

## Japan

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Lorraine Plourde, *Tokyo Listening: Sound and Sense in a Contemporary City*

Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2019. 174 pages. Hardcover, \$80.00; paperback, \$24.95; eBook, \$19.99. ISBN 9780819578839 (hardcover), 9780819578846 (paperback), 9780819578853 (eBook).

Whenever a book title implies the entirety of something, in this case, Tokyo, a reader is right to be suspicious; truer still if references, notes, and index included, it weighs in at 174 pages. But biting off more than one can chew in a title does not detract from the substance of what exists between the covers. *Tokyo Listening: Sound and Sense in a Contemporary City* by Lorraine Plourde is a book that should appeal, first and foremost, to Japanese studies scholars with a taste for cultural theory who are interested in music broadly speaking. However, a key point from the start is that, given that the book's focus is an area of inquiry that can easily become self-referential and myopic, this offering is accessible and well-written—if at times a touch repetitive—with a healthy weighting of ethnographic material making it an engaging read for lay and specialist readers alike.

The purpose of the book is perhaps best spelled out in its rather Spartan two-page conclusion: “The central premise . . . is that the individual’s relationship to the city is an embodied and sensory experience through which sound orients people’s movements, affects, labor practices and consumption” (132). How and where this happens is the backdrop. To address these issues, the author first takes the reader to a tiny experimental music café where the sounds of the city meld with the music being produced inside, bringing the daily auditory mundanity of the urban space into the “placed experience” of where performance and listening meet, so to speak. The focus of chapter 2 shifts to several classical music cafés where the goal of the owners is to immerse the patron into a “sonic patina” (52–55). These are places consciously crafted with sensuous décor and vinyl LPs played on analog equipment with affective and embodied responses in mind, often the invocation of nostalgia and opulence, but designed to keep the sounds of the city, and even the conversation of patrons, at bay. Such cafés, “despite their small numbers . . . are part of a larger culture of attuned listening in Tokyo’s leisure spots” (73), a point I return to below.

The chapter that follows is sandwiched between two brief ethnographic vignettes of an upscale mall designed to sonically entice new female shoppers and a retro *shōtengai* (older shopping arcade) hoping to retain its older patrons. It focuses on the history and role of BGM, or Background Music, largely through Japan’s largest Muzak-style company (the original American producers of what has come to be colloquially called “elevator music”), Usen. The most theory-heavy chapter, it shifts from examining active listening to a more passive form of listening underscoring the commercial motivation behind it, notably the variety of productive and consumptive environments that BGM is thought to foster. Leaving consumption aside, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this chapter is its explanation of the company’s SDO (Sound Design for Office) system. Plourde—through a combination of interviews, personal experience, and critical theory—highlights how SDO is, somewhat creepily from this reviewer’s perspective, “emerging as an ambient form of labor control” (82). Music scores and

other sound effects are developed and tested by designers to mark how they unconsciously influence collective moods and rhythms, managing the affects and bodies of an office workforce; subtly cheerful music in the morning, the sounds of a bustling café at lunch, Auld Lang Syne to discourage overtime, or looping lo-fi versions of the theme from the Rocky movie to encourage more production. Such music is played throughout the workday at barely conscious levels, and when workers are brought into the office without this sonic patina after having been subjected to it, they claim to feel lonely or depressed (98–102). Through SDO doing its job, they have effectively become acoustically “attached” to their work. There is also a particularly interesting comparison of Japanese and North American office space. Contrasting a space that is largely communal, not sectioned off, and where private listening devices are discouraged, there is little ability to escape the sonic conditioning of Usen’s SDO as North Americans or Europeans might be inclined to do with other technologies and individual playlists.

The final chapter is a look at the extension of Usen’s technology outside the office to shopping spaces and even educational facilities like junior high schools. “Here it is useful to compare the use of BGM as sonic comfort to ambient engineering techniques, such as air conditioning” (111) in looking for an optimal level that is unnoticeable, an “auditory hyperesthesia” (116), much in the way composer Éric Satie envisioned his salon music, or “furniture music,” to be an unobtrusive part of the environment enabling and conditioning affective and embodied interactions. Here is an explanation, for example, of what seems to be the near-ubiquitous Jazz BGM in chain *izakaya*. The purpose is to cultivate mood without the customer noticing that it is being created; the construction of unquestioning comfort is the key for consumers to keep consuming.

As noted, one critical point I would levy at the book is conceptual and another, though related, is aesthetic, and neither are particularly damning. The reductive nature of how *Tokyo Listening* is framed is problematic. Again, the key premise is highlighting the individual’s relation to Tokyo via sound. But what of hardcore punk or dancehall reggae shows? Where is the sonic patina of public parks or temple grounds? The individual in the city invoked herein is a rather middle-class, even upper-middle-class, ethnically homogeneous, and conservatively trendy one. The rubric of Tokyo and its inhabitants should include much more diversity. For example, while the sounds of hipster Nakano are present in the text, surely the ethnic enclave of Ōkubo, only a JR train station away, has its distinct tones and attunements. This leads to the second issue. With only four chapters, a battle with word count is not evident, so it is unfortunate that the author did not include more such examples. Indeed, the two “interludes” of rather different shopping areas are rich with ethnography but not really integrated or theorized, and they could form the backbone of an outstanding standalone chapter rather than being “tacked on” to a discussion of office space. But again, one ought to judge a book from what is there over what is not, and there is more than enough in *Tokyo Listening* to highly recommend it to anyone interested in the anthropology of urban Japan or cultural studies of sound, affect, and embodiment.

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