

Lorraine Plourde

# **TOKYO LISTENING**

Sound and Sense  
in a Contemporary City

Wesleyan University Press   Middletown, Connecticut

Wesleyan University Press  
Middletown, CT 06459  
[www.wesleyan.edu/wespress](http://www.wesleyan.edu/wespress)

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Designed by Mindy Basinger Hill

Typeset in Minion Pro

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the AMS 75 PAYS  
Endowment of the American Musicological Society,  
funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities  
and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
available upon request

Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-8195-7883-9

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-8195-7884-6

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-8195-7885-3

5 4 3 2 1

Front cover illustration: Photo by Hakan Topal, Roppongi  
Hills Mori Tower, Tokyo.

## INTERLUDE III

### Retro Shopping Arcades Muzak

In the western Tokyo neighborhood of Nakano, just outside the west exit of the train station, lies the Sun Mall Shopping Arcade (*shōtengai*). The neighborhood of Nakano is the “hip” underground alternative to the more mainstream and touristy Akihabara district, known for its Japanese pop-culture-oriented stores and cafés. Built in 1966 at the peak of Japan’s economic climb, just two years after the Tokyo Olympics, the shopping arcade now reflects what is often referred to as Showa retro charm, the style of which is discussed in Chapter 2. The Showa era ended just as the economic bubble was about to burst, leading to the prolonged recession of the 1990s. The period continues to be invoked as an idealized and nostalgic historical period. The consumption of nostalgia is well represented toward the end of the Sun Mall Shopping Arcade, in a section called Nakano Broadway, a four-story, dizzying cluster of vintage shops primarily aimed at collectors and *otaku*, or die-hard fans of Japanese popular culture. One can find used manga, vintage *kajiu* figures, kewpie dolls and doll parts, and railway memorabilia, among other collectors’ goods and ephemera.

Part of Sun Mall’s nostalgic appeal is also its retro sonic ambience, as piped-in BGM reverberates throughout the length of the structure. Speakers are placed at roughly twenty-foot intervals throughout the length of the arcade’s walkways, which are lined with stores and restaurants themselves playing their own BGM. The sonic territory of the stores therefore extends outward, spilling into the main hallway. Small surveillance cameras are placed throughout the length of the Sun Mall Arcade in between each of the speakers, subtly invoking the oft-cited connections between muzak programming and surveillance.

As I walk down the arcade, the BGM fluctuates and increases in intensity when



FIGURE INTERLUDE III.1 BGM speakers in Nakano's Sun Mall Shopping Arcade (*Shōtengai*). Surveillance cameras visible to the right. Photo by the author.

I near each individual speaker. The muzak playing in arcades intermingles, often uncomfortably, with an individual store's foreground music. This sonic dissonance reflects Jonathan Sterne's discussion of the inherent acoustical tensions in the Mall of America, where the background music of the transitional spaces (nondescript, instrumental symphonic arrangements; no vocals) contrasts with the louder foreground music of the individual mall stores. I occasionally stop directly underneath a speaker to hear it more clearly, though this also poses challenges, because I have to avoid disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic. Standing under the speakers and appearing to be doing nothing, I feel slightly uncomfortable, and perhaps arouse suspicion. I occasionally look up at a speaker, as if this visual confirmation will somehow provide more information about the muzak's source. I decide to track the source of this muzak.

Not knowing where the actual BGM programming might be coming from, I choose the store nearest to me, a women's lingerie shop, and ask a store employee if she has any idea where the muzak is coming from. The young saleswoman does not seem baffled by my query, and she politely assures me that her manager will know—"Please wait just a moment," she tells me before heading back toward the rear of the store. I overhear the faint tones of her conversation with the manager,



FIGURE INTERLUDE III.2  
Sign leading toward arcade office.  
Photo by the author.

who then briskly steps out from behind the cash register. As she approaches me, she tells me to go to the shopping arcade office (*jimusho*), which happens to be just around the corner and up a flight of stairs. The manager seems confident that the office is responsible for the BGM.

As I walk up the stairs, I notice that there are no windows to see into the office. Not sure what to expect, I knock and slowly enter, apologizing as I tentatively walk inside. The room is windowless and surprisingly free of sound. A young woman gets up and greets me, and I explain my interest in tracking down the shopping arcade's BGM. An older man (the only other employee in the office) who is sitting at the far end of the room looks up when I explain my interest, and he invites me to sit down. Not long after we sit down at a table to discuss the muzak, the young woman brings me a cup of green tea. Before beginning our conversation, I exchange business cards with the office manager. He tells me that the muzak operates automatically from inside the office. It begins at 10:00 a.m. every day and is the same music every day; it never changes. As he says of the sound's repetition, "It's the same, day after day [*mai nichi, mai nichi*] . . ." His voice trails off, and I wonder if I can detect a hint of weariness. Although there is no audible BGM in the arcade office, he explains that the amplified sound from the arcade filters into the office.

I then notice the sound system directly behind me, uncovered and unobscured. Somehow, standing directly in front of the system that is responsible for the arcade's muzak is not quite as noteworthy as I might have thought. The system feels smaller and cruder than I was expecting.



FIGURE INTERLUDE III.3  
Music system that supplies the BGM  
for Sun Mall Shopping Arcade.  
Photo by the author.

The office manager allows me to take photos and inspect the system more closely. The muzak runs on a continuous loop, unlike earlier Stimulus Progression playlists that built periods of silence into each hour of programming. Because of the arcade's high ceilings and narrow passageways, the BGM works efficiently with the acoustic space, he explains. The muzak is always instrumental music; there are never any vocals. He tells me that occasionally shoppers will stop by the office to ask about specific songs playing in the arcade; they will often mention that they like the muzak, though he explains that "only the older generation seems to appreciate it." Young people hate it, he laments. Perhaps the sound induces a sense of nostalgia for older Japanese, although this question of memory would seem to contradict what a muzak company employee later told me in an interview. For him, the difference between music (*ongaku*) and muzak (BGM) is that music contains the potential to provoke images or nostalgic memories in the listener, whereas BGM does not. Music should be precisely and properly (*kichinto*) listened to. BGM, on the other hand, should just be heard or registered as background. But why, I wonder, should we not expect BGM to contain memories? Is it too disruptive to the commodity form and the process of consumption? Does it unintentionally undermine the consumerism of patrons as they drift through the shopping arcade?

## FOUR

### Sonic Air Conditioning

#### Ubiquitous Listening as Mundane Comfort

If Muzak makes people happy . . . and contented in their environment like air-conditioning or a colour-scheme—*How can it not be good?*<sup>1</sup>

*Umberto Muscio, President of Muzak Corporation, 1966*

#### ENCOUNTERING BGM

On a recent fieldwork trip to Tokyo, I stayed in what had become my standard lodging, the weekly mansion. In this context, the word “mansion” is a Japanese neologism that refers to architectural materials; it does not evoke the same sense of grandeur as the English word does. The weekly mansion where I tend to stay is a chain budget hotel company—each one looks and feels the same. The buildings’ exterior structures vary slightly depending on location, yet the room size and furnishings are standardized, creating a comforting repetition. Like most consumer spaces in Japan, the location where I recently stayed featured background music in the lobby, a common transitional space where BGM is often heard. Sound is smoothing and provides comfort in places that might otherwise provoke anxiety for patrons. The BGM welcomed patrons when they entered the hotel or exited the elevator on their way out, via speakers embedded in the ceiling of the front entrance and lobby. I soon noticed that the music seemed to be the same every time I encountered it—Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*, an instantly recognizable and a highly repetitive piece that is often rejected by classical music connoisseurs for being too popular, perhaps because of its utter recognizability and ubiquity. At

the same time, the piece is often described as soothing and healing (it is often played at weddings), a kind of “easy-listening” classical music.<sup>2</sup> The piece is well known enough that its presence is not jarring or off-putting to those with no knowledge of classical music who pass through the space in which it is played.

Throughout my stay at the weekly mansion, I entered and exited the lobby at different points in Pachelbel’s piece; however, the repetition soon became unavoidable. The sonic repetition melded with the interior design repetition. Occasionally the lobby was silent, which felt somewhat unsettling since I had come to expect the strains of Pachelbel’s *Canon* to greet me as I headed out for the day. One day, I spoke with a friendly hotel staff worker and asked her about the lobby music. She told me that it was always classical and, in fact, she added with an overly bright smile, it was always the same song played “over and over.” Then, “I’m actually pretty sick of it!” she admitted, the smile eerily never leaving her face.

Sound designers and BGM company employees in Tokyo fill up public spaces like hotel lobbies and retail stores with background music and ambient sound. Sound engineering techniques are described by some sound design companies in highly aesthetic terms, such as painting space (*kūkan*) with sound. Such aesthetic terms, it must be noted, are also often intertwined with terms of control and management. Sound, as one company describes in its corporate literature, can be used to “control the space,” evoking long-standing associations, outside of Japan, of ubiquitous background music with social control. For example, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali examined how music was used to institutionalize the silence of others. Placing particular emphasis on background music, with its linkages to mass consumption and labor, he argued that Muzak served to silence everyday noise through repetition: “Muzak, the American corporation that sells standardized music, presents itself as the ‘security system of the 1970s’ because it permits use of musical distribution channels for the circulation of orders. The monologue of standardized, stereotyped music accompanies and hems in a daily life in which in reality no one has the right to speak up any more” (1985, 8).

As a form of ambient sound that operates as sonic branding and mood enhancement for stores, BGM is ultimately a form of functional music that creates affective atmospheres through spatial and sensory design, similar to architecture or air conditioning. Foreshadowing the later use of muzak in work and consumer spaces in the 1940s and 1950s, composer Erik Satie posited in 1920 that his notion of furniture music “creates a vibration; it has no other goal; it fills the same role



as light and heat—as *comfort* in every form . . . Furniture music for law offices, banks, etc.” (cited in Shattuck 1955, 169).

Muzak, described by Jonathan Sterne as signifying “the height of banality,” would seem to evoke the low taste by which it is often rejected or condemned. However, with the shift from background music (instrumental covers) to foreground music (original songs) beginning in the 1980s, the very question of taste in muzak and music has been upended. Joseph Lanza, for one, laments the shift in muzak from easy-listening instrumental covers by artists such as Percy Faith, Ray Conniff, and Mantovani, to the use of original Top 40 pop songs—a shift that effectively remakes background music into foreground. Rather than offer customers one elevator music channel, foreground music allows individual businesses to take advantage of the massive selection of in-store music channels, and, in this way, cater to a wide range of tastes. In addition to foreground music’s more obtrusive volume, Lanza is critical of corporate sonic branding: “Under this assumption, urbanites might feel more urban when hearing jazz selections at a Starbucks, with the added value of being able to purchase CDs of the same music at the frappuccino checkout. But those with a different idea of the appropriate caffeine concerto are left feeling alienated. And a high-toned New York city bistro might try to slather on a layer of ‘class’ by piping in classical music, but not everyone likes classical. Classical has even been proven to be a human repellent, such as when New York’s Port Authority blasted it to scare away loiterers” (2013, 625).<sup>3</sup>

Much has changed in the past thirty years, not the least of which is Muzak Corporation’s steep economic decline. Given the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, where Muzak’s role has shifted from controlling the worker or consumer to the technique of atmospherics (catering to the customer’s taste and sensory disposition), it is significant that sound design companies draw on discourses that aestheticize sound design techniques while still evoking themes of controlling space. As a result of this complex history, muzak occupies a tricky, contradictory position in city soundscapes. The right music must be used to create the ideal affective atmosphere, yet its sonic presence is carefully engineered so as not to engage the listener *too* much. As I discovered during my interviews with BGM employees and sound designers in Tokyo, the line between employing music to fill up space and using BGM to evoke feelings of nostalgia and branding (to further commercial aims) is not clear-cut. Muzak’s planned invisibility hovers strategically between distracted non-listening (such as classical BGM playing in a hotel lobby or bank) and affective engagement (such as

ambient sound in a women's restroom in an upscale department store, designed to enhance the experience).

These various uses of muzak reflect assumptions about the activity of the listener. In his study of programmed music in Minnesota's Mall of America, Jonathan Sterne explains that there is an inherent ambiguity to the figure of the listener, which can refer to the active or passive perception of sound. As he argues, this ambiguity of listening is significant since programmed music "isn't meant for contemplative listening; it also isn't always 'heard' in an entirely passive fashion—rather, it tends to pass in and out of the foreground of a listener's consciousness" (1997, 25).

In this chapter, rather than assume that BGM operates strictly in the background, I linger on the moments when BGM becomes noticed (whether rejected out of annoyance or pleasurably attended to). While most listening is described as either intentional or implicit, BGM is something one passively encounters but does not directly or intentionally listen to; yet BGM *programming* is planned, purposeful, and highly managed. As a sound design company employee put it, "Without a doubt, there's always a purpose [*mokuteki*] with BGM; it's never the case of 'anything goes.'" This project of bringing muzak listening and engineering to the foreground complicates claims of the passivity of background music listening. This fluid engagement with background sound is a significant mode of contemporary auditory experience in the city; some listeners seek out sound-filled spaces in order to relax and tune out, for example those attending classical music cafés (Chapter 2). Other listeners, for example some experimental music patrons (Chapter 1), desire intentional listening experiences that though isolated and unconventional, are nevertheless informed by the city soundscape.

## SONIC COMFORT

BGM serves as meaningful sonic material in Tokyo's public spaces and cannot be dismissed as cacophony despite its ubiquity. While much of the "background" music in Tokyo operates as foreground music for sonic corporate branding, BGM includes ambient sounds used to induce comfort and relaxation, as well as instrumental elevator music that intentionally evokes nostalgia for some listeners. The production and engineering of comfort has historically been tied to consumption and the notion of physical comfort as a learned behavior produced through "institutional support and resources," rather than reflecting "innate human traits and dispositions" (Healy 2014, 36). David Bissell, for example,

describes comfort as an affective resonance that “moves away from comfort as objectified or as intentional and instead present[s] comfort as a complex set of affective resonances circulated through a variety of tactile, visual and audio media. Comfort is no longer an attribute of an object but more a set of anticipatory affective resonances where the body has the capacity to anticipate and fold through and into the physical sensation of the engineered environment promoted” (2008, 1701).

Throughout much of the sound design corporate literature I discovered both in Japan and in North America, music is frequently categorized in terms such as “optimal” or “appropriate.” Sound designers are constantly attuned to the effect of the BGM they create on the overall environment, but more important, on the individual passing through that environment. Background music must be “easy to listen to” (*kikiyasui*) and should not challenge or distract the shopper or worker. Here, we are reminded of the madam at classical music café Mignon expressing worries over patrons requesting her to play *gendai ongaku* (modern music). Even though this music is part of the café’s collection, its atonal qualities could be unsettling to other patrons, thus potentially driving away some patrons and ultimately affecting business. Here, it is useful to compare the use of BGM as sonic comfort to ambient engineering techniques such as air conditioning, and the ways in which these technologies produce and inform new sensibilities. In his analysis of the relationship between air conditioning and the act of shopping, Stephen Healy examines how “the condition of ‘optimal’ thermal comfort delivered by a/c can induce a languid state that can render subjects more open to subjective influence” (2014, 42). He argues that through thermal comfort, shoppers are ultimately made “more vulnerable to enticements to shop” (2014, 37). This is similar to the tactile sensations often associated with comfort, such as an easy chair or a soft pillow.

To compare BGM and air conditioning as ambient technologies begs the question: Does BGM render its listening subjects more “vulnerable to enticements”? Has BGM produced a new auditory sensibility? Setting aside the attacks on muzak as soulless low art, one of the most common critiques of muzak is that it subliminally controls and manipulates listeners; it subconsciously leads those who hear it to shop more and linger longer.<sup>4</sup> This critique implicitly presumes that listeners are vulnerable to sonic intrusions and can be naturally swayed by them. It also presumes the effectiveness of muzak by implying that these putatively manipulative techniques *actually work*.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, in my interviews, sound designers conceded that it is incredibly difficult to track the effectiveness of BGM in retail

spaces.<sup>6</sup> While they will occasionally distribute surveys to store customers about the musical selections, most of my interviewees concur that taste is so subjective that it is hard to objectively determine if the BGM programming is working or not. Both air conditioning and BGM share the affective capacity to regularize the environment, yet air conditioning is rarely condemned as a manipulation of public space.<sup>7</sup> Aside from environmental concerns, air conditioning is seen in many quarters as a necessary part of modern life. Muzak, on the other hand, is seen, especially in some parts of Europe and North America, as a noisy intrusion into public space. The anti-muzak movements such as *Pipedown* in the UK attest to this organized opposition.<sup>8</sup>

BGM is engineered to act on bodies in public and semi-public space. Sound designers concede that people do not actively listen to BGM, yet their programming and design techniques, often informed by strict rules and conventions, would seem to suggest otherwise. They conduct extensive planning and research so that background music and ambient sound generate certain bodily and auditory effects on those passing through BGM-filled spaces. While office workers engage somatically with background music in ways that deemphasize the music itself, so that it enhances productivity (at least, according to *USEN*'s logic), BGM listeners are provoked into certain associations between sound, memory, and genre as they move through public and semi-public space. In all of these sonic practices, background music and sound is meant to do something to listeners, even though it is expected that they are not actively listening.

## **STUDYING MUZAK: OR, HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO NOTICE?**

In order to understand the discourses of listening that undergird the logic behind BGM programming, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with three different Tokyo-based background music companies beginning in 2011. Despite widespread acknowledgment that BGM is not designed to be directly listened to, company employees admitted that it is explicitly designed to have certain effects on consumers and workers. They also told me about receiving positive feedback from store customers concerning their in-store music programming. My fieldwork also revealed that many store workers who are subjected to constant music programming are deeply aware of its sonic presence.

In addition to *USEN*, I conducted ethnographic research with two sound design companies based in Tokyo: *Tōyō Media Links* (TML) and *Mood Media*.

Both of these companies position themselves as high-end sound design firms. They distinguish their corporate identity as antithetical to *USEN*, in terms of the locations and clients they serve, as well as in their background music programming strategies. Because they frame themselves in terms of “sound design” or “mood,” these two companies often described their programming logic in terms of aestheticizing public or semi-public retail space. While they use standard background music genres (jazz, classical, bossa nova, and so on), they also tend to draw on ambient sounds to evoke certain moods, often in spaces that are seen as outside the traditional purview of background music, including bathrooms and store entranceways. All three companies are continuing to expand the physical boundaries of sound programming in Tokyo’s public and private spaces, with a clear focus on spaces that did not previously have sound. For example, *USEN* is now marketing BGM in junior high school hallways, law offices, and medical waiting rooms, while Mood Media and Tōyō Media Links are programming ambient music in women’s restrooms and commissioning musical jingles to be played at department store entrances during opening and closing.

Despite BGM’s sonic ubiquity, tracking its listening practices proved challenging. Because the BGM listening public is ambiguous, and because those who are subject to it tend not to recognize themselves as listeners, I focused the bulk of my fieldwork on the background music companies’ discourses of BGM listening and programming.<sup>9</sup> In order to track and understand the design and programming of BGM and ambient sound, I conducted in-depth interviews with employees (lower level, mid-level, and CEOs) of three of Tokyo’s main background music companies. I accompanied sound designers as they visited public spaces (hotels, cafés, bars) that have programmed music. In addition to interviewing BGM employees and analyzing corporate marketing and advertising materials (both print media and online), I also listened closely to the BGM that surrounded me everywhere I went in Tokyo. This was not as simple a process as it would seem. Because this form of music is not to be directly listened to or noticed, I looked suspicious when I stopped underneath built-in speakers in a shopping arcade to listen to the BGM, or when I lingered perhaps a bit too long in an upscale department store restroom with my recorder to capture the ambient sound that was circulating faintly throughout the space.

Trying to make ethnographic sense of muzak in Tokyo thus poses certain methodological challenges. How does one write about something designed to be unheard? Despite the inherent challenges in asking people about their reactions to BGM, a form of sound they were not supposed to consciously notice, I did try

to speak to as many store workers as I could. Employees told me that they often tuned it out while at work, though they were eager to detail the genres their store or restaurant featured and when certain genres shifted during business hours. For example, for some Japanese-style noodle shops, classical music is typically played during the day, and jazz at night. As I discovered during fieldwork observing businesses throughout Tokyo and their use of BGM, many restaurants or stores play only one channel. This, I learned through discussions, was often mandated by company headquarters. The workers have little choice of what genres are played and no control over the music's volume. When I asked an employee at a noodle shop about its background music, her immediate response was mild concern: "Do you hate it?" I quickly assured her that I did indeed like it (in this case, mellow instrumental jazz). When I asked if it was supplied by *USEN*, she responded yes, and quickly confirmed the shop's channel of choice (H-9). The noodle shop worker told me that they wanted the music to be gentle and soothing for the patrons, not overpowering or harsh. The volume was appropriately minimal; patrons could sense the music's presence, but it never inhibited conversations or noodle-making.

I encountered this attachment to a specific channel at other restaurants and cafés too. Many retail employees I spoke with whose employers subscribed to *USEN* were able to immediately recall their individual selection, based on *USEN*'s myriad choices, each number corresponding to a different genre. Other store employees seemed outright baffled by my interest in something of so little aesthetic value. A store clerk at a 100-yen shop was puzzled and perhaps irked by my query about the origins of his store's BGM, which sounded like classic elevator music (instrumental, jaunty synthesized melodies). His puzzlement told me that BGM should not be commented on, noticed, or recommended. Its sheer unobtrusiveness and anonymity is critical to its putative efficiency.

In contrast to this bewilderment, I found BGM corporate employees and sound designers to be intellectually curious about my ethnographic interest in their sound programming.<sup>10</sup> During my conversations with BGM employees, their position shifted from corporate secrecy—some material they claimed they were not able to reveal—to willful divulging of sound design programming strategies. Very often, formal interviews with BGM employees would organically expand into brainstorming sessions concerning music programming logic more generally. For example, during one interview, as we discussed certain accepted conventions of music programming, one of my sound designer informants was unable to explain

why, for example, you would never play bossa nova as café background music at night; it should only be played in the afternoon, he insisted.

It was while interviewing sound design engineers that I began to see intriguing parallels between ethnographic methods and corporate market research. Much of the logic that guides background music programming, especially the creation of moodscaapes and affective atmospheres, draws on ethnographic questions concerning the relationship between sound and space and the effect of such sound programming on the individual. Against the rhetoric of background music as unobtrusive acousmatic sound, BGM and sound design companies, like ethnographers, are deeply invested in those moments when BGM becomes noticeable. Not surprisingly, I discovered that BGM company employees were well versed in the English literature (translated into Japanese) on muzak. Because there is no existing scholarship on BGM in Japan in either Japanese or English, I understood their interest in my ethnographic analysis of sound design and music programming in Japan.

As I discovered, most of my contacts in the background music and sound design world in Tokyo have creative backgrounds. Moreover, not only are they well aware of the larger corporate history of muzak as it developed in the West, but many of them are knowledgeable about avant-garde and ambient music, especially in relation to functional music. During most of my interviews, for example, the names of pioneers in sound experimentation, such as John Cage and Brian Eno, or sometimes Erik Satie, came up as we discussed the larger history of muzak. Cage's and Eno's critiques of background music as sonic pacification in the service of capitalism were not lost on my informants. As I noticed throughout my time spent with sound designers (and as they often remarked to me), they not only tended to be attentive toward sound in public space, but were all generally self-described "music fanatics" (*otaku*) and keen listeners of the city, as well as highly attuned to BGM programming trends. During a conversation with a music designer at Mood Media, for example, she told me that she had noticed that McDonald's had recently changed its BGM to something more "stylish."

The highly engineered sonic ambience created by muzak serves as part of the everyday infrastructure of consumer and leisure spaces in urban Japan. The repetition and ubiquity of BGM in contemporary Japan is an effect of the conditions of listening in everyday postindustrial life. According to Anahid Kassabian, we are completely surrounded by music everywhere we go. This omnipresent music "poses as a quality of the environment" and ultimately shapes our listen-

ing practices, which are heavily distracted and ubiquitous—we primarily listen while engaged in other activities such as working, cleaning, cooking, commuting, and so on. The ubiquity of much music today complicates our received understandings of music as directly tied to a specific author and specific location (Kassabian 2013, 9). A ubiquitous mode of listening deemphasizes its own status as an intentional auditory practice (2013, 10).

Ubiquitous music's power, then, resides in its sheer pervasiveness. Because we are completely surrounded by music or sound in our everyday lives, it is assumed that we no longer recognize that we are listening to this ubiquitous music. It seems to recede into the background. BGM company employees and sound designers focus on the moments when sound shifts from background to foreground to impact the listener on an auditory and sensorial level. BGM companies constantly seek to develop new techniques for using sound to amplify businesses. BGM is employed to trigger a range of affects and associations, such as store branding, comfort (in the case of genres that are believed to be “easy to listen to,” like jazz), nostalgic associations, and occasionally “native” aesthetic concepts of beauty. These techniques are all grounded in stimulating the patrons' sensory experience as they move through the space.

## AUDITORY HYPERESTHESIA

Mood Media Japan is a subsidiary of the Canadian company Mood Media, which took over Muzak Corporation in 2011 after it filed for bankruptcy in 2009. Mood Media describes its practices in highly sensorial and aestheticized terms: “The reverberation of sound, images, and scent are various ways to decorate space, similar to designing a space through the use of curtains or paint. This is our vision of experience design.” This business ideology emphasizes selling customers a memorable experience or a feeling, rather than specific goods or products. It is predicated on engaging the senses in order to appeal to the customers' emotions: “The more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it can be. Smart shoeshine operators augment the smell of polish with crisp snaps of the cloth, scents and sounds that don't make the shoes any shinier but do make the experience more engaging . . . Similarly, grocery stores pipe bakery smells into the aisles, and some use light and sound to stimulate thunderstorms when misting their produce” (Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore cited in Howes 2005, 290).

David Howes describes this shift toward multisensory marketing as creating a state of “hyperesthesia” in the consumer (2005, 288). After the 1970s, manufac-



turers became more concerned with “what the *product does* to the consumer,” as opposed to what the consumer does with the product (Bijsterveld 2010, 203).<sup>11</sup> While multisensory marketing aims to engage all of the customers’ senses, sound plays a prominent role in determining how customers assess certain products. For example, in the case of luxury automobiles, the sonic experience of customers is precisely engineered to appeal to their associations between sound and luxury brands. The sounds of the car’s engine and exhaust are tied to the image of specific car brands. BMW, for example, has hired acoustic engineers to ensure “that the engine sounds sporty, the doors produce a reassuring solid sound . . . [and] the buttons click for a good reason” (Daniel Jackson cited in Bijsterveld 2010, 201). In this case, sound not only evokes a specific brand image (here, “sporty”), but also conveys that the car is structurally sound and safe. It is not surprising that with the shift toward hybrid, and thus less noisy cars, some patrons have associated noiselessness with dangerousness, a feeling that something is off. Tesla Motors discovered that some customers felt their electric cars were *too* quiet, a reaction that led an engineer to design software that would provide a range of engine sounds as a kind of sonic reassurance (2010, 201). This apparent discomfort with noiselessness, especially in situations where we expect noise, is a sentiment that some BGM companies in Japan, especially USEN in its SDO program, draw on in order to appeal to workers. Spaces that are believed to be without sound are often described by BGM designers as being “lonely” or “unsettling.” Thus, amplifying continuous background music not only will comfort stressed workers, but also can enhance productivity.

Mood Media Japan focuses in particular on using sound as part of experience design. Background music and ambient sound will “decorate” the space and enhance the overall sensorial experience for the patron. I interviewed the CEO of Mood Media as well as one of the company’s primary music designers, and we discussed the ways in which BGM has become standardized throughout public space in urban Japan. Jazz, for example, is one of the most commonly heard forms of BGM throughout certain types of Japanese-style (*washoku*) restaurants, as well as bars and pubs.<sup>12</sup> As the CEO explained, “Jazz is seen as modern and high class,” whereas other genres, especially older Japanese musical forms such as *enka*, are seen as outdated and retro. Many of the sound designers I spoke with were frustrated by such genre conventions, claiming them to be unoriginal and uncreative.

The music designer at Mood Media expressed a desire to hear unexpected BGM, admitting that “when I go to a really hip *washoku* restaurant and hear

either jazz or *koto* [traditional Japanese stringed instrument], I find it really uninspiring.” She contrasted this with a surprising but pleasurable encounter with BGM in a fashionable Tokyo neighborhood: “I went to a Mexican restaurant in Omotesando once, and the BGM seemed like it was personally selected by the staff. They played a range of styles that seemed to be on shuffle, then all of a sudden there was *enka*! It seemed very Tarantino-esque; it reminded me of *Kill Bill*. I thought it was very cool, but extremely unusual.” She laughed, “I was really surprised.”<sup>13</sup>

The designer later took me on a tour of hotels and restaurants where Mood Media has programmed background music and ambient sound. During this tour, she explained the programming logic for each space, which included hotel lobbies, elevators, bathrooms, restaurants, bars, and private rooms. We spent a fair amount of time at the Tokyo Palace Hotel, a four-star hotel in downtown Tokyo that caters to wealthy business people.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the repetitive BGM in the lobby of the weekly mansion (a chain hotel, it should be reiterated), the background music in the Palace Hotel was texturally varied, as each space within the hotel offered a distinct sonic environment, including the lobby, elevator, hallways, and bathrooms, among other spaces. This background music technique marked the hotel as a non-place trying to assert itself otherwise.

Mood Media’s music designer explained the logics of sound design as we walked through the hotel together. Complicating the association of BGM with the mundane, she told me that she drew on Japanese aesthetic concepts of silence and beauty to inform her programming design. In order to solidify the hotel’s theme of “beautiful Japan,” she was inspired by traditional sounds of nature: “When I was selecting the music for the hotel, I used the sound of *shishi odoshi* as a motif.” A bamboo water fountain often found in Japanese gardens, this device is used to scare away animals such as deer or boars. It produces gurgling and calming sounds of water flowing through a bamboo tube; the water flowing through the tube eventually shifts the center of gravity, thus tipping the bamboo tube back and hitting the rock against which it is resting, ultimately producing a sudden clapping sound.<sup>15</sup> She described the moment right after the bamboo tube is completely filled with water and the clapping sound resonates as a moment of silence or calmness (*isshun no seijyaku*). She framed it in culturalist terms, as a “fleeting sense of beauty” highly valued in Japanese culture. This moment, she went on to explain, refers to *ma*, an aesthetic concept that relates to silence or space, a sense of being in-between. “It is the time between events, the space between objects, the relationship between people, or that moment in a person’s

mind between thoughts. It is the white space in a pen-and-ink drawing, the pause between notes” (Galliano 2002, 14).

When used in the context of a musical performance, *ma* can signify a positive appraisal by suggesting that the “individual sounds of the music did not occur in an empty vacuum and that the silences in the music were full of a sense of ‘betweenness,’ or *ma*, for *ma* reflects aesthetic sensitivity” (Galliano 2002, 15).<sup>16</sup> This was the first time I had heard BGM programming being explicitly articulated in cultural terms. In contrast, communication scholar Gary Gumpert has characterized muzak as “amniotic fluid”—sound that constantly surrounds us and is continuous, repetitive, and calming. One of the managers at *USEN* told me that the company’s audio systems are engineered such that the volume between song transitions is constant to avoid jolting the listener. Transitions between tracks are smooth and uninterrupted. Mood Media’s sound design for the Palace Hotel complicates these assumptions about BGM as providing a continuous sonic blanket by being tailored to the spaces between sounds, something one might expect to be anathema to the very concept of BGM.

Like Mood Media, Tōyō Media Links is a small but prominent sound design company that manages sound in a variety of what it considers to be “high-end” retail spaces, including various spaces within department stores (restrooms and entranceways), upscale hotels, medical clinics, and banks. When I contacted the sound design team at TML to arrange an interview, one of the members asked for permission to also conduct a “reverse interview.” When we met, the team members explained that it was rare for them to be interviewed by someone who is not either a journalist or a business person, so they wanted to learn more about my research. I met with a sound design team member, customer support team member, and the customer support team leader.

Founded in 1962, TML does more than just sound design: it also offers surveillance camera services, digital signage, and more recently, scent programming. Scents are often intertwined with sound to create a rich, multilayered atmosphere of sensory branding. Unlike *USEN*’s customers, both retail and private, TML’s customers are unable to select specific music channels because the company retains full control over programming. The right music for the right environment is ensured by extensive consultations with individual clients to determine the appropriate fit. As staff members told me, they will first meet with clients to understand the concept they have for their space, after which the sound design team will recommend specific music programs. Though BGM is highly engineered, TML’s workers do not want people to overtly notice or listen to it

in either consumer or work spaces (where they may be distracted from work or consumption); the focus is on creating an appropriate affective atmosphere and sonic branding.

One of the sound design team members revealed specific rules concerning BGM programming, including that BGM songs cannot have Japanese lyrics, as that would be too distracting. Songs in English are deemed acceptable, however, since it is unlikely that people will notice these. We discussed conventions regarding specific genres tied to specific settings and times of day. Bossa nova, for example, is one of the more common genres to hear in retail settings (especially cafés). But it is only played during the afternoon.<sup>17</sup> To hear bossa nova at night in a café would feel unsettling (*iwakan*), as one employee explained, even though he was unable to describe why this would be so, other than the fact that it defies conventional use of BGM. He further noted that although it would not be unusual to listen to bossa nova by oneself at night at home, it would be very unusual to hear bossa nova playing in a bar or lounge at night. In the background music world of Tokyo, bossa nova is used solely in the afternoon. These genre conventions were explained as standard procedure in Japan. “It’s always bossa in the afternoon and jazz at night,” a sound designer neatly summed up.

Other fixed conventions of genre include the widespread use of jazz as BGM, especially in Japanese-style restaurants.<sup>18</sup> When I spoke with the sound designers, they agreed that jazz is easy to listen to and can fit with any type of restaurant. In terms of its sonic properties, jazz is considered “safe” and comfortable for the patrons (*ochitsuita kanji*); it is not difficult listening, as *onkyō* is. Many sound design employees I spoke with articulated BGM engineering conventions as something particular to Japan, and playing traditional Japanese music or instruments was similarly guided by certain widely accepted conventions. For example, it would not be unusual to hear traditional Japanese instruments like the *koto* as background music in a restaurant, yet the popular ballad form of *enka* would never be used as BGM. The message conveyed by such emotionally weighty music, as a sound designer explained, is too strong for the listeners. Here, “too strong” indicates that restaurant patrons might be distracted by the nostalgic lyrics (in Japanese) or the music itself, steeped in themes of longing, pain, and unrequited love.<sup>19</sup> Distracted by *enka*’s lyrics, characterized by Christine Yano as expressing “clichés of excess” (2002, 90), patrons might then unwittingly *listen* to the music. *Enka* is also tied to a particular moment in Japanese history, the Showa era, and is often seen as a retro (if quaint) musical form, whereas traditional instruments such as the *koto* operate outside of history, denoting a more generic

sonic property of so-called Japaneseness. As sound engineers explained to me, the sound of *enka* evokes an older image, whereas newer (often instrumental) musical genres like jazz evoke feelings of comfort, ease, and coolness without burdening the (Japanese) listener with the weight of things that are out of time.

TML stands out from some of the major BGM companies due to its highly aestheticized approach to sound design. Its corporate literature describing the company's approach to background music programming is peppered with poetic language about the powerful role of sound in space. TML defines sound design as "decorating space with sound" as well as "coloring" space with sound. The ability of sound to beautify space is intertwined with themes of control and management. BGM, as TML's literature describes it, allows individuals, clients, and companies to control space (*kūkan*). During my interview with some of TML's sound design team members, they compared BGM to other infrastructural elements of space, such as air conditioning and temperature. TML company literature frames BGM as something that will improve business (*shinka dekiru*), a discourse that invokes the techno-utopic foundations out of which the company emerged and to which it is still indebted. From its early days when it was used to stimulate factory workers to its function as audio architecture and environmental design, Muzak has always evoked progress and modernity (Vanel 2013, 48–49).

Although its corporate history is similar to that of USEN, having first emerged in the 1960s, TML frequently positions itself as distinct from other BGM providers in terms of corporate strategies, ethos, and clientele. It offers more intense guidance to its clients in order to determine the appropriate BGM for a particular retail space. While USEN offers pre-selected programs and packages for a massive range of customers—corporate and private—TML curates an entire playlist for a store, individually tailored to that store alone. As a result, its service fees are much higher than USEN's, and it typically works with more selective high-end clients. USEN, by contrast, sells BGM on a mass commercial level, which includes convenience stores, fast-food chains, and 100-yen shops. Like most other BGM companies, TML does not typically compose the music or have access to the recordings that make up the playlist, and therefore must rent songs from a recording company. Clients are thus paying not for music, but for TML's sound design employees' expert knowledge in choosing the right background music for the specific environments.

TML, like many other BGM companies, often programs music in transitional spaces such as store entrances, hallways, hotel lobbies, and restrooms. Two of its recent programming contracts stood out to me: programming ambient music

in women's restrooms in NEWoMan, the newly opened department store in Tokyo aimed at women; and commissioning music to be played at the entrances to this same department store. While public restrooms globally have become saturated with background music in recent years, it tends to be foreground pop music, often tied to the store's brand identity. The most common sonic landscape of public women's restrooms in Japan is that of white noise, due to the widely disseminated "sound princess" (*oto hime*), a white-noise device mounted inside individual restroom stalls. The *oto hime* can be heard in restrooms in department stores, train stations, and businesses, among other spaces.

First invented in 1988 by the Toto Corporation (internationally famous for its technologically advanced toilets), the sound princess was designed as a means to counteract the wasteful running of water in order to mask bodily sounds in public restrooms.<sup>20</sup> The device thus draws on the power of background sound and ambient noise as a sonic blanket to create privacy between strangers in cramped public spaces. The impetus for the sound princess is steeped in culturalist and gendered discourses concerning Japanese women's so-called tendency toward embarrassment at the prospect of other people hearing them in public restrooms. According to Toto, the sound princess was designed to combat women's supposedly "delicate mentality," a logic that is often explained in environmental terms. In this case, the wasteful running of water is replaced by the technologically mediated sound of trickling water that can be controlled by the individual in her private stall. The sound of the water itself is aestheticized, as the device offers users two types of sound to choose from: a murmuring lake or a murmuring lake with birds chirping. The company claims that such nature sounds provide a "relaxing effect."

TML was contracted to produce BGM in the women's restroom in the brand-new department store NEWoMan, managed by the Lumine department store chain, which opened in the Shinjuku neighborhood of Tokyo in 2016.<sup>21</sup> Aimed at "mature women who are looking for truly fine items," NEWoMan offers a range of stores from upscale fashion boutiques and shoe stores to restaurants, French bakeries, and cafés. It also features a rooftop garden, child-care center, and full-service women's health clinic. As the TML employees pointed out to me, public restrooms are incredibly important spaces in Japan, and their cleanliness is often reviewed in online sites such as Tabelog. This applies especially to restrooms located within department stores, which are typically connected to railway stations and thus used frequently by commuters who do not actually shop in them. As the employees explained during our interview, the more positive

experience someone has in a public restroom increases the likelihood that they will associate that positive atmosphere with the department store itself. Ideally, satisfied washroom-goers will become devoted customers.

It is for this reason that women's restrooms are very carefully and strategically designed. During my interview with TML employees, they pointed out that men's restrooms are typically small, cramped, and narrow, while women's restrooms are much more spacious and comfortable, often resembling lounges with seating, plants and lush greenery, and now, background ambient sound. While the sound designers at TML bemoaned the fact that online reviews rarely comment on the background sound (not surprisingly, reviews tend to focus on the bathroom's cleanliness and scent), they reiterated the importance of women's restrooms as a space of comfort, ease, and, not insignificantly, consumption. Some department store restrooms will feature internal windows with goods on display, thus making the restroom function as an extension of the store itself. Sound, in this context, is thought to solidify consumer loyalty and create an atmosphere of calm. In these toilet settings, the sound engineers explained to me, the BGM must be ambient music, and cannot have a discernible melody or rhythm, or be too "energetic." As we discussed the logic behind using ambient music in a space like a restroom, one of the sound designers jokingly mentioned Brian Eno, and we all laughed at the absurdity of Eno's concept being applied to a department store restroom. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 1, Eno's theory of "ambient music," a form of music that "is intended to induce calm and a space to think," was vehemently opposed to the commercial thrust of the Muzak industry, where music was programmed solely to stimulate consumption.

In some ways, TML's programming at NEWoMan draws on some of the key features of Eno's ambient music: it should be as "ignorable as it is interesting," and it should accommodate "many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular." Of course, where this association falls apart is when we consider that this BGM programming is designed to solidify a department store's brand identity, something that Eno's notion of ambient music directly rejected.

TML notes in its press materials for its NEWoMan bathroom design that the lush "display of plants is so beautiful that it makes you forget that you are in a restroom." The restroom's atmosphere is described as a highly sensorial and branded experience in which the greenery display, stylish hand soap and other amenities, and Daisō brand hand dryers work together to create a "refined atmosphere" (*senren sareta funiki*). As TML employees explained, the ambient BGM of "relaxing sounds" was chosen to "perfectly match" this restroom's space.

One of the customer support team members for TML spoke approvingly of the bathroom's ambient BGM, noting that it was very "cozy and comfortable."

Drawing on the widely accepted practice in Japan of using specific melodies to indicate that stores (especially department stores) are closing and opening, TML offers services it refers to as "sound logos" and "welcome sounds." Sound logos are described as effective ways to transmit campaign images, while welcome sound is framed as symbolic sound playing at store entrances to greet customers. In 2016, TML commissioned Tokyo-based jazz saxophonist Kikuchi Naruyoshi to compose a melody for the opening and closing jingle of NEWoMan. In its advertising brochure, TML describes how it selected music that would be fitting for the store's concept, "new experiences in a new city for new women."

In its press release announcing the sonic vision for NEWoMan, TML stressed that the three-minute version of this melody is heard when the store opens (at the entrance), but the full version can be heard only when the store closes, and referred to it as a "rare recording." The press release urged listeners to come check out this "hip" melody in person. TML employees told me that occasionally, fans of Kikuchi will specifically come to the store right at closing so they can hear this (very short and fleeting) music, and will often document and record it.<sup>22</sup>

By featuring a fairly well-known jazz musician, TML's use of BGM complicates received understandings of muzak as unobtrusive, anonymous, background sound. In this case, patrons (fans of the artist) are deliberately seeking out this BGM, not as background listening. Many shoppers, the sound designers admitted, will not recognize the specific artist commissioned to perform the store's opening and closing melody, thus enabling it to operate strictly as BGM—anonymous background music. At the same time, devoted fans of an artist will seek out his or her music to hear and capture through recordings. For them, it is the antithesis of BGM. The rarity of this "sought-out BGM," something that can be heard only at the store entrance and not purchased or downloaded as a recording, adds to the allure of hearing it "live." Similar to Mood Media's music designer drawing on the space between sounds to inform her sound design, TML also approaches BGM engineering in ways that challenge received understandings of muzak as formulaic, mundane, and widely applicable across a range of environments. In contrast to TML's curated site-specific offerings for individual clients, *USEN*, the most well-known purveyor of BGM in Japan, offers its customers, whether private or retail, the ability to select their own personal BGM.

I asked a manager at *USEN* to describe the differences in listening modes between music proper (*ongaku*) and BGM, and he informed me that "music is



something you listen to properly, while BGM just enters your ears.” Interestingly, the term he used in Japanese to refer to the process of music listening, *chanto*, indicates a normative sense of listening, a process that demands labor and intentionality on the part of the listener; this is the supposed antithesis of background listening, which demands no concentration from the listener. BGM listening, for this manager, should not be framed as passive non-listening, but instead as a meaningful mode of auditory engagement. Sound, in fact, indicates that business is running smoothly.

USEN’s music programming is spread widely across retail and now white-collar office settings throughout Japan. Unlike some other sound design companies, USEN also provides a household-centered vision of BGM that it markets as creating a more pleasant and comfortable domestic environment through total immersion in sound. In this program, BGM is ubiquitous and embedded in speakers throughout the home for collective family listening, while also allowing for the creation of individual (and often highly gendered) private moods, such as the “Home Spa” channel, which is marketed as a channel for mothers. The presence of BGM in the household, according to USEN’s promotional literature, will strengthen mutual contact (*fureai*, or “touching-together”) between family members. This logic is similar to that which guides background music programming for office workers: to strengthen social and affective ties.<sup>23</sup> Private and retail customers are offered the same wide variety of channels, which are broken down into very specific micro-genres, including slow jazz, light music, pachinko music, healing music, morning music, and Swiss yodel music. In addition, BGM itself is further refined and categorized into a variety of distinct genres, including “*Mukokuseki* BGM” (nationless BGM), nostalgic BGM, seaside BGM, resort BGM, and Chinese BGM.

For the home listener, BGM serves to create a mood or atmosphere conducive to lounging or relaxing with family. Similar to Spotify’s offer of “playlists for every mood” for its listeners, USEN’s private customers can choose channels through a search engine on the company’s main website that allows them to search channels based on mood (*kibun*) or scene: moods range from “the feeling of a home café” to “times when I want to cry”; artists range from Japanese *enka* diva Misora Hibari to Mariah Carey.<sup>24</sup> Paul Allen Anderson describes how the process of streaming music from such mood-based playlists reduces “the anxiety of excessive choice and retains the element of music discovery: the user need not even name a particular artist, only the mood they want to mimetically represent or the activity the music will accompany” (2015, 827–28).

Despite the widely accepted genre conventions for BGM in many public spaces, especially the restrictions against music with Japanese lyrics as too distracting, or certain genres being limited to certain times of the day, BGM for the home listener is explicitly marketed toward personal mood management and does not contain such restrictions. In fact, private listeners are encouraged to draw on nostalgic associations with music, including music in Japanese, in order to heighten their emotional connection to the music.

The manager at *USEN I* interviewed referred to the same genre conventions described by the sound designers at *TML* and *Mood Media*, especially the standard use of jazz, and expressed frustration with these conventions. As he explained exasperatedly, such rules become codified and widespread because companies follow these practices and copy each other, without trying anything new. These static programming sensibilities are frustrating, he said, because music itself is dynamic and constantly changing. Determining that a specific type of music works in a particular type of space or at a particular time of day is a form of marketing, he explained, but it is also a way of creating a new market. Referencing my discussion with *TML* sound designers regarding jazz as the most common musical genre in Japanese-style restaurants, the manager lamented a lack of creativity and originality with BGM programming in restaurants and bars. He expressed a desire to radically reimagine the relationship between music and (retail) space, jokingly telling me that BGM providers should try opera instead of jazz.<sup>25</sup> He then mentioned that the company is seeking to create new markets for BGM targeted at tourists, for example in hotel lobbies and capsule hotels for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020.

In an unexpected admission, the manager later confessed that “it would actually be fine to have no background music in Japanese-style restaurants because the natural soundscape could serve as a kind of BGM. The sounds of chopping and food being prepared is in itself a kind of music. But of course,” he admitted laughingly, “we would be out of business!” This attunement toward ambient sounds that would not typically be considered musical is in line with what some of the listeners at *Off Site* (see Chapter 1) told me about the impact of city sounds on their auditory experience inside the performance space. Some listeners described how they became more attuned to the city soundscape after attending shows at *Off Site*, a music venue with unusual sound restrictions where outside sounds regularly filter into the space and intermingle with the live performances.

## BGM AND MUNDANITY

The sound design companies that I spoke with often stressed to me that their company was radically distinct from *USEN*. Despite their diminutive size and impact relative to *USEN*'s domestic wide reach, they seemed to relish their aesthetic distinction from the biggest BGM provider in Japan. As they told me, their clients rely on their expertise to curate and select the appropriate background music for their companies. Thus, their services are more expensive than *USEN*'s. Beyond the business strategies, sound design companies also seek to distinguish themselves from *USEN* on aesthetic grounds. For instance, employees often pointed out to me that they served more "high-end" clients, a strategy that highlights a sense of corporate sonic exclusivity. One sound design company jokingly referred to *USEN*'s BGM style as "ready-made goods." The underlying assumption is that the services of sound design companies are site specific to each individual retail environment, rather than *USEN*'s generic mass-marketing focus. There is also an implication that the BGM is of a higher quality, personally selected and curated by an expert rather than "ready-made" banal music.

The mundanity implicit in muzak was taken to new marketing heights in the 1980s by the Japanese chain store *Mujirushi Ryōhin*. Shortened to *Muji*, the full name translates to "no brand quality goods." Indeed, *Muji*'s overall marketing strategy was precisely to offer basic and emphatically unostentatious goods.<sup>26</sup> *Muji*'s chief advisor Tanaka Ikko described this corporate philosophy: "You may feel embarrassed if the person sitting next to you on the train is wearing the same clothes as you. If they are jeans, however, you wouldn't be worried, because jeans are what we could describe as 'basic' clothing. All *Muji* products are such 'basic' products" (cited in Holloway and Hones 2007, 557). Of course, in its project of branding no-brand products, *Muji* paradoxically ended up solidifying its own unique style, a paradox that can also be applied to *USEN*-sponsored BGM. The more closely one listens to background music in Tokyo's public space and talks to those who are regularly exposed to it, such as store workers, the easier it is to determine whether BGM is *USEN*-sponsored or not.

The first *Muji* store opened in the Aoyama neighborhood in Tokyo in 1983, the same year *Muji* commissioned techno-pop musician Hosono Haruomi to compose in-store BGM. The cassette recording titled "Watering a Flower" consisted of three tracks, yet only one was used in the store.<sup>27</sup> To intentionally listen to this BGM from today's perspective—as foreground music—can be a pleas-

antly surprising experience. The repetition is subtle and never feels insistent or overbearing, as is the case with much contemporary BGM. There are occasional flashes of atonality, but they never feel jarring. “Watering a Flower” gestures to the aesthetic sensibilities of Eno’s 1978 album *Music for Airports*, because the listener can easily enter the music and listen, or just as easily tune it out and play it in the background. Roughly twenty years after it first opened, Muji returned to BGM by releasing a series of in-store CDs. In contrast to the early avant-garde-inspired work as commissioned by Hosono, this series takes a multicultural approach, with each recording in the series offering (often stereotypical) musical soundscapes from a different region in the world, including Paris, Sicily, Ireland, Buenos Aires, Hawaii, Stockholm, and Rio de Janeiro.<sup>28</sup> Muji describes the BGM in this series as the “background music to life.”

Muji markets its clothes as “basic,” suggesting that its products are “designed to blend into non-Muji environments” (Holloway and Hones 2007, 558). This nod to visual anonymity and seamlessness with the environment perfectly aligns with BGM logic, which stipulates that music should remain unobtrusive as it facilitates the relationship between humans and their environment. The descriptions of Muji products in its store catalogues suggest qualities that could easily be applied to muzak: “discreet, muted, transparent, understated, unobtrusive, and unostentatious” (2007, 558). It is precisely this quality of BGM that is appealing to some listeners who see the banality and seeming lack of authorship as evoking a sense of stylish sonic anonymity.

## BGM AS ANONYMOUS POP MUSIC

During a summer research trip to Tokyo in 2010, I stumbled across a CD release at Tower Records, Shinjuku, in the avant-pop section. This marketing category features a wide swath of genres, including experimental music (noise music is included here), modern music, ambient, exotica, and miscellaneous genres such as sound effects compilations. This particular CD caught my eye, for it was displayed very prominently with a handwritten write-up by a store employee that highly recommended the recording. Moreover, a cleverly staged visual parody of supermarket fliers, the cover image awash in soft pastels, jumped out at me. Featuring a young man and woman posing in generic clothes advertised as “men’s and women’s casual wear,” the cover indicates that the item is “half off,” and the discount will be taken off at the register.<sup>29</sup> The back cover continues the theme



FIGURE 4.1 Front cover of *Music for Supermarket* CD (2007), Sweet Dreams Press. Image courtesy of Fukuda Norio of Sweet Dreams Press.

of the supermarket as a nonthreatening and generic space of consumption. The track listing is featured in the upper left-hand corner against a washed-out and shadowless pale mauve backdrop that evokes an ambiguous time period. Occupying the majority of the frame, however, is a staging of banal consumer goods: a straw handbag is flanked by two bright yellow lemons and a French baguette, a fluffy bouquet of baby's breath, and women's sandals that might be considered to be targeting middle-aged female customers.<sup>30</sup>

Composed and produced by musician Hosono Shinichi (formerly of J-pop bands including Magoo Swim, Sunny Day Service, and Puffy) and artist and graphic designer Odajima Hitoshi, *Music for Supermarket* (2007) was the first album release by Sweet Dreams Press, an independent record label that also produced a regular music magazine. On its website, Sweet Dreams explains that its employees painstakingly composed original songs to sound exactly like BGM one would hear in a supermarket. The album liner notes describe the genealogy of the project, tracing it from Muzak's familiar historical lineage beginning with John Cage and moving through to Brian Eno. In fact, the notes mention explicitly that the album was released twenty-seven years after Brian Eno first came up with the concept of ambient music while convalescing in the hospital. The album title playfully evokes Eno's legendary *Music for Airports* album.

Though the album is described in the liner notes as “fake easy listening,” Sweet Dreams expresses some hesitation with labeling its recording as a complete parody. It acknowledges the standard critiques of muzak as “canned music” and “valueless and soulless music,” while also referring to muzak’s listeners as zombies. This reference comes from George A. Romero’s classic 1978 horror film *Dawn of the Dead*, which takes place inside a mall where muzak plays a prominent, if at times parodic, sonic backdrop.<sup>31</sup> Intriguingly, Sweet Dreams specifically calls out BGM listeners in the liner notes, explaining that their engagement can be compared to a “feeling of déjà vu.” As the company writes in the notes, “even if one is hearing the track for the first time, it feels as if you’ve heard it before.”

*Music for Supermarket* sonically matches the parody artwork displayed on the album’s covers. The music is deliberately lo-fi and invigorating (*sawayaka ni*); the liner notes state that a Roland SC-88 synthesizer (from 1994) was used, which lends the album a retro yet relentlessly cheerful tone.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this lively mood continues throughout the album with song titles ranging from “Summer Clearance Sale” to “Afternoon Hills” to “Tropical Island.” The individual tracks vary in tone and sentiment, and some occasionally veer into minor keys. However, the overall mood of the album is free of tension. Aside from the store closing track, the individual tracks are short enough that the listener never feels burdened by the weight of repetition, often seen as the primary characteristic of muzak. The penultimate track draws on the widely used convention for stores, often department stores, to broadcast a voice announcement stating that the store is about to close. This announcement, in a smooth female voice, repeats in formal Japanese multiple times over a backdrop of synthesized strings. “Thank you for visiting our store today. The store is about to close. We look forward to seeing you again. Thank you very much.” Repeat ad nauseam.

To keen listeners of muzak, *Music for Supermarket* gestures to an older era of what is sometimes disparagingly referred to as elevator music. It is a specific style, rarely heard in North America after the rise of foreground music in the 1980s. But it is a style that is still often heard in Japanese supermarkets, 100-yen shops, shopping arcades, and convenience stores. While it would be easy to read this recording simply as an ironic take on supermarket muzak (and to be sure, there is a winking sense of parody), the liner notes force the listener to engage with questions about the ubiquitous (and presumably anonymous) pop music that surrounds them as they shop and consume. As the label owner of Sweet Dreams, Fukuda Norio, explained to me, the album serves as a nostalgic homage to retro BGM, especially the USEN-sponsored BGM that was heard in



FIGURE 4.2 Soy sauce music. Interior of CD jacket portraying album producers as generic supermarket employees stacking the shelves with soy sauce and miso. Hosono Shinichi (left); Odajima Hitoshi (right). Image courtesy of Fukuda Norio of Sweet Dreams Press.

supermarkets.<sup>33</sup> Paul Allen Anderson describes the appeal for some aesthetes who take pleasure in old-school Muzak “precisely because of their mechanically exteriorized emotional content, alienation effects, and desubjectivizing quality” (2015, 819). I spoke with Fukuda and Odajima, the main graphic designer involved in *Music for Supermarket*, and we discussed how part of the appeal of BGM is its anonymity, despite its utter ubiquity: “It’s exciting because no one is listening to it.” Similar to how the sound designers I met with were astute listeners of the city, the musicians and artists behind *Music for Supermarket* revealed a similar fascination with the BGM that surrounds them on a daily basis.



discussed the possibility of canceling the service as a cost-cutting measure. She told me that she is completely opposed to this: “I love the BGM!” she laughingly admitted.

36. *Kūkan* is a more abstract way to express filling a space or void.

37. Roquet describes how the Japanese term for atmosphere (*funiki*) has undergone a transformation similar to that of the English word, expanding in the Meiji period (1868–1912) to “refer not just to a pocket of air but to the subjectively felt feeling and tone of a place” (2016, 3). This expansion in meaning was an attempt to “keep pace with the European notion of the feeling or mood of a place” (2016, 187).

## FOUR Sonic Air Conditioning

1. See Anderson (2015) and Lanza (2004) for use of the phrase “sonic air conditioning.” I use the phrase to evoke the infrastructural and highly engineered presence of background music.

2. Interestingly, I encountered the use of Pachelbel’s *Canon in D* as BGM in other areas of Tokyo, although it was employed to very different ends. For example, the piece was played as closing time music at a classical music café in Tokyo that I frequented. Drawing on the extensive practice in Japan of using music (or generic sonic melodies) to sonically indicate that stores are about to open or close, this particular café plays *Canon in D* at exactly 5:55 p.m. every night, five minutes before closing. Soon after the piece begins, most café patrons begin slowly packing up their belongings to leave. At the same time, it would be extremely unusual to hear Pachelbel’s *Canon in D* played in a classical music café as part of the musical offerings for the listener-patrons during business hours. Its value thus lies in its functionality rather than its role as a representative work from the Baroque era to be listened to attentively by café patrons. Here, the music’s function is to aurally discipline patrons to leave the café, yet in a sonically gentle, non-forceful way.

3. See Sterne’s analysis of the weaponized use of classical music used by some businesses as a deterrent for undesirable customers, a strategy he refers to as the “non-aggressive music deterrent” (2013).

4. It has drawn the ire of musicians as disparate as Ted Nugent, Genesis P-Orridge, and Brian Eno. These musicians have rejected Muzak in distinct, though occasionally overlapping ways. Nugent was strenuously opposed to it on aesthetic grounds, decrying it as “sucking the lifeblood from countless melodies since its founding.” In 1989, he attempted in vain to buy the company in order to destroy it. In 1984, P-Orridge published an essay advocating the creation of an “anti-muzak” “that, instead of cushioning the sounds of a factory environment, made use of those very sounds to create rhythmic patterns and structures that incorporated the liberating effects of music by unexpected means. This approach is diametrically opposed to the position of official MUZAK.” Composer and producer Brian Eno famously defined his notion of “ambient music” as an explicit



rejection of “canned music,” which he viewed as “stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music.”

5. Vanel describes how “criticizing Muzak for its efficiency is as absurd as blaming teenagers’ suicide on the influence of heavy metal music—as did the Parent Teacher Association in the 1990s—while ignoring that the source of the problem lies elsewhere” (2013, 4). He argues that the company’s own marketing of its product as increasing productivity has “been accepted uncritically by its harshest opponents” (2013, 5).

6. This is contrasted with *USEN’s Sound Design for Office* program, discussed in the previous chapter. Much of the corporate marketing of the program draws on pseudo-scientific testing to support claims that this music program reduces stress for workers and makes them more productive.

7. While air conditioning is not necessarily condemned in the ways that other ambient technologies like muzak are, it is acknowledged as having a deep impact on cultural practices. See Arsenault (1984). Thanks to Gretchen Bakke for informing me of this reference.

8. Marks & Spencer announced in June 2016 that it will adopt a music-free policy across three hundred of its stores in the UK following complaints from customers and employees about the in-store sonic repetition. See “M&S to Turn Off Music in Stores Following Customer Feedback,” June 1, 2016, available at [www.theguardian.com/business](http://www.theguardian.com/business). Thanks to Ethan Spielman for alerting me to this article.

9. Many companies that subscribe to *USEN’s Sound Design for Office* program were reluctant to talk to me about their experiences. This reluctance seemed indicative of the general difficulty of talking about their relationship to sound and its effect on their labor practices. Given *USEN’s* strong corporate brand, I also wondered if some companies that may have had negative experiences with *SDO* (or canceled the service) were reluctant to share those opinions publicly.

10. It is perhaps not surprising that many of these employees expressed interest in reading my analysis of *BGM* listening practices in Tokyo, perhaps as a means of advertising for the company. For example, I conducted an interview with a high-end sound design company, and prior to the interview, I was asked if employees could interview me about my research on *BGM* in Japan. This interview was later featured on the company blog.

11. It is not surprising that certain sensual properties of commodities have become privatized and trademarked. Harley Davidson, for example, has sought to trademark the infamous sound of its motorcycle engines, and Singapore Airlines has patented its “warm towel smell” (Howes 2005, 288; Malefyt 2009, 17). See also Powers (2010).

12. Curiously, sushi restaurants (and sometimes soba) do not typically have *BGM*. Most of the sound designers I spoke with believed that the “natural” sounds of food being prepared in these types of restaurants serve to create a unique “musical” soundscape, thus rendering *BGM* unnecessary. Ramen spots also do not typically have *BGM*, but I was told that this is because ramen is seen as food to be eaten quickly and not lingered over, as

would occur at other more formal Japanese-style restaurants; therefore, BGM serves little purpose in targeting individual patrons. Despite this argument about BGM as antithetical to businesses built on expediency, such as ramen, nearly all fast-food chains in Japan have BGM, often sponsored by USEN.

13. Here, the designer is referring to the legendary *enka* singer and Japanese cult actress Kaji Meiko, whose music was prominently featured in both *Kill Bill* soundtracks.

14. Hotels are the classic example of what anthropologist Marc Augé referred to as “non-places,” that is, liminal and transitory public spaces such as airport waiting rooms, fast-food restaurants, and supermarket checkout lines that people pass through rather than inhabit. Antithetical to the notion of a place, non-places “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 1995, 77–78). While places are “organically social” and rooted in historical significance, non-places are necessarily grounded in a kind of “solitary contractuality” (1995, 94). It is not surprising, then, that chain hotels and airports are classic examples of non-places for Augé, “being strangely familiar in every corner of the globe and instinctively comprehensible to all supermodern subjects, regardless of language or other markers of local identity” (Hainge 2009, 203). Given this, one might expect a uniformity of sound in these non-places, as if all hotels would sound the same.

15. YouTube features numerous videos of *shishi-odoshi* as a form of white noise or tinnitus relief. One video features a “three-hour Japanese fountain ‘Shishi-odoshi’ sound for relaxation and healing.”

16. See Novak (2010) for a discussion of the complex reappraisal of *ma* for postwar avant-garde composers in Japan.

17. Bossa nova has long been used as elevator music, and it has also served as musical inspiration for musicians like Burt Bacharach, whose music forms the core of postwar elevator music. See Scannell (2014).

18. Jazz occupies a complex position within Japan’s musical landscape—jazz *kissaten* (cafés) are well known for their dedicated listeners, and the domestic recording industry serves as a global haven for jazz record collectors. Despite this, jazz is one of the most common forms of BGM in leisure spots such as bars and restaurants.

19. See Yano (2002) for a rich ethnographic analysis of *enka*.

20. Toilets have long been asserted as emblematic of Japan’s aesthetic and, more recently, its technological advancement. Writer Tanizaki Jun’ichiro’s 1933 essay on Japanese notions of beauty, “In Praise of Shadows,” features a section somewhat parodically reflecting on the traditional Japanese toilet as a meditative and tranquil place of “great spiritual repose.” He contrasts this with the garishly lit Western toilet. The current global popularity of toilets by Toto suggests the recognition and consumer interest in technologically advanced toilets offering such features as heated seats, bidets, and various sound options.

21. The department store name is a portmanteau of “New” and “Woman,” pronounced

as *nyūman* in Japanese. The store's name announces its consumer focus on women; in this case, women in their forties and beyond. NEWoMan distinguishes itself from other department store chains geared toward younger women in their twenties and thirties, such as Lumine and Marui.

22. In a sense, this evokes the practices of other subcultural groups such as the train-fan (*tecchan*) subculture, a subset of which is obsessed with the sound of trains and is devoted to making live field recordings (*nama roku*) of trains.

23. For recent work on this emergent fantasy of sociality in post-Fukushima Japan, see Nozawa (2015).

24. Pandora, Spotify, Moodagent, Songza, iHeartRadio, Beats, Musicoverly, and Bipolar Radio, among other streaming services, all offer mood-based playlists (Anderson 2015, 828).

25. In an online promotional magazine, BGM company Monstar Channel describes the ways in which different genres of jazz can be engineered in distinct consumer spaces, including ramen spots and teppanyaki. The article concedes that it might seem unexpected for a ramen or teppanyaki restaurant to play jazz, but in fact, “modern jazz” fits perfectly (*pittari*) and will help the business evolve. The company recommends playing contemporary jazz or jazz hip-hop, which will be “easy to listen to,” especially for patrons who don’t listen to music very much.

26. Paul Roquet examines Muji’s marketing of “no-style style” as indicative of the “subtractivist” style that was popular in the early 1980s as a backlash to the hyper-consumption of the bubble economy era (2016, 136).

27. See “Haruomi Hosono—Watering a Flower,” June 6, 2012, available at [glob.daniel-letson.com](http://glob.daniel-letson.com). Thanks to Peter Kaiser for alerting me to this article.

28. Muji has also released a relaxation app. The Muji to Relax app offers users the choice of six nature soundscapes to choose from: waves crashing, birds chirping, crackling fire, mountain stream, forest sounds, waterfall. The app also offers users the option to measure heart rate (by placing one’s finger over the smartphone’s camera lens), after which the app will “create your own relaxing music with your pulse and the time.”

29. The record label owner told me that they had received complaints from Tower Records Japan for putting the half-off label on the CD cover, because this could be potentially confusing for record store patrons.

30. It is intriguing that baby’s breath was chosen as the flower in this image. Long considered to be a “filler” generic flower that serves as backdrop in most bouquets, baby’s breath is never used as the centerpiece. It is perhaps the floral equivalent of BGM.

31. See Carpenter (2013) for analysis of the use of muzak in *Dawn of the Dead*.

32. To hear a track from *Music for Supermarket*, visit [soundcloud.com](https://soundcloud.com) and search “Music for Supermarket Sweet Dreams Press.”

33. More recently, there has been a global undercurrent of fascination with this kind of lo-fi retro ubiquitous music, as can be seen with the vaporwave phenomenon. Relatedly, in 2016, Mark Davis, a former employee of Kmart who worked there from 1989 to 1999, uploaded fifty-six hours of digitized cassettes of in-store music and advertising. The majority of the user comments suggest longing and nostalgia for the loss of this in-store music programming. Such expressions of nostalgia are also bound up with Kmart's economic downfall; the company declared bankruptcy in recent years. One user wrote, "I can't really explain but I've always had this strange fascination with old elevator music. Perhaps the way it takes you back to the good ol days when things were a lot simpler." Another user vividly described the childhood sensorial associations of the store itself: "Kmart at Christmas time was one of my fondest retail memories as a kid. Those aqua colored uniforms and the vintage cafeteria with specials like hot turkey dinners. The pumpkin pie was mandatory. And this cheesy music wafting through the deliciously fragrant air of hot processed holiday food and brand new merchandise. It's so depressing shopping at Kmart now. It's always empty, the shelves are a mess, the music is 5 Seconds of Summer, the Little Caesar's pizza stinks and they're undersold by Walmart." See [archive.org](https://archive.org) and search "Kmart music."

## CONCLUSION Tokyo Listening, Listening to Tokyo

1. See Abe (2018) for an ethnographic analysis of the economic impact of *jishuku* on *chindon-ya* practitioners whose livelihood depends on the ability to make noise in public.

2. See Giaimo (2016) for discussion of Irv Teibel, the central figure behind the creation of environmental recordings in the 1970s as a means of self-soothing, relaxation, and increased productivity.

3. The Japanese beef bowl chain, Tokyo Chikara Meshi (similar to Yoshinoya), has been dealing with recent economic losses and subsequently has closed a number of locations nationwide, including many in Tokyo. After joking with an acquaintance that perhaps this is because they don't always play BGM in their stores, I was surprised to read negative reviews on Tabelog and Twitter that specifically mention the store's lack of BGM as creating an uncomfortable environment. One reviewer bemoaned the lack of BGM as forcing people to engage with the undesirable sounds of eating. As the reviewer wrote, "Even though it's a chain store, there was no BGM playing, and there was only the clanking sounds of eating utensils which created a feeling of disorder or malfunction." Another reviewer stated, "When I first entered, I was really surprised at this completely silent space since there was no BGM playing." Both comments reveal how BGM is an expected sonic backdrop that evokes normalcy in consumer spaces (especially chain stores); thus, when there is no BGM, there is a feeling of something "going wrong." Thanks to Shunsuke Nozawa for pointing out the lack of BGM in Tokyo Chikara Meshi.