance when the notes are delayed for several measures. When the motif returns later in the piece, it is played alone twice and the high notes eventually follow a few seconds later. These two small musical ideas are easily recognizable. Every time they begin, listeners will expect them to continue in a certain manner. When something unexpected happens a state of ambiguity is created.

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<sup>64</sup> Julian Johnson, “An Interview with Jonathan Harvey,” in *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, ed. Peter O’Hagan (Bodmin: Ashgate, 2003), 125.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 290.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *Wheel of Emptiness* (London: Faber, 1997).

For a full score, please visit <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/wheel-of-emptiness-3002/score>.

Example 5 A short motif played in a low register by a bass clarinet followed by high long notes played by piccolo and oboe which is delayed in the second repetition

Source: by author

Harvey claimed that he did “not compose according to a Buddhist theory” but instead believes that the Buddhist philosophy describes “the nature of composition in itself.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, for Harvey ambiguity is integral to all music not just composition that aims to embody Buddhist ideology. Pierre Boulez claimed that the only music which interests him possesses the quality of ambiguity.<sup>69</sup> Harvey also holds this view and argues that good music has to contain a balance between clarity and ambiguity:

What do all good, “likeable,” listening experiences have in common? They are fresh, unpredictable, not too chaotic, and they constantly awaken the attention. What do all bad listening experiences have in common? They are banal, predictable, clichéd - or there’s no rhyme or reason to what happens and they are merely chaotic, they fail to keep my interest - unless, of course, the text or some extra-musical element mitigates. Between the boring and the chaotic, just the right balance of clarity and complexity must be found. ... *Statement and ambiguity must both be strong.*<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 289.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 282.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspective*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 288.

For Harvey, good music will always contain ambiguity. Consequently, he believes that all good music represents the Buddhist notion of emptiness.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has shown that Buddhism influenced Harvey both in terms of the musical content he utilized and his compositions' extra-musical significance. In my opinion, the Buddhist philosophy forms the most crucial principle of Harvey's compositional approach. Harvey's belief that music must relate to the human spirit had its roots in his experience as a choirboy. Most of his compositions were based on this belief and consistently inspired by the religious teachings or philosophy he was studying at the time. The Buddhist influence on his musical content can be found in the texts he uses in vocal compositions, the Buddhist monastic musical materials and meditative musical ideas. Through the study of the Buddhist notion of emptiness he discovered the nature of human perception and the essence of music which consequently affected his compositional method. He believes that music represents the philosophy of emptiness by demonstrating everything only occurs in the mind. For Harvey, music is an illusion or "Forms of Emptiness."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, if music truly represents the notion of emptiness, which describes the essence of the world, then music can show us the nature of reality. The pivotal ramification of Harvey's Buddhist interpretation of music is that music can harbor extra-musical meaning and is a tool to understand the world.

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<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit: Thoughts on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 83.

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